

**ISLANDS AT WAR: THE BRITISH WEST INDIAN EXPERIENCE OF  
THE FIRST WORLD WAR, 1914-1927**

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
General Summary	iv
Acknowledgements	v
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
List of Abbreviations	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	10
Chapter 2: Civil-Military Relations & Imperial Defence, 1898-1914	34
2.1 Civil Disobedience and Anti-Imperial Sentiments	38
2.2 Planter Society and the Prewar West Indian Imperial Garrison	44
Chapter 3: Recruitment	34
3.1 The German Naval Threat to the British West Indies	62
3.2 Initial Recruitment of West Indian Soldiers	75
3.3 Leadership	87
3.4 Conclusion	96
Chapter 4: West Indian Infantry in Egypt & Palestine	99
4.1 Civilian Volunteers	108
4.2 The West Indian Wartime-Tourist	123
4.3 West Indian Soldiers	140
4.4 Conclusion	161
Chapter 5: Africa and the Middle East	163
5.1 Old Wars: Cameroon, 1915-16	168
5.2 Guerilla War: German East Africa, 1916-18	180
5.3 Conclusion	200
Chapter 6: Labour	202
6.1 Military Logistics and the Recruitment of West Indian Labourers	206
6.2 King George's Steam Engine	215
6.3 The Inland Water Transport	233
6.4 Conclusion	237
Chapter 7: The Return	241
7.1 Breaking the Contract	246
7.2 Ex-Servicemen	262
7.3 Conclusion	277
Chapter 8: Conclusion	280
Appendix 1: British Army First World War Organizational Structure	290
Bibliography	291

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the experiences of British West Indian soldiers of the all-volunteer British West Indies Regiment and the British Regular Army's West India Regiment during the First World War and how these experiences contributed to a rise in Black West Indian nationalism during the early interwar period. It highlights how, over the course of three years of First World War service, West Indians hoped that Britain would reward their military service with opportunities for social mobility and that the growth of Black West Indian nationalism resulted from these rewards not being granted. Whereas the existing historiography has examined the West Indian experience solely from a racial perspective, this dissertation argues that race was not a monocausal influence on the West Indian wartime experience. Britain's plans for global war, difficulties associated with raising and training new battalions, and army strategic considerations, along with race, played a part in how the West Indian Great War experience played out. When compared to other imperial forces, the West Indian experience of 1914-18 was not unique. West Indian troops participated in combat operations in Cameroon, German East Africa, and Palestine while also serving as military labourers and support troops in Mesopotamia, Italy, and the Western Front. Yet, when Britain did not reward their wartime service with employment, massed land settlement, or the right to vote, West Indians responded by using tactics from their prewar struggles with imperial authority — strikes and civil demonstrations — leading to the rise of a West Indian nationalist movement centred on race, class, and First World War service.

## **General Summary**

When Britain went to war with Germany in August 1914, millions of British subjects throughout the empire answered the mother country's call to arms. Amongst this multi-national army were approximately 16,000 British West Indian soldiers who served in the West India Regiment (~1,000 soldiers) and the all-volunteer British West Indies Regiment. Mainly employed as labourers on the Western Front and in Italy, a small portion of the West Indian contingent served as combat troops against the Ottoman Empire in Palestine and against German colonial forces in German East Africa. Earlier historical studies have focused entirely on the relationship between race and the West Indian wartime experience, arguing that West Indian soldiers became increasingly alienated with imperial society as a result of being withheld from combat, deployed to the fringes of the war, and their treatment as second-class soldiers by British military authorities. This dissertation, however, argues that, while race was an essential factor in the development of the West Indian Great War experience, it was not the only factor. Britain's responses to German naval threats, difficulties in raising and training so many volunteer soldiers, and strategic developments in Europe and abroad influenced how West Indian soldiers were recruited, organized, trained, and employed. Furthermore, West Indians enthusiastically enlisted, hoping that Britain would reward their military service by providing opportunities for Black social advancement, including through land grants, postwar employment, and the right to vote. When informed that such rewards would not come to fruition, West Indians responded in kind by questioning their imperial allegiances and directing their military grievances towards the Caribbean's interwar Black nationalist labour movement.

