

# CARIBBEAN SOLDIERS ON THE WESTERN FRONT



**African Heritage Forum**





# Caribbean Soldiers on the Western Front



African Heritage Forum

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Cover Image: Men from the BWIR on the Albert-Amiens Road during the Somme Offensive 1916 (Imperial War Museum collection: Q1202)

Thanks to John Siblon for the additional images

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**Dedicated to  
Cheryl 'EL' Phillips (1966-2016)**



African Heritage Forum

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## *Preface*

# Caribbean soldiers on the Western Front

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**S**oon after Britain declared war on Germany on 4th August 1914, the first British military operations were in Africa against the German colony of Togo, and later in the Cameroon. It was not until 1915 that Caribbean men were involved in the war after joining the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) amidst controversy as to whether they should carry guns and shoot German soldiers in Europe. The Colonial Office had been in favour of employing their voluntary service, but the War Office, in particular Lord Kitchener, was not keen. The issue centred on the servicemen's 'colour', and indirectly on their African/slavery heritage. However, white Caribbean men were allowed to volunteer. The controversy was resolved in the Autumn of 1915. By November 1918, more than 15,000 Caribbean men were recruited for military service in Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, East Africa, France, Italy, Belgium and England. Black and East Indian soldiers always had to serve under white Officers and the former were not allowed to rise above Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) status.

The Battle of the Somme which began in July 1916 created a crisis, as there were heavy British losses during the months up to November that year. As a result, an urgent appeal was made for men from the Caribbean colonies to join the British forces. More of them were recruited, but they later found out that they had to serve as labourers, not fighters. Generally, the recruits were not allowed to carry guns, and they felt utterly dejected. The 'colour' question returned to cause discontent and disruption among the troops. They expressed feelings of being racially discriminated against, and made their discontent heard. It resulted in racist remarks by white soldiers, and there were often internal conflicts.



Caribbean soldiers said they were fighting two wars, one against the Germans and the other against racism within the British Army.

BWIR troops were engaged in numerous supporting roles including digging trenches, building roads and gun emplacements, acting as stretcher-bearers, loading ships and trains, and working in ammunition dumps. These manual tasks were often carried out within range of German artillery and snipers. A number of BWIR soldiers were awarded gallantry medals during the war. Among the Caribbean soldiers who were awarded decorations was the future Premier of Jamaica, Norman Manley, who received the Military Medal.

John Siblon's research *Caribbean Soldiers on the Western Front* is about the experiences of the Caribbean men who enlisted to fight in the First World War, and who showed their patriotism and loyalty. Their experiences were overshadowed by the discriminatory practices of the British government who were reluctant to engage Black and East Indian soldiers in combatant roles. Furthermore, discrimination in terms of pay, housing and general treatment led to the politicisation of many of the men who, on returning to their countries, played key roles in various nationalist and labour organisations that marked the beginning of the long struggle for political self-rule and independence.

In 2015, African Heritage Forum received Heritage Lottery funding for this project.

Arthur Torrington, CBE  
Chairman, African Heritage Forum  
November 2016



African Heritage Forum



Men from the BWIR on the Albert-Amiens Road during the Somme Offensive 1916 (Imperial War Museum collection: Q1201)

# Why did Caribbean Soldiers fight in the First World War?

**C**aribbean men volunteered to fight in the First World War. The English-speaking West Indies, as the islands were called then, were part of the British Empire and many inhabitants of the islands considered themselves British and were eager to participate in a war against the King's enemies. It is possible to get some idea why men chose to volunteer from reading Caribbean newspapers of the period. It must be taken into account, though, that most of the newspapers represented the views of the colonial elite. Caribbean historian Glenford Howe has claimed that at the outbreak of the war some people in the region were opposed to it because they saw it as a *white man's war*.<sup>1</sup>

*The Jamaica Times* said that it was wrong to have described it as a 'white man's war'; rather, it should have been seen as an opportunity for Blacks to demonstrate their loyalty to and equality with whites. In this way, they could 'win the confidence

of other races' and 'not be seen as a white man's burden'.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper owners were determined to show that colonial governments were fully behind the British Empire in its struggle against the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. They used their newspapers to encourage patriotic fervour so that men would volunteer to fight, hinting that involvement might change the status quo.

**... some people in the region were opposed to it because they saw it as a *white man's war***

The editor of the *Grenada West Indian* newspaper believed that Caribbean involvement in the war might lead to a West Indian Federation. He was of the opinion that the formation of a British West Indies Regiment (BWIR), made up of men from across the region, would make this a possibility, claiming that a 'united West Indies would be born'.<sup>3</sup>



1. Glenford Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War* (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), p.16.

2. *The Jamaica Times*, 20 November 1915.

3. *The Grenada West Indian*, 20 February 1915.

## Theme 1



An example of a recruitment poster used to encourage Bahamian men to volunteer  
Image: Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

Black Nationalists, who wanted self-government, argued that Blacks should fight against Germans to show their superiority against them. Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), encouraged men to join up. On 16 September 1914, he sent the Colonial Secretary, Lewis Harcourt, a telegram expressing his support. A meeting of Garvey's UNIA, held in Jamaica, with some of the BWIR present, spoke against German atrocities in Togoland and whipped up the threat of German ships raiding the islands for coal and eventually invading.<sup>4</sup>

Few testimonies exist of Caribbean men who actually served in the war. However, some veterans were interviewed before they passed away and they reveal a variety of reasons explaining why they chose to enlist. One motivating factor was

patriotism and loyalty to the British Empire. Arthur Cipriani from Trinidad, who went on to become an officer in the BWIR, believed that 'if the West Indies claim a place in the sun, we must do our duty as a unit of the British Empire.'<sup>5</sup> George Blackman, from Barbados, explained, 'We wanted to go, because the island government told us that the King had said that all Englishmen must go to join the war. The country called all of us.'<sup>6</sup> Gershom Browne, from British Guiana, joined up to break out of the 'slave mentality'; whilst Eugent Clarke, from Jamaica, volunteered because there was little prospect of work on the island.

