

# BlackPoppyRose at the National Army Museum

## Introduction

BlackPoppyRose was created to highlight the contributions of African, Black, West Indian, Pacific Island and Indigenous communities to wars that date back to the 16th century. Exploring the histories that we are taught regularly and how race, culture and identity have played a role in the growth of European empires. History empowers the reader to understand the roles their ancestors played in the world and how the impact of their actions has rippled through time. Annual remembrance allows the confidence, pride and the sense of belonging to encourage the future generations to respect, honour and learn from those who have fought to secure freedom. The impact on family, heritage and the sense of belonging have been affected because the history we learn about does not always include all the stories of those who were there and those who served. There are many reasons why our ancestors served which range from: wanting to protect King/country and their families, wanting to travel and explore new worlds, being made to feel there is no other alternative, desperation to ensure their families are looked after, being sold a reality that later realised to be untrue.

There is a history of the roles men and women played within wars that date back to:

- The Kingdom of Ndongo (Angola), Queen Nzingha against the Portuguese in the 1600s.
- American Revolution (1765 – 1791), which saw Africans fighting on both sides supporting both King George III & George Washington for freedom and liberty.
- Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815), which was still in effect when the abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807 was enacted yet allowed for the African community to be enlisted into life-long service into the Armies and Navies of Britain.
- Crimean War (1853 – 1856), with Nurse Mary Seacole and her pursuit towards doing her part to serve her country and empire and allegiance to Britain, via Jamaica and Scotland.
- 1884 – 1885, when the Berlin Conference provided the necessary legal paperwork, terms and agreements European empires needed to spread outside of Europe and Asia. Having already secured several regions since the 1500s, this meeting ensured the growing recruitment of men to serve in voluntary roles throughout Africa, the West Indies, Europe, the Pacific Islands and Oceania.
- The West India Regiments, formed by the British in 1795 after losing the American colonies, saw their service within the Americas, West Indies, Caribbean and West Africa, where they took part in the third Anglo-Ashanti War between 1873 - 1874.

The First and Second World Wars continue this history of empire.

## **First World War**

In the First World War, Britain's army was supported by forces from across the British Empire. Over 3 million soldiers and labourers from across the Empire and Commonwealth served with the British Army in the war.

In the Caribbean, around 15,000 men signed up, including 10,000 from Jamaica. Others came from Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, the Bahamas, British Honduras (now Belize), Grenada, British Guiana (now Guyana), the Leeward Islands, St Lucia and St Vincent. Most men from the Caribbean served in the West India Regiment and the British West Indies Regiment. The West India Regiment, whose two battalions were based in the Caribbean and West Africa at the time, joined the effort at the start of the war in 1914. The Regiment first took part in the West Africa campaign, and then, in 1915, the East Africa campaign. Later, they served in a non-fighting role in Suez and Palestine. In 1915, the British West Indies Regiment was formed. But the War Office did not want non-white troops fighting white troops. Therefore, some soldiers were sent to Egypt, and others to fight the Turkish Ottoman Empire. The rest were sent to Europe where they worked as labourers on the Western Front. Here, they served in some of the most famous battles, including the Somme.

In Africa, Britain's colonial regiments were brought to action when war broke out, called to fight against Germany's own colonial forces on the continent. African troops played an important role in containing the Germans in East Africa and defeating them in West Africa. By November 1918, the British Army in East Africa was in fact mostly made up of African soldiers. The units involved were the West African Frontier Force, with soldiers from Nigeria, the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Sierra Leone, and the King's African Rifles, recruited from Kenya, Uganda and Nyasaland (now Malawi). At least 180,000 Africans also served in the Carrier Corps in East Africa and provided support to troops at the front. Additionally, over 60,000 labourers were recruited from South Africa. Black South Africans did not fight because the South African government were afraid to give them weapons. Around 25,000 black South Africans also served as labourers on the Western Front between 1916-17.

## **Second World War**

In the Second World War, forces from across the British Empire served in all the major theatres of war, as well as on the British home front, within the colonies and in Allied territories. In total, Britain raised 8,586,000 men for military service, 134,000 of whom were from British colonies.

The Caribbean's major contribution to the Second World War was not only in the Army, but also included other services, most notably the RAF. In 1944, the Caribbean Regiment was formed, travelling to Egypt later that year. This was as part of the garrison protecting the Suez Canal. The regiment remained here until the end of the

war, though they did not fight. In addition to men, Caribbean women served in the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service, or ATS. Six hundred West Indian women volunteered to join the ATS, serving in both the Caribbean and in Britain. But black women from the Caribbean were at first rejected as recruits by the War Office because of their race, and so it was not until 1943 that the first contingents of West Indian women arrived in Britain. Here, some of the women served as clerical workers and telephonists; others worked as cooks and drivers. They also staffed anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons.

*ATS veteran Ena Collymore-Woodstock, from Jamaica (speaking with her daughter):*

- *I think our group was the first of the first, of the groups...*
- *Her group was the first to leave the West Indies – first group of women to leave the West Indies to go to the war, to volunteer to go to the war. Then, when they got there, they had them typing. That's when she said – you didn't want to type, you didn't come to England to type; she wanted to be in the war. She said, she had told them she was there a month, she hadn't done anything; she wanted to do something more.*
- *Yes.*
- *That's when she trained to be a radar operator, the Anti-Aircraft.*

In Africa, Britain's colonial forces took part in several campaigns. The King's African Rifles played an important role in the East African campaign, which was fought between the British with their allies and the Italians, between 1940 and 1941. The King's African Rifles also took part in the Allied invasion of Vichy French-controlled Madagascar which began in 1942, launched in order to prevent the island being used by Axis naval forces. Between 1941 and 1945, British Commonwealth troops and their allies fought in a bitter campaign against the Japanese in South East Asia. Troops drawn from both the King's African Rifles and the Royal West African Frontier Force took part in the Burma campaign. The fighting took place in malaria-ridden jungles during drenching monsoon rains and on remote islands in searing tropical heat.

*Royal West African Frontier Force veteran Joseph Hammond, from Ghana:*

- *You know, the impression...it's the same like Africa, they have jungles there. That makes the whole thing very difficult...we continued the fighting, sometimes there is no food, 3 or 4 days. We waited for the aircraft parachutes to drop our food and also the ammunition to continue the fighting. I feel very, very proud too – that I'm involved in this war. The Burma Star is a very special star among my medals because we had a very terrible and tough time there.*

## Conclusion

Here you have heard a small fraction of the contributions and roles played during The First and Second World Wars. BlackPoppyRose has been able to encourage so many communities to share and explore their family histories and heritage to uncover more stories. We continue to share and inspire more communities to do the same. Our BlackPoppyRose pins, exhibitions, talks and workshops have struck at the hearts of many and nurtured organic conversations between people who were once strangers, now sharing their common histories and concepts around the contributions made by the African, Black, West India, Pacific Island and Indigenous Communities to many global wars through time.

The First and Second World Wars impacted the entire world, broke apart many families, had families fighting on both sides during these wars. Men and women left their families, homes, communities in hopes they were fighting for an improvement to their lives and the lives of others. So many experiences were had, seen and felt that changed all involved. These changes contributed to how they raised their children and interacted with their families and local communities. We honour all their memories and encourage you all to remember with us. The world was not in black and white but full colour and had numerous factors that both negatively and positively impacted non-white communities. We have now partnered with several organisations to continue what we started in 2010 and are creating bridges that we need to do the right thing and educate truthfully and inclusively.

We remember 365 days a year, every month.

We will remember.