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## **List of Tables**

Table 1.1 - Total Enlistments by Territory and by Pension Records .....	29
Table 2.1 - British Army Organizational Comparison.....	54
Table 3.1 - West Indian War Exports, 1914.....	70
Table 3.2 - Prewar Occupations in BWIR Pension Files .....	84
Table 4.2 - BWIR Training Schedule, Egypt 1915.....	119
Table 5.1 - BWIR Daily Rations, East Africa, 1917.....	198

## **List of Figures**

Figure 3.1 - BWIR Recruits from Trinidad Light Infantry .....	68
Figure 3.2 - St. Vincent Contingent, BWIR.....	87
Figure 3.3 - Colonel A.E. Barchard, 3BWIR.....	93
Figure 3.4 - Naval Gun Emplacement, Grenada, 1917 .....	97
Figure 4.1 - BWIR Recruits at Seaford, 1915 .....	115
Figure 4.2 - BWIR Soldiers with Chaplains, 1917 .....	128
Figure 4.3 - BWIR Soldiers, Egypt 1916.....	142
Figure 4.4 - BWIR Maxim Gunners, 1917 .....	143
Figure 4.5 - BWIR and ELC Constructing Dugouts, 1917 .....	149
Figure 5.1 - Layout of a British Camp in Cameroon .....	175
Figure 5.2 - BWIR soldiers, possibly BWIR(EA) .....	187
Figure 6.1 - Charges Laid Against West Indian Soldiers by Battalion and Bi-Annual Period... ..	228
Figure 7.1 - Obverse of British Victory Medal (1918) .....	264
Figure 8.1 - Port of Spain War Memorial .....	289



## List of Abbreviations

ADM	Admiralty Papers
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BDA	Barbados Department of Archives
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BWIR	British West Indies Regiment (numeral indicates battalion)
BWIR(EA)	British West Indies Regiment (East Africa Detachment)
CAB	Cabinet Office Papers
CLE	Charger Loading Lee-Enfield
CO	Colonial Office
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Committee
DG	<i>The Daily Gleaner</i>
EAEF	East African Expeditionary Force
EEF	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
FGCM	Field General Court Martial
FO	Foreign Office
GH	Government House Records (Barbados)
GHQ	General Headquarter
GSWO	General Staff, War Office
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
HMSO	His Majesty's Stationary Office
IWM	Imperial War Museum
IWT	Inland Water Transport Section
JAG	Judge Advocate General's Office
MEF	Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NZMR	New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade
OWNH	Old Weather/Naval History Zooniverse Project
POSG	<i>Port of Spain Gazette</i>
RE	Royal Engineers
SMLE	Short Magazine Lee-Enfield
SS	<i>Stationary Service Pamphlet</i>
TNA	The National Archives (Kew, UK)
WICA	West India Committee Archives
WICC	<i>West India Committee Circular</i>
WIR	West India Regiment (numeral indicates battalion)
WO	War Office

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Giving the sermon at the disbandment ceremony for the West India Regiment (WIR) in 1926, Reverend S.P. Hendrick addressed the regiment's soldiers and spoke of "the faithful service rendered to your King and country".<sup>1</sup> The sermon's tone reflected the service that the West India Regiment had provided to Britain for the better part of 130 years: from the campaigns against Revolutionary France to the expansion and defence of the British Empire in the Caribbean and West Africa, and finally to four years of combat service during the Great War.<sup>2</sup> In the decade following the First World War, the War Office's decision to disband the West India Regiment was a matter of imperial defence and cost-saving. The British Government believed that the Royal Navy's Caribbean Squadron and the various local defence militias could protect Britain's West Indian colonies. Most importantly, these militias were funded and maintained by the regional government offices and not by Britain. Regarding British West Africa, which West Indians had garrisoned since the 1840s, the West African Frontier Force's adequate performance from 1914-18 nullified the need for the colonies' continued garrison by West Indian soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S.P. Hendrick, "Sermon," quoted in "Valedictory Service for West India Regiment at Kingston Parish Church," *The Daily Gleaner*, 15 November 1926, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while the WIR was established in 1794, the service of professional Black soldiers in the British Army can be dated to the foundation of the Carolina Corps in 1779. See Gary Sellick, "Black Skin, Red Coats: The Carolina Corps and Nationalism in the Revolutionary British Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 459–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1489765>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Stewart, "An Enduring Commitment: The British Military's Role in Sierra Leone," *Defence Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 351–68. Richard S Fogarty and David Killingray, "Demobilization in British and French Africa at the End of the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 100–123.