Even though many men throughout the Caribbean expressed a desire to volunteer to defend the Empire, they initially faced many obstacles to enlistment in the armed forces. Most of all, they had to contend with the attitude of the British government, in the form of the Colonial Office and the military, represented by the War Office, who were reluctant to employ Black colonial troops against a white enemy on European soil. The governments of each Caribbean territory had pressed their colonial governors to persuade the Colonial and War Offices for involvement in the war to be beyond providing food, material goods, financial contributions and gifts. They informed British officials that Caribbean men also wished to serve and fight in the war. In 1914, the Colonial Office made an enquiry to the British government into the possibility of recruiting a Black Caribbean Contingent for overseas service.

The War Office replied that the Army Council 'are of the opinion that the residents of the West Indies will be most usefully employed at present in denying supplies, etc., to the enemy's commerce destroyers, and maintaining order, if necessary, in the islands.'<sup>7</sup>

**... many had already paid their own passage on ships and joined British and Canadian units**

Notably, the rejection of the suggestion of a Black Contingent was not intended for white Caribbean men who wished to enlist. Many had already paid their own passage on ships and joined British and Canadian units with the blessing of their colonial governments and were accepted into the army.<sup>8</sup> Despite the official obstacles, some Black Caribbean men managed to bypass military authorities and enlist in a variety of British Regiments. Eventually, in May 1915, as a consequence of political pressure, the Caribbean islands were allowed to recruit Contingents for



This scroll lists contributions of food, clothing and money from the West Indies and other parts of the British Empire. Image: Courtesy of the West India Committee, London

... government told us that the King had said that all Englishmen must go to join the war.



Recruitment poster from the Bahamas calling upon men to fight so that 'the Empire might be saved'. Image: Courtesy Library of Congress.

... Despite the official obstacles, some Black Caribbean men managed to bypass military authorities and enlist in a variety of British Regiments.

war service overseas in the newly-formed British West Indies Regiment. The Regiment was officially permitted to serve in France and Belgium, called the Western Front, but on a non-combatant basis, and only for the duration of the war.

The condition under which Black soldiers were allowed to fight was that they had to serve wherever they were directed. On 20 October 1915, the King's appeal for volunteers was received and read out in the Caribbean. It had had an "electrifying effect" on recruitment.<sup>9</sup>

4. The Jamaica Gleaner, 25 October 1915.  
 5. C. L. R. James, The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies (Nelson: Coulton & co. Ltd, 1932), p.25.  
 6. George Blackman interviewed by Simon Rogers, 'There were no parades for us', The Guardian, 6 November 2002.  
 7. 'The War Office to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies', 2 September 1914, the National Archives (UK), CO 318/333/50055.  
 8. Frank Cundall, Jamaica's Part in the Great War (London: The West India Committee, for the Institute of Jamaica, 1925), pp. 21-22.  
 9. Herbert G. Delisser, Jamaica and the Great War (Kingston: Gleaner Press, 1917), pp. 59-60.

**How many  
volunteered  
and which  
Colonies did  
they come  
from?**

**A**ccording to official statistics, 15,600 men served in the twelve Battalions of the British West Indies Regiment, most of whom served in France and Belgium, whilst other Battalions operated in Egypt, Mesopotamia, East Africa, and Italy. Although Jamaica passed a law in 1917 making all men aged 17 to 41 liable for military service, the law was never enacted as recruitment was suspended until 1918 and by this time the war was drawing to a close. This meant that all the men who served on the Western Front from the Caribbean were volunteers and had not been conscripted to fight.

Initially, the British government announced that Contingents for active service would only be accepted from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and British Guiana. However, after protestations from the other Caribbean territories, recruitment was allowed across the whole region.<sup>10</sup> The largest Contingent of over 10,000 men came from Jamaica. The government of the island were at the forefront of trying to persuade the British to accept Contingents of men from the Caribbean. As early as 31 August 1914, a letter was published in the *Daily Gleaner* urging the formation of a Contingent for active service.

A member of the Legislative Assembly suggested a militia should be formed who could free up the West India Regiment (WIR) to serve abroad and to be paid for by the Jamaican government. This proposal was rejected by the Governor.

By 16 October 1914, the *Daily Gleaner* published a leading article advocating a Caribbean Contingent. In April 1915, William Wilson, an Englishman living in Jamaica, suggested an appeal in the *Daily Gleaner* of £30 per person to fund and send 200 Jamaicans to the front. By June 1915, £2000 had been raised in this way. On 28 May 1915, the British government stated that the offer of a Caribbean Contingent was accepted and that Jamaica could send as many volunteers as it wished.<sup>11</sup>



The inspection of the First Trinidad Merchants' and Planters' Contingent in London in 1915  
Image: Courtesy of the Institute of Jamaica / The *Daily Gleaner*

## ... The largest Contingent of over 10,000 men came from Jamaica'

The next largest Contingent of men from the Caribbean came from Trinidad and Tobago who sent around 1500 men. Of this number, 276 of these volunteers served in a private Contingent of lighter-skinned Trinidadians of British and French extraction called the Trinidad Merchants' and Planters' Contingent. A recruitment committee was established in 1915 and had collected \$18,000 within a few days to send men from the Contingent to fight in Europe. The work of the Committee was kept secret as they knew that if the War Office found out about their work the Committee might be disbanded. In October 1915, the first Contingent of 113 men left Trinidad and landed in England on 2 November 1915. After they arrived in London they were inspected by the Lord Mayor and were entertained at the Mansion House.

The second Contingent left Trinidad on 29 December 1915. They were also inspected and entertained by the Lord Mayor. The majority of this Contingent joined the 4th Battalion, City of London Regiment of the Royal Fusiliers. Between 1915 and 1918, seventeen Contingents of Merchants' and Planters' were sent overseas from Trinidad.<sup>12</sup>

10. Sir Charles Lucas, *The Empire at War*, Volume II (London: Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 334.

11. Herbert G. DeLisser, *Jamaica and the Great War*, pp. 31-33; 47; 50.

12. Captain H. Dow, *Record of Service of the Members of the Trinidad Merchants' and Planters' Contingent 1915-1918* (Trinidad, 1925), pp. ix-xiii.