Just five years before, as another Great War regiment — the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) — was being disbanded, the commanding officer of the regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Major Charles Wood Hill, said to his men, "...It is to be hoped that those who wore the King's uniform will never allow themselves to be evilly influenced by political agitators and that they will always be soldiers in spirit and loyal to their King and Country."<sup>4</sup> Hill's address was neither as chipper nor as patriotic as Hendrick's. Whereas Hendrick's West Indian soldiers were valiant defenders of the British Empire, Hill described his former soldiers as lazy, prone to faking illness to escape fatigue duties, and incapable of functioning without white officers' leadership.<sup>5</sup> Hill's comments were undoubtedly influenced by the actions of some West Indian soldiers stationed at Taranto, Italy, following the armistice; there, after being ordered to clean the latrines of white Italian civilian labourers, members of 9BWIR mutinied.<sup>6</sup> The mutiny, which resulted in the battalion's immediate disbandment and the disarmament of all West Indian soldiers in Taranto (approximately three-quarters of all Black West Indians on active service), was a defining moment for emerging West Indian nationalist and self-determination movements, with many of the soldiers returning home to become the very 'political agitators' Hill had warned against.<sup>7</sup>

Civil strife and demonstrations were commonplace in the British West Indies before 1914. The period between 1890 and 1903 was particularly striking, with riots

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<sup>4</sup> Major Charles Wood Hill, "W.I. Soldiers During the War," quoted in "West India Committee Circular," West India Committee, 1921,

<sup>5</sup> Hill, "W.I. Soldiers During the War."

<sup>6</sup> For more detail, see W Elkins, "A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean: The Revolt of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto, Italy," *Science and Society* 34, no. 1 (1970): 99–103.

<sup>7</sup> Elkins.

occurring in St. Kitts, British Guyana, and Trinidad. Such demonstrations stemmed from West Indian discontent towards Britain, mainly when West Indians thought the colonial governments were overstepping their boundaries or failing to act in the best interests of West Indians. Yet, despite such animosity, West Indian responses to Britain's 1914 declaration of war against Germany were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Like citizens of the British dominions and other colonies, some West Indians believed that service in the Great War would afford the region certain benefits in the peace that followed. Colonial administrators and West Indian nationalists alike hoped that, in providing a large contingent of men for the British war effort, the various British colonies of the circum-Caribbean might federate to become Britain's sixth dominion, like a Canada of the Caribbean. Similar motivations for imperial service could be found throughout the British Empire. Political leaders in the larger dominions, such as Canada and Australia, hoped that a strong showing in the war might afford the young nations a certain degree of autonomy, perhaps control over their international affairs, separate from the British parliament.<sup>8</sup> In Ireland, Irish nationalists hoped that patriotic service would result in the granting of Irish Home Rule, the debates of which pushed Britain to the brink of civil war in the months preceding Germany's invasion of Belgium.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Irish unionists hoped that a patriotic showing might demonstrate Britain and Ireland's strong ties, stopping Home Rule once and for all. Some Indian patriots hoped that a strong showing

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<sup>8</sup> See Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War One and Partition* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 45–48.

by the British Indian Army might correlate to increased autonomy or even self-government in the war's aftermath. West Indian political leaders, colonial administrators, and nationalists were very much like their imperial counterparts regarding motivations for supporting the European war.<sup>10</sup>

Ordinary West Indian citizens, too, were motivated to support Britain's entry into the First World War in the hope of bettering their social standing, while others enlisted due to imperial loyalty, the opportunity for adventure, or to escape unemployment. On the eve of the First World War, West Indian male suffrage was tied to land ownership, as it was in Britain. In the West Indies, private land ownership was primarily a luxury of the white, planter minority who dominated West Indian politics, society, and business since European arrival in the seventeenth century. Ever after Britain passed the *Emancipation Act* in 1833, it was very difficult for Black West Indians to join the ranks of the West Indian landed gentry. For example, while freedmen purchased and constructed dwellings in post-abolition Jamaica, they often did not have freehold of the land. Rather, in most cases, Black West Indian homeowners paid rent to the planter elite for the use of their land, barring most from participation in island politics.<sup>11</sup> The West Indies in the prewar period was the sight of numerous riots, demonstrations, and civil actions that stemmed from inequalities in colonial society. When Britain entered the First World War, many Black and creole West Indians hoped that voluntary military service would result in land

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<sup>10</sup> Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 39–74; Richard Grayson, *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Rachel Goffe, "Capture and Abandon: Social Reproductions and Informal Land Tenure in Jamaica," PhD Dissertation (University of New York, 2017), 21–30.

grants being awarded to ex-servicemen at the end of hostilities. In short, it was hoped that a demonstration of imperial loyalty through military service would be rewarded with opportunities for social mobility, political representation, and land.

West Indian desires for wartime service to result in greater social autonomy and mobility echoed British dominion Indigenous citizens. Timothy Winegard explored this topic in his work *Indigenous Peoples of the British Empire and the First World War*.<sup>12</sup> Britain classified Winegard's Indigenous soldiers, like the West Indians discussed here, as second-class citizens within their respective dominions. For example, like their West Indian counterparts, Canadian Indigenous soldiers were mostly unable to participate in Canadian politics because of the *Indian Act* and the various treaties between the Canadian Crown and Indigenous groups. Still, Canadian Indigenous peoples flocked to recruiting stations in the hope of bettering their position within Canadian society.

As West Indian motivations for military service, like their Indigenous and Irish comrades, were tied to prospects of postwar reward, the best way for historians to examine the relationship between West Indian soldiers and the British Army is through contractual terms. As Nikolas Gardner states in his study of Indian soldiers during the Siege of Kut-al-Amara,

Rather than simply serving their [officers] with steadfast devotion, Indian soldiers agreed to perform a defined set of tasks over a specified duration, in return for which they received a range of tangible and intangible rewards and benefits. These included pay and rations, adequate medical

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

care, and the prospect of a pension for themselves or their families if they were wounded or killed on active service.<sup>13</sup>

West Indians expected the same benefits as the Indian soldiers whom Gardner describes; however, as the overwhelming majority of West Indian soldiers during the First World War enlisted only for the duration of the war, additional postwar rewards must be added to Gardner's list. West Indians broadly hoped that Britain would reward their military service through land grants, civilian employment, and the right to vote — all of which would increase Black West Indian social mobility in what was a white-dominated socio-political sphere. West Indian motivations for wartime service – and indeed the motivations for other British imperial subjects – are perhaps best represented by a passage from Jonathan Fennell in his history of British imperial citizen soldiers during the Second World War: “If citizen soldiers were to risk all, and potentially sacrifice life and limb, the state had to offer something in return.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet, like the dominions' Indigenous peoples and Irish nationalists, hopes of post-1918 rewards were quickly dashed following the armistice. While Britain provided some land to ex-servicemen as part of the empire's soldier settlement schemes, unused land in the West Indies was, by 1919, sparse, and what free land existed was largely unsuitable for agricultural endeavours. Black British West Indian returned in 1919 not at the dawn of a better tomorrow, but to state-sponsored emigration to Cuba and Latin America aimed at ridding the colonies of thousands of unemployed and underemployed ex-servicemen

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<sup>13</sup> Nikolas Gardner, *The Siege of Kut-Al-Amara: At War in Mesopotamia 1915-1916* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 681.

whose prewar activities in strikes and demonstrations invoked fears of Bolshevism in the interwar West Indies. Dismayed, with Britain for not fulfilling its end of the social contract between soldier and empire, Black West Indian ex-servicemen turned to Black nationalist organizations such as Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and launched the British West Indies' independence movement.