## Theme 2

The attention given to the Merchants' and Planters' Contingent demonstrated the official prejudice that operated in favour of white, lighter-skinned, upper-class Caribbean men compared to those with darker skins. Those men from Trinidad and Tobago with darker skin were enlisted into the BWIR. However, even those men with darker skin found it difficult to be enlisted. C. L. R. James, the Trinidadian writer and historian, tried to enlist in 1918. He recalled that 'when my turn came I walked to the desk. He took one look at me, saw my dark skin and, shaking his head vigorously, motioned me violently away.'<sup>13</sup> Many men of East Indian descent from Trinidad were also discouraged from joining as the War Office believed their inability to speak English and their different diet meant that they would not become efficient soldiers.<sup>14</sup> However, 'Creoles' of East Indian descent were allowed to volunteer, and there is evidence that East Indians from the Caribbean did serve on the Western Front.<sup>15</sup>

Bermuda was another island close to the Caribbean where men who wished to enlist for service overseas were separated according to their colour. In the local forces, white Bermudans were to be found in the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps (BVRC), which had existed since 1894.<sup>16</sup> 125 men enlisted in the BVRC and were sent overseas to be attached to the 1st Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment. Meanwhile, 234 Black Bermudans served in the Bermuda Militia Artillery (BMA), which was attached to the Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) and known as the Bermuda Contingent of the Royal Garrison Artillery (BCRGA). The First Contingent of the BCRGA set sail for Europe in 1916.<sup>17</sup>

**... operated in favour of white, lighter-skinned, upper-class Caribbean men compared to those with darker skins.**



Gunner Charles Curtis of the Bermuda Contingent of the Royal Garrison Artillery Image: Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

Over 800 men from Barbados volunteered to serve overseas. As with Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, many white and lighter-skinned men joined British and Canadian Regiments. In 1915, a Citizens' Contingent Committee had been formed to enable young men to enlist and most served in the BWIR. In British Guiana, over 800 men volunteered to fight. It is estimated that 100 men joined British Regiments and the rest served in the BWIR. Even when recruiting for the BWIR stopped in 1918, many joined up to serve in Canadian Regiments.

East Indian Caribbean soldiers served on the Western Front despite opposition from the War Office. For example, medal rolls of the BWIR showed that *Shiblal*, who was indentured from India and settled in British Guiana, was recruited in 1917, served in the 12th Battalion of the BWIR and was discharged in 1919.<sup>18</sup>



WARNING:—If this Certificate is lost a duplicate cannot be issued. You should therefore, on no account part with it or forward it by post when applying for a situation.

Social No. .... Army Form B. 3079.

**NOTE—This Certificate is to be issued without any alterations in the manuscript.**

Certificate of discharge of No. 1089 Rank Private

Name SIBLAL Surname. Christian Name is full.

Unit and Regiment or Corps Br. W.I. Regiment

From which discharged Br. W.I. Regiment

\*The unit of the Regiment or Corps such as Field Co. R.E., H.T., or M.T., A.S.C., etc. is invariably to be stated.

Regiment or Corps to which first posted Br. W.I. Regiment

Also previously served in None

Only Regiments or Corps in which the soldier served since August 4th, 1914, are to be stated. If inapplicable this space is to be ruled through in ink and initialed.

Specialist Qualifications (Military) None

Medals, Clasp, Decorations and Mentions in dispatches None Wound Stripes None  
To be inserted in words.

**Has served Overseas on Active Service?** Yes

Enlisted at Jamaica on 1st July 1914

He is discharged in consequence of Wounded

after serving 332 days with the Colours, and nil days in the Army Reserve or Territorial Force

\*Each space is to be filled in and the word "nil" inserted where necessary; number of years to be written in words.  
(Service with Territorial Force to be shown only in cases of soldiers serving on a full attestation.)

Date of discharge 2nd April 1919

Siblall Signature and Rank.  
Br. W.I. Regiment Officer in Charge Records.  
Jamaica (Place).

Description of the above-named soldier when he left the Colours.

Year of Birth 1895 Marks or Scars None

Height 5 9/4 in

Complexion Dark

Eyes Dark Hair Dark

PRINTED BY THE GOVERNMENT PRINTER, GENERAL POST OFFICE, LONDON. (L3267.) I.P.T.O.

The Discharge Certificate for Private Siblall, 12th Battalion, BWIR  
Image: Courtesy of John Siblall

# Theme 2



Map of the Caribbean Image © Windrush Foundation



# ... Even when recruiting for the BWIR stopped in 1918, many joined up to serve in Canadian Regiments.

British Honduras sent 580 men out of a population of only 40,000 people. Of these, 40 were white and were allowed to join other units of the armed services. The other 540 men were seconded to the Inland Water Transport in Mesopotamia. An estimated 700 men from the Bahamas served overseas in the army and the navy. White Bahamians enlisted into Regiments in Britain, the U.S.A. and Canada. Five drafts of men totalling 486 served in the BWIR. In the Windward Islands, fifteen men from Grenada enlisted in British Regiments in 1915 and 445 darker-skinned men enlisted into the BWIR. In St. Vincent, 54 men served in Canadian units and 538 men joined the BWIR. In St. Lucia, 360 men served in the BWIR. The records of the Leeward Islands comprising, Antigua, Barbuda, Redonda, St. Kitts, Nevis, Anguilla, Montserrat, Dominica and the Virgin Islands sent 347 men in four Contingents.<sup>19</sup>

It is also important to state that many Caribbean men were resident in Britain when war was declared and enlisted into British Regiments and served on the Western Front. They include Lionel Fitzherbert Turpin, a merchant seaman from British Guiana, who found himself in England at the outbreak of the war. He enlisted in the York and Lancaster Regiment and served with the King's Royal Rifle Corps as part of the British Expeditionary Force in France.<sup>20</sup> A merchant seaman from Barbados, Charles Augustus Williams, enlisted in the Royal Engineers and served on the Western Front.<sup>21</sup> Norman Manley and his brother, Roy, from

Jamaica, who were studying in England, enlisted in the Royal Field Artillery. They both served on the Western Front, Norman for the duration of the war, but his brother, Roy, was killed in Ypres in 1917.<sup>22</sup> Selvin Campbell from Jamaica, travelled to Holland and arrived in Britain as war broke out. He joined the army and served in France.<sup>23</sup> Sam Manning, a Black Trinidadian who travelled to Britain at his own expense, enlisted in the Middlesex Regiment in London. He served in France before transferring to the BWIR.<sup>24</sup>

# ... In St. Vincent, 54 men served in Canadian units and 538 men joined the BWIR.

13. C. L. R. James, *Record of Service of the Members of the Trinidad Merchants' and Planters' Contingent 1915-1918* (Trinidad, 1925), pp. ix-xiii.

14. War Office to Colonial Office, 30 October 1915, The National Archives (UK), CO 318/336.

15. See note 18.

16. Ray Costello, *Black Tommies: British Soldiers of African Descent in the First World War* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 114-115.

17. Clara F. E. Hollis Hallett and Edward Cecil Harris, *Bermuda Contingents and those who served overseas in the Great War, 1914-1918*, *Bermuda Journal of Archaeology and Maritime History*, Vol. 16 (2005), pp. 7-72.

18. See 16891 Private Shiblal, 'British War and Victory Medals: BWIR & BCRGA', The National Archives (UK), WO 329/2327.

19. The figures for this section were mostly supplied from Sir Charles Lucas, *The Empire at War*, Volume II, pp.344-436.

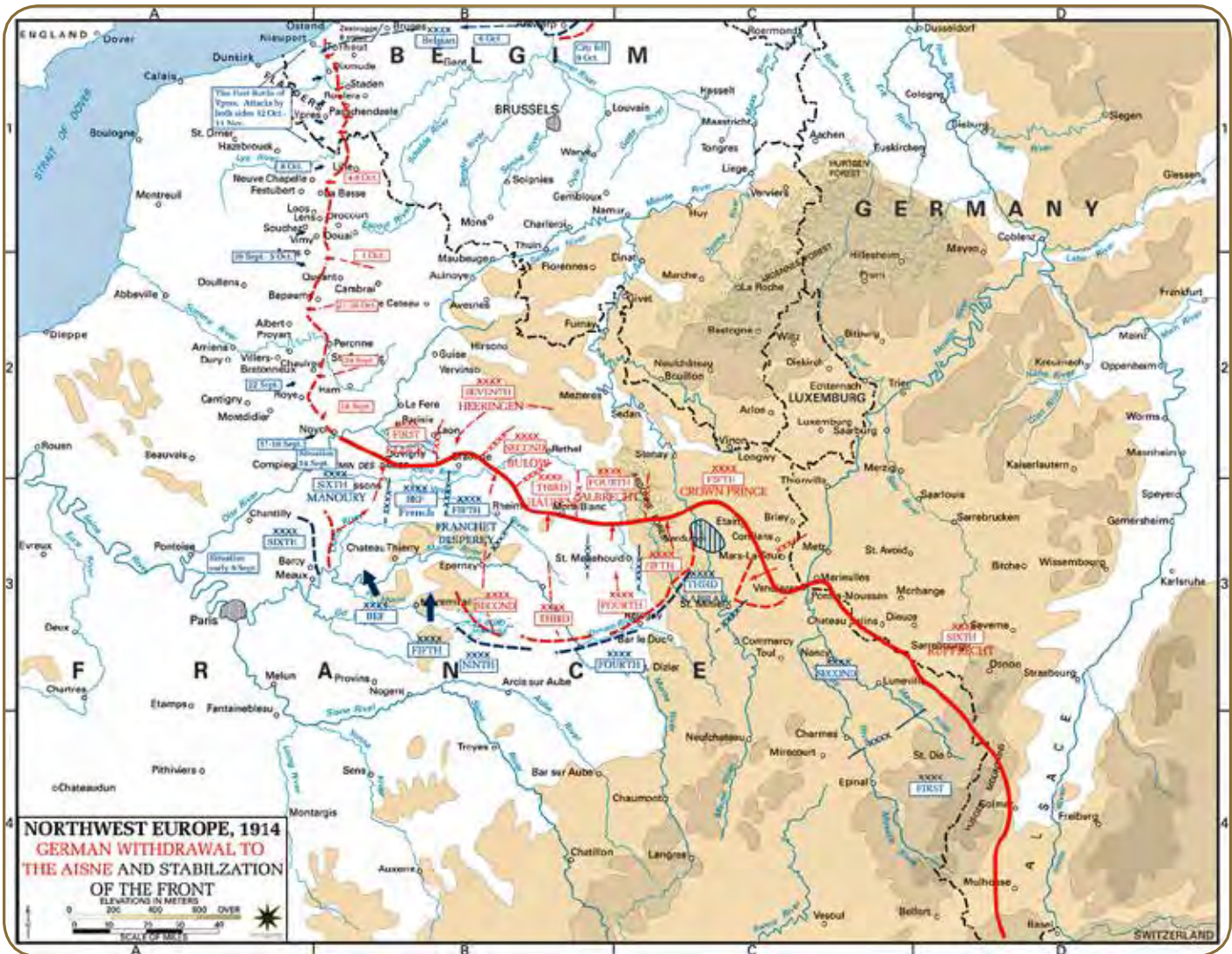
20. Caryl Phillips, *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 89; Stephen Bourne, *Black Poppies: Britain's Black Community and The Great War* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014), pp. 29-32.

21. David Killingray, 'All the King's Men? Blacks in the British Army in the First World War, 1914-1918' in R. Lotz and I. Pegg (eds.), *Under the Imperial Carpet: Essays in Black History 1780-1950* (Crawley: Rabbit Press, 1986), p.177.

22. Norman Manley, 'The Autobiography of Norman Washington Manley', *Jamaica Journal*, Vol. 7, Nos. 1-2 (March-June 1973), pp. 2-20.

23. Stephen Bourne, *Black Poppies*, pp. 50-51.

24. *Soldier Profiles: Sam Manning*: [http://www.soldiersfromtheempire.co.uk/?page\\_id=3035](http://www.soldiersfromtheempire.co.uk/?page_id=3035)



The Western Front



A recruiting meeting in Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1916

**Where did  
they serve and  
what did they  
contribute on the  
Western Front?**



Seaford town, England 1911, two camps. Red circles indicate training areas. Numbers refer to the section on Training Facilities.

**C**ontingents of Caribbean recruits began to arrive in England from October 1915 and were initially based either at North Camp in Seaford, Sussex or Withnoe Camp in Plymouth, whilst awaiting a decision regarding their deployment. The war in Europe had developed into a stalemate and it would have been expected that the Caribbean volunteers would be allowed to serve and fight in the armies along the Western Front of France and Flanders.

A clue as to the mixed deployment of the Caribbean soldiers is given by the Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion of the British West Indies Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Wood Hill. He wrote in his diary of the dreadful conditions that the Caribbean Contingents found themselves on their arrival during the European winter. He states that the men were housed in huts in Seaford Camp, which were not adequate in summertime, let alone winter. The damp in the hastily-constructed huts affected the health of the men and admissions to the local hospitals increased. This affected the ability of the men to be properly trained. The 2nd Jamaican Contingent arrived in England in January 1916 and was stationed at Withnoe Camp. The conditions in the huts there were similar to those at Seaford and the men suffered terribly from the cold. Wood Hill went to London to see the liaison officer

between the War Office and Colonial Office and implored him to move the Regiment to a warmer climate for training and where there would be less wastage of life from diseases. Within three weeks the Battalion was moved to a new base in Egypt.

## ... 106 men had limbs amputated as a consequence.

Unfortunately, in Egypt the men suffered from measles, mumps and cerebro-spinal meningitis as a consequence of being stationed at camps where there had been outbreaks of mumps amongst British troops. Matters were further compounded by the fact that many had died of pneumonia on board the ship on their way to England as a result of being unsuitably clothed. They were not given warm underclothing, overcoats and the accommodation for sick troops was inadequate<sup>25</sup>. The worst example of poor forward planning involving Caribbean troops was in March 1916 when the 3rd Jamaican Contingent, sailing on the *Verdala* troopship, was caught in a blizzard after diverting to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The ship, with 1,115 Black Caribbean soldiers and 25 white Officers on board, had no steam heating and over 600 men were frost-bitten as they were only wearing their tropical lightweight khaki clothing. Their winter clothes were on board but it was issued too late. The limbs of 106 men were amputated as a consequence.

It was whilst the four Battalions were concentrated in Egypt in 1916 that a decision was made to break up the Regiment and deploy the men in different theatres. This dashed the hopes of the volunteers and some of their Officers that they would be allowed to be engaged in combat within a fighting brigade. Five hundred men from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions were sent to German East Africa as reinforcements for the WIR, guarding captured German territory. One hundred men from the 2nd Battalion were sent to Mesopotamia to work

25. A Few Notes on the History of the British West Indies Regiment by Lt. Col. C. Wood Hill D.S.O. Commanding 1st British West Indies Regiment (Senate House library, Special Collections, F1601 PAM 13).

## Theme 3

on the Inland Water Transport. Men from the 3rd and 4th Battalions were ordered to France to be turned into ammunition carriers. On the Western Front they were allowed to participate in the war as non-combatants. The decision to employ them as ammunition carriers was, according to Lt. Colonel Wood Hill, down to the fact that Black soldiers from the Bermuda Contingent of the Royal Garrison Artillery had performed well under fire as ammunition carriers and did not suffer badly through the winter of 1915-16. The fact that Bermuda has a temperate climate and the Caribbean a tropical one does not appear to have been taken into account.

From 1916, the shortage of manpower in Europe needed to be addressed urgently and recruiting was recommenced in the Caribbean. All successive Contingents of men thereafter would be sent to France and Belgium. Lt. Colonel Wood Hill has suggested in his Notes that men from the 3rd, 4th and 6th Battalions were concentrated on ammunition work whereas later Battalions were mostly labour Battalions.<sup>26</sup> A reading of the War Diaries of the 3rd, 7th and 8th Battalions of the BWIR is helpful in providing information as to where men from the Caribbean served on the Western Front and what sort of tasks they were employed in. It appears that all BWIR Battalions that served on the Western Front were involved in ammunition work.



Men from the BWIR loading shells in France  
Image: Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

## ... When they arrived at their nominated sector they were immediately shelled by German artillery

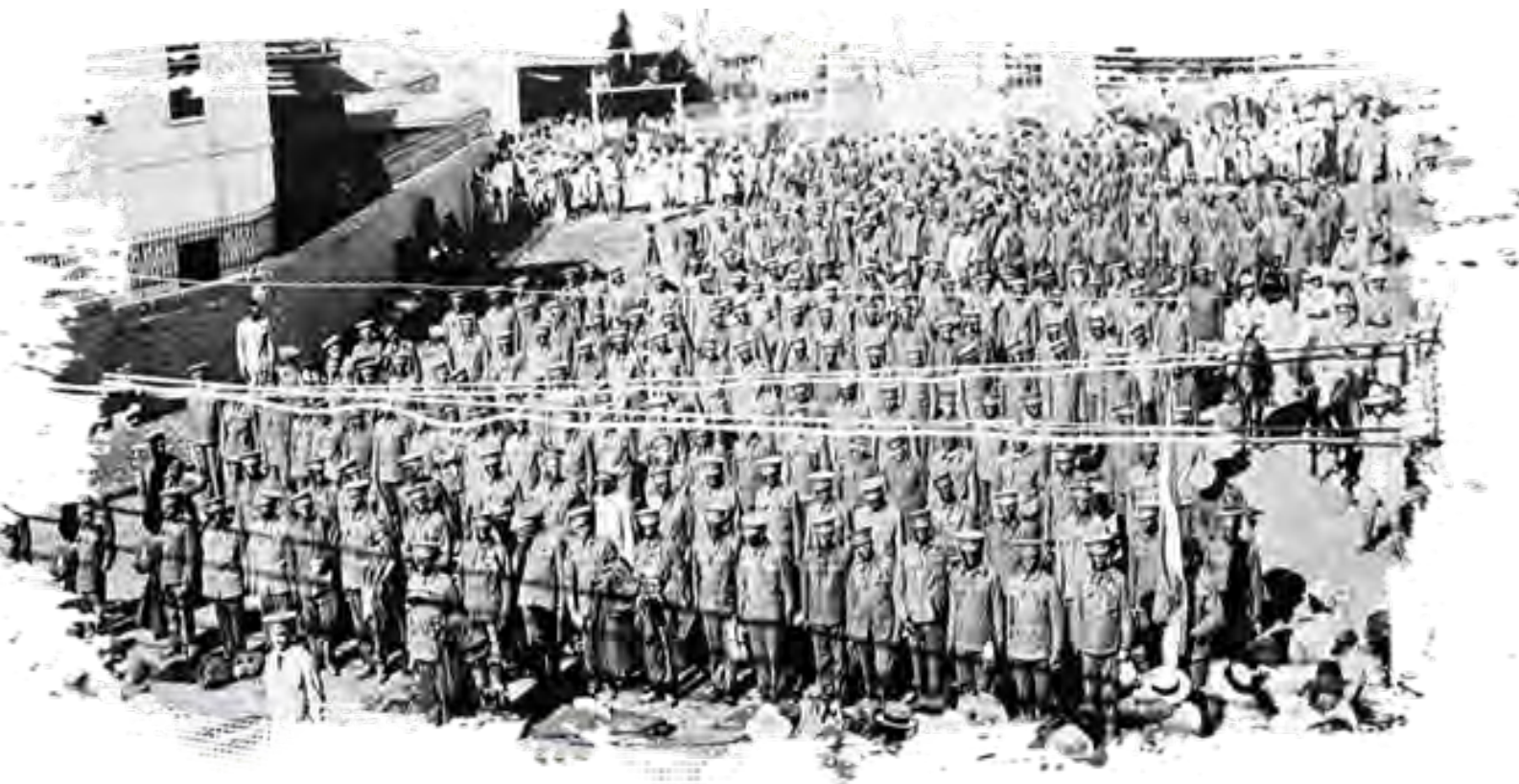
The 3rd Battalion of the BWIR served in France from September 1916 to January 1919. They sailed into the port of Marseilles where they were transported to the Western Front and attached to units of heavy artillery. When they arrived at their nominated sector they were immediately shelled by German artillery. The shelling was a reminder of a significant fact of war: that whether combatant or non-combatant, all troops faced the same dangers in the combat zone. The Battalion's job was to start an ammunition dump and repair the roads, so that shells could be transported to the artillery in support of the front-line troops. The War Diaries show that Caribbean soldiers increased the amount of shells loaded to artillery gunners. They began by loading 6000 shells per day and sometimes through the night. Within weeks they were loading about 25,000 shells per day, sometimes more. On top of their main job of supplying ammunition they made dug outs for troops and dug trenches for communication cables. At Dernancourt, Fricourt, Windy Dock, and Meaulte they loaded and unloaded shells on a narrow gauge railway.

The men often faced hostile air raids. All units were under fire as they worked. Another factor which made the task even more difficult was that the men's feet were getting swollen because of the cold weather. In the winter of 1916, the soldiers were moved to Boulogne where they worked in the docks loading and unloading ships. By early 1917, many of the soldiers had died from pneumonia, primarily brought on by their exposure to the cold. The Battalion was then moved south to the warmer climate of Marseilles. There the Battalion lost many soldiers, but this time from measles.

On 15 March 1917, the Battalion, before returning to the Front, were given the honour of being allowed to march through Marseilles after which they

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.10.





BWIR Troops on parade. Image: Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

were given dinner by the French people. In April 1917, they were moved back to the combat zone. Before returning to the ammunition work, they were given the task of dismantling Nissan huts. The War Diaries state that in May 1917 at Faubourg d'Amiens, the Battalion handled 57,300 shells. From May 1917, they were stationed at Ypres where they supplied siege Battalions at night. Under heavy shell fire, they cleared up battery positions and loaded ammunition.

An entry from September 1917 describes how they came under grenade attack, which meant they must have worked extremely close to German positions. After facing another cold winter with snow, the Battalion was posted back to Marseilles. There they recovered from the cold before returning to the Front Line to work in the ammunition dumps where they worked throughout 1918. After the Armistice in November 1918, they were ordered to be moved to Taranto in Italy where they remained until they were posted back home in 1919.<sup>27</sup> The men were expected to carry out some labouring duties but were mostly employed in ammunition work.

Were the later Contingents only employed in labour duties? Using official War Diaries, the experiences of the 7th and 8th Battalions on the Western Front can be described. The 7th Battalion arrived in Brest in June 1917, to join up with the British Expeditionary Force. As they marched through town to the train station, headed by a marine band, French people threw flowers and sweets at the men. From Brest they travelled to Rouen, then Le Havre, and Hazebrouck, where they were shelled upon arrival. They were attached to 14 Corps and the 65th Labour Group but they also worked on ammunition dumps loading shells onto railway trains like earlier Contingents.<sup>28</sup>

The 8th Battalion arrived in Brest in July 1917 and, after a period of recuperation due to an outbreak of fever and bronchitis, were able to carry out drills and training. In September 1917, the Battalion supplied parties for ammunition work for 10 Corps of the Heavy Artillery. Some men were sent to Abeele, in Belgium, where they were employed to fill box respirators. There they regularly faced bombs from aeroplanes and shell-fire.

27. '3 Battalion British West Indies Regiment: September 1916-January 1919', The National Archives (UK), WO 95/338/2.

28. '7th Battalion, British West Indies Regiment: British Expeditionary Force France: June 1917 - December 1917 to Italy January 1918', The National Archives (UK), WO 95/409/4.

## Theme 4

Many soldiers were killed or wounded working with the Heavy Artillery and building dug-outs for Officers, and sandbagging. Like the other Contingents they suffered from the effects of the cold in winter, in particular snow and frost, and they needed to be issued with extra blankets. They travelled via Vlamertinghe, Poperinghe, and Rouen to a new camp at Bruyeres where they worked, under constant shelling, at a petrol depot before being sent to Taranto in Italy for the remainder of the war.<sup>29</sup> A reading of the War Diaries suggests that all of the Battalions who served on the Western Front, in Northern France and Belgium, served mainly supplying shells and ammunition to the Artillery and Front Line troops whilst also being asked to carry out some labour duties.

Over 178 men from the BWIR were killed mostly in Northern France or Belgium. 697 were wounded in action and over 1,071 died overseas as a result of sickness such as pneumonia, chest and lung infections.<sup>30</sup> Visible reminders of the toll the war took on the men from the Caribbean are found in the military cemeteries scattered all over the former Western Front. The graves and headstones of Caribbean men can be found at Dunkerque, Boulogne, Calais, Hazebrouck, Ypres, Courtrai, Etaples, Arras, Cambrai, Mons, Le Havre, Dieppe - Rouen, Amiens, Longeau-Albert, Bapaume-Peronne, St. Quentin, Landrecies, and Soissons. The largest numbers of dead soldiers are buried in Mazargues Cemetery in Southern France, which was the base for the Caribbean troops.<sup>31</sup>

**... When they arrived at their nominated sector they were immediately shelled by German artillery**



Headstone of Private H. Anderson of the 6th Battalion, BWIR in Mazargues Cemetery, Marseilles. Image: Courtesy of John Siblon

**... 'They called us darkies, but when the battle starts, it didn't make a difference. We were all the same. When you're there, you don't care about anything. Every man there is under the rifle.'**

29. '8th Battalion, British West Indies Regiment, July 1917–December 1917: France 2 Army Troops', the National Archives (UK), WO 95/338/2.

30. West Indian Contingent Committee, 'Report of the Committee for six months ended June 30th 1919', the National Archives (UK), CO 318/351.

31. Sidney C. Hurst, *The Silent Cities: An Illustrated Guide to the War Cemeteries and Memorials to the Missing in France and Flanders, 1914-1918* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1929).



Trinidadian calypso singer Sam Manning travelled to London from the Caribbean and joined the Middlesex Regiment. Image: Courtesy of Middlesex University

The Corps Commander on the Western Front praised the 'splendid work' of the Caribbean men and described how they 'behaved magnificently under shell fire'. Wood Hill also added that on top of the dangers the men faced they also had to deal with racial prejudice from German as well as white British Soldiers.<sup>32</sup> The most famous images of the British West Indies Regiment show the men armed with Lee Enfield rifles in 1916 during the Somme Offensive.

Does this indicate that the men actually took part in combat on the Western Front? In interviews with former BWIR soldiers, there are reports of men physically fighting off counter-attacks. One account tells how a group fought off a German assault armed only with knives they had brought from home. George Blackman recalls

trench fights he was in alongside white British soldiers. 'They called us darkies, but when the battle starts, it didn't make a difference. We were all the same. When you're there, you don't care about anything. Every man there is under the rifle,' he vividly remembered. 'The Tommies said, "Darkie, let them have it." I made the order: "Bayonets, fix," and then "B company, fire." You know what it is to go and fight somebody hand to hand? You need plenty nerves. They come at you with the bayonet. He pushes at me. I push at he. You push that bayonet in there and hit with the butt of the gun - if he is dead he is dead, if he live, he live.'<sup>33</sup> Units of the 1st and 2nd Battalions had seen action in Palestine in 1917 but it is also clear that Caribbean soldiers who served on the Western Front not only faced the danger of death but also engaged in combat.

32. Lt. Col. C. Wood Hill, Op. Cit. p. 9.

33. George Blackman interviewed by Simon Rogers, 'There were no parades for us', The Guardian, 6 November 2002.

# What happened to them after serving on the Western Front?

**A**fter service in Palestine, France and Belgium and as the war drew to a conclusion, all BWIR Battalions were sent to a base at Taranto in Italy. At the camp Caribbean soldiers faced racially discriminatory treatment at the hands of Senior Officers, who viewed the whole Regiment, despite their war service, as 'coloured natives' and 'niggers'.<sup>34</sup> They were segregated from other troops, asked to guard ammunition dumps and given duties usually performed by labour Battalions, such as washing dirty linen and cleaning latrines for other corps at the camp.

The order to perform menial labour duties was interpreted by the men as a deliberate attempt to remind the Regiment of their supposed inferior status within the Army and the British Empire. To add further insult, they were not awarded a pay rise of sixpence that was given to all other British servicemen posted overseas in 1918. The official explanation for the non-award of a pay increase was that BWIR soldiers had been classified as a 'native' Regiment and were not entitled to any pay rise that was awarded to white British soldiers.<sup>35</sup>

On hearing these orders, a large number of Battalions refused to carry out work and fatigues they considered of a discriminatory nature and engaged in acts of insubordination. On 6 December 1918, the 9th Battalion led a mutiny in which officers were attacked. The 10th Battalion refused to work. In response to the mutiny, the military authorities acted swiftly to crush the mutiny and were prepared to use force against the BWIR.

As a result the 9th Battalion was disbanded. Private A. Denny was executed and sixty other soldiers were convicted of mutiny. One received a sentence of twenty years in a military prison whilst other soldiers were sentenced to three to five years in jail. One of the outcomes of the mutiny was the establishment, on 17 December 1918, of the Caribbean League which was formed by a meeting of Non-Commissioned Officers to unite the different colonies of the Caribbean in a demand for self-rule when the soldiers returned home.<sup>36</sup>

The pay rise was eventually granted in February 1919, with some urging by the Colonial Office, who were worried about the effect of the mutiny in the Caribbean. Despite this, a decision had been made to disband the Regiment and repatriate the men back to the Caribbean. Wood Hill later wrote that the 'colour question' was never so much in evidence as at Taranto and never were Caribbean men so humiliated and badly treated.<sup>37</sup>



**Private Albert Denny 8th Battalion, British West Indies Regiment, executed for murder 20/01/1919 Image: Courtesy of Commonwealth War Graves Commission**

34. Cedric L. Joseph, 'The British West Indies Regiment', *Journal of Caribbean History*, 2, (May, 1971), p.119.

35. The War Office, *Diary of the 2nd Battalion British West Indies Regiment*, TNA (UK) W.O. 95/4732.

36. W. F. Elkins, 'A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean: The Revolt of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto', *Science & Society*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring, 1970), pp. 99-103.

37. Lieutenant-Colonel C. Wood Hill, *A few notes on the history of the British West Indies Regiment*, p.10.

# What happened after demobilisation?

**The Colonial and War Offices were deeply concerned about the return of BWIR to the Caribbean. They feared that the angry troops would destabilise British rule in the Caribbean and argued for extra security whilst the troops were being transported back to the Caribbean and on their arrival. Promises were made in advance that ex-servicemen would be given the right to vote in elections in the colonies. There was a mutiny aboard the *Orca*, one of the ships transporting troops back to the Caribbean. The *Orca* was transporting 120 ex-BWIR and 75 prisoners from Taranto, as well as 200 Caribbean seamen. One soldier was shot dead in the riot and the Captain demanded an armed escort to Barbados. There were also disturbances in the Caribbean linked to the return of the Contingents after their service overseas.**

In British Honduras, the Contingent returned home on 8 September 1919. They were allowed a march through town but rioting erupted in Belize on 22 September 1919. Ex-members of the BWIR were leading the riots and there was looting of shops and many whites were beaten in the streets. The disturbances were mostly in protest at their treatment whilst overseas. The newspapers reported that many of the rioters were shouting 'This is not Mesopotamia, this is not Egypt, this is Belize'.<sup>38</sup> The territorial force did not turn out when summoned so the Governor was forced to meet representatives of the Contingent who made five demands which helped bring the rioting to an end.

Sailors from HMS *Constance* were deployed to the colony and martial law was declared. *The Castine*, a US warship, was sent to Belize but left when a detachment of the Sussex Regiment arrived, who were then replaced by the WIR. *The Independent* newspaper asserted that it was mistreatment of Caribbean soldiers that was major factor in riots as well as news about mistreatment of Black subjects in the United Kingdom.<sup>39</sup>

In Jamaica, the colonial government tried to recruit extra militia in advance of the return of the Jamaica Contingent which was met by a warship and a show of military force. The authorities did not want sailors or soldiers uniting. The Contingent was allowed to parade in Kingston: the soldiers were paid-off individually and they moved on quickly to avoid any disturbances.

On 18 July 1919, there was a riot in Kingston. White sailors from HMS *Constance* were attacked. The violence included some ex-servicemen and it was rumoured that they would aim to disrupt Peace Celebrations planned for 19 July. There was some lawlessness and disruption in Kingston, Morant Bay and Savannah-la-Mar involving unruly ex-servicemen. It took reinforcements from HMS *Constance* and the West India Regiment (WIR) to restore order. At the same time, seamen petitioned the colonial government to explain that their actions were due to race and class oppression in England.

To placate the ex-servicemen, they were offered some land in a Land Settlement Scheme and it was decided to encourage ex-BWIR men to migrate to Cuba. The offer of paid passages was taken up by 4,046 ex-servicemen although many desired to go to Canada. Many ex-BWIR became socialists, or nationalists through the Caribbean League, and many turned to Black nationalism in the form of the UNIA and an offshoot called the Ethiopian Progressive and Co-operative Association.<sup>40</sup>



The return of the St. Vincent Contingent in 1919  
(Imperial War Museum, Q15098)

38. Glenford Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War*, p.182.

39. *Ibid.* p.182.

40. *Ibid.* pp.192-194.

## Theme 5

In Trinidad, the *Merchants' and Planters' Contingents* had returned in May and June and were mobbed when they arrived. The returning BWIR Contingent was treated differently. As an attempt to head off trouble and pacify the ex-servicemen, colonial officials invited them to lead a parade at the Queen's Park Savannah on 19 July 1919 during the Peace Day Celebrations. However, only 132 men joined the parade, while a number in uniform and civilian dress merely looked on or booed those who were in the procession. The reason for the poor turn-out was due to the refusal to arm those in the parade lest they turned their guns on the authorities. During the peace celebrations some white sailors from *HMS Dartmouth* were assaulted and a deputation forced the release of some of the military prisoners. The Governor requested white troops be sent to the island and *HMS Cambrian* was kept there in case of further trouble. In Grenada, there were some disturbances in July 1919. The *TTT Gang* carried out robberies and arson attacks but some of the gang members were believed to have been ex-servicemen. Other ex-servicemen migrated to Cuba.<sup>41</sup>



The return of the St. Vincent Contingent in 1919  
(Imperial War Museum, Q15098)

King George V visited the Caribbean in September 1920 and this was seen as an attempt to show those men who served in the war that their efforts were appreciated in Britain and by the colonial government. Alongside this, the erection of war memorials throughout the region served to remind the local population of the service and the loss of life among the Caribbean Contingents in the war. However, many Caribbean soldiers tried to rekindle the loyalty and patriotism which had motivated them to volunteer to fight in the war, but which had been lost by the way they were treated. Many other soldiers were just glad the war was over and that they had survived. Corporal Charles Booth of the 9th Battalion BWIR wrote the poem below in December 1918 whilst recovering from wounds in a Liverpool hospital.

I

Peace and victory is before us  
Bright and Happy days is nigh  
Soon shall one and all be singing  
Peace on earth good will to men

II

Though the Light at First was dimly  
And our boys was but a few  
But the Light Burst out in splendour  
Peace on earth good will to men

III

Now the Germans Lies and Slumbers  
Never more to shoot an' slay  
Never shall the 'rais' to fight us  
Peace on earth good will to men <sup>42</sup>



The National War Memorial in Kingston, Jamaica,  
unveiled in November 1922. Image: Courtesy of John Siblon

41. Ibid. pp. 195-198.

42. Corporal Charles N. Booth, West Indian Contingent Committee: Letters from the trenches during the Great War (Long Compton: The 'King's Stone' Press, 1935).



**CARIBBEAN  
SOLDIERS ON THE  
WESTERN FRONT  
REMEMBERED  
1914 - 1918**

**B.W.I.**

In Seaford Cemetery there are more than 300 Commonwealth War Graves and nineteen of the headstones display the crest of the BWIR.

Unidentified, The British West Indies Regiment.  
<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/50967-caribbean-soldiers-and-units/>  
British West Indies Regiment badge

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