Despite similarities between the British West Indies and other marginalized British subjects regarding political and personal motivations for Great War participation, the West Indian wartime experience was quite different from the dominions and other colonies. While Britain readily accepted offers of expeditionary forces from each of the five dominions and mobilized its forces in India, Kenya, and West Africa, the War Office rejected offers of a West Indian overseas contingent in 1914. While the 'old contemptibles' of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) retreated from Mons to the Marne before advancing back to Ypres, West Indians were told to stay home and focus on local defence.<sup>15</sup> From the war's initial mobile campaign through to the adoption of trench warfare and up until the gas attacks of Second Ypres, West Indians were told the best way to serve the empire was to stay home. Britain did not start recruiting West Indian volunteers until April 1915: nine months after Britain's entry into the war.

While the West Indies was home to one regiment of professional, Regular Army soldiers during the war (the WIR), the region only raised a single, 12-battalion regiment of wartime volunteers: the BWIR. The unit represented the largest single, West Indian

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<sup>15</sup> 'Old Contemptibles' is a postwar nickname given to the original BEF that crossed the English Channel to France in August 1914.



personnel contribution to Britain's war effort (just under 16,000 volunteer soldiers) and has unsurprisingly come to dominate West Indian memory of the Great War in the century since 1918. Yet even within this regiment, wartime experiences varied greatly. Although classified as an infantry regiment, approximately only 3,000 of its members would actually participate in combat. Even then, these combat experiences were not the dominant British imperial experiences of the Western Front but of fighting in Palestine, Jordan, and German East Africa. The remaining soldiers went to Western Europe: not as infantrymen, but as shell carriers and military labourers.

Between 1915-18, West Indians were constantly reminded of their place within Britain's imperial hierarchy. After the war's conclusion, some shell carriers expressed their dismay at being forced to lug shells rather than fight. While Britain employed thousands of Black soldiers as infantry during the war, they only did so outside of Europe; the only British subjects of colour on the Western Front were labourers and shell carriers from various African realms, Canada, and the British West Indies. In 1918, while the majority of Britain's soldiers received a pay increase, West Indians were informed that they, like Britain's 'native' colonial troops, would maintain the 1914 pay rates. When asked why West Indians were excluded from the pay increase, the War Office stated it was an administrative matter; that only regiments with UK-based depots could avail of the pay increase. Yet white South Africans, whose regimental depots were not in the United Kingdom, availed of the pay increase. Finally, when stationed at the British docks at Taranto at the end of 1918, BWIR troops were infamously made to clean the latrines of white, Italian, civilian labourers. Their breaking point reached, hundreds of soldiers

mutinied. The BWIR was quickly disarmed, dispatched to the Caribbean, and disbanded unceremoniously.

Given the racial environment in which West Indian soldiers operated between 1914-19, it is not surprising that most historians of the British West Indian Great War experience have examined primarily through a racial lens. Caribbean nationalist, reporter, and writer C.L.R. James was the first to address racism and the BWIR in his 1932 work *The Life of Captain Cipriani*.<sup>16</sup> This was the first work dedicated to the British West Indies and the First World War outside of two state-sponsored official histories that appeared in the 1920s.<sup>17</sup> James's work was not a history of the First World War but rather a biography of Trinbagonian Labour Party politician, nationalist, and war veteran Arthur Andrew Cipriani. Nevertheless, James presents Cipriani's experiences as a BWIR captain, highlighting the institutional racism directed towards Black West Indian soldiers from the white British military hierarchy. James argues that such racism dated from the war's beginning when the War Office refused offers of a West Indian overseas contingent in 1914-15. Accord to James, the War Office felt that the West Indian recruits made poor-quality soldiers, particularly in the cold European climate, and were better suited as labourers to carry shells, unload ships, and conduct military construction duties. James described the matter as being "...the old story of the Black man being first refused an opportunity [to fight] to be afterwards condemned for incapacity."<sup>18</sup> For the better part of

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<sup>16</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies, with the Pamphlet 'the Case for West-Indian Self Government*; (Nelson, UK: Cartmel & CO, 1932; repr., Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Frank Holmes, *The Bahamas During the Great War* (Nassau: The Tribune, 1924); Frank Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War, 1914-1918* (London: The West India Committee, 1925).

<sup>18</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 70-71.

the Great War, Cipriani and his West Indian comrades are portrayed by James as being neglected by their white commanders until 1917, when the West Indians are vindicated following their excellent performance against Ottoman forces in Palestine.

James's work stood as the definitive social history of West Indians at war until the 1970s, when the topic was revisited. In his 1970 work "A Source of Black Pride in the Caribbean", W. Elkins argued that the British Army considered West Indians to be racially inferior, leading the War Office to employ most Black West Indians as shell carriers instead of infantrymen. Elkins further argued that the army's mistreatment of Black West Indians during the war, particularly during their time at Taranto, gave birth to sentiments of racial nationalism amongst the soldiers, many of whom would channel their grievances over their wartime service in interwar Black nationalist organizations.<sup>19</sup> One year after Elkins's work was published, C.L. Joseph built upon the work of C.L.R. James by examining all twelve BWIR battalions during the war, albeit through the same lens of presumed widespread racism. Joseph's work, titled "The British West Indies Regiment", presents a pattern of white British prejudice against the West Indians that once again dates to the War Office's 1914 refusal of West Indian contingents. Joseph's narrative positioned the West Indian First World War experience at a crossroads between race, class, and empire, in which West Indian troops were relegated to secondary tasks such as labour and construction duties on account of their perceived social and military inferiority by the British Army and imperial government.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Elkins, "A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean."

<sup>20</sup> C.L. Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment, 1914-1918," *Journal of Caribbean History* 2 (1971): 94-124.

The early twenty-first century saw the publication of two important works in the study of the West Indian First World War experience. Glenford Howe's *Race, War and Nationalism* remains the definitive work dedicated to the entire British West Indies during the war.<sup>21</sup> Like James, Elkins, and Joseph before him, Howe is deeply critical of Britain's treatment of its West Indian volunteer soldiers. A large portion of the work is dedicated to British notions of West Indian racial and intellectual inferiority, demonstrated through the wartime actions and writings of British subjects, government officials, and army officers. Howe is particularly critical of the War Office, which, he argues, was opposed to using West Indians in combat out of the fear that, once the war concluded, West Indian ex-servicemen would turn their military training and combat experience against West Indian colonial administrators.<sup>22</sup> Howe furthers the historical discussion from earlier works by incorporating letters and testimonies of the West Indian rank-and-file and contemporary newspaper articles from throughout the British West Indies. West Indian volunteers, Howe argues, were wasted by British military authorities who relegated them to lesser tasks, such as labour and constructions duties, despite their enthusiasm for combat, their physical capabilities (as demonstrated by their performance in inter-imperial sports

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<sup>21</sup> Glenford Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War* (Kingston, JA: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> The fear of Black West Indian ex-servicemen revolting and overthrowing the colonial administration was well-established since the raising of the West India Regiments during the French Revolutionary Wars, and intensified after the Haitian Revolution. Melissa Bennett, "'Exhibits with Real Colour and Interest': Representations of the West India Regiment at Atlantic World's Fairs," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 558–78; David Lambert, "'[A] Mere Cloak for Their Proud Contempt and Antipathy towards the African Race': Imagining Britain's West India Regiments in the Caribbean, 1795-1838," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 4 (2018): 627–50; Rosalyn Narayan, "'Creating Insurrections in the Heart of Our Country': Fear of the British West India Regiments in the Southern US Press, 1839–1860," *Slavery and Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 497–517, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1489796>.

competitions) and their large numbers (roughly the size of three infantry brigades plus reserve).

Finally, Richard Smith's 2004 work *Jamaican Volunteers* added an analysis of gender to the West Indian wartime experience.<sup>23</sup> Smith maintains that British military authorities sought to keep West Indians from participating in combat as a means of feminizing, and thus diminishing, Black Jamaicans within British imperial society. Like Howe, Smith argues that British motivations for such feminization were meant to lessen the probability of interwar rebellion against imperial rule, but that, ultimately, the mistreatment of Jamaican volunteers led to an awakening of Jamaican nationalist sentiments amongst returning soldiers. However, Smith states that West Indian ex-servicemen did not universally share these sentiments. Soldiers of 1BWIR, 2BWIR, and 5BWIR, who were posted to Egypt and would fight, did not share the dissatisfaction of their compatriots in other battalions, particularly 3BWIR and 4BWIR, which were recruited as infantry in 1915 but served as labour units. Smith incorporates gender into the historical discussion, arguing that the experience of soldiering during the Great War created a masculine awakening amongst Jamaican soldiers. One decade following *Jamaican Volunteers'* publication, Smith remains the dominant scholar regarding West

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of National Consciousness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). The arguments presented in *Jamaican Volunteers* are presented in a much more condensed form in Richard Smith, "West Indians at War," *Caribbean Studies* 36, no. 1 (2008): 224-31.

Indian nationalism and the First World War and has since published several smaller works dedicated to imperial memories of West Indian service in the war.<sup>24</sup>

Reena Goldthree's "A Greater Enterprise than the Panama Canal" was the first work to examine West Indian enlistment patterns during the First World War.<sup>25</sup> Unlike West Indian nationalist historians, Goldthree maintains that employment was a greater factor than imperial loyalty in driving West Indian enlistment. West Indians viewed the army as a steady source of income in a region rocked by unemployment where the working classes traditionally relied upon migratory employment. As travelling throughout the Caribbean in search of work — often on short-term contracts — was a common way of earning a wage for West Indians, Goldthree, in turn, argues that military enlistment represented the next logical course of action for unemployed workers, particularly those who had worked on the Panama Canal; especially when the military offered free accommodations, meals, and uniforms in addition to a monthly salary. Similarly, Black Caribbean sailors swelled the ranks of Britain's Merchant Marine before the First World War, with Black representation on merchant ships increasing considerably during the war

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Smith, "Loss and Longing: Emotional Responses to West Indian Soliders during the First World War," *The Round Table* 103, no. 2 (2014): 243-52; Richard Smith, "The Multicultural First World War: Memories of West Indian Contribution in Contemporary Britain," *Journal of European Studies* 45, no. 4 (2015): 347-63.

<sup>25</sup> Reena Goldthree, "'Vive la France!': British Caribbean Soldiers and Interracial Intimacies on the Western Front," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 17, no. 3 (2016): 21-32; Reena Goldthree, "A Greater Enterprise Than the Panama Canal: Migrant Labour and Military Recruitment in the World War I Era Circum-Caribbean," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 13, no. 3 (2016): 57-82.

due to the Royal Naval Reserve's mobilization that re-assigned many of the Merchant Navy's experienced sailors and officers to warships.<sup>26</sup>

Another article by Goldthree, titled "'Vive la France!'", was the first to explore the intimate relationships formed between West Indian labourers serving along the Western Front and the French female civilian population. Goldthree argues that the strained relationship between the white British military leadership and the Black West Indian soldiers on the Western Front was a source of discontent amongst the West Indian soldiers, but that these soldiers were treated relatively well by the local French civilian population. Like all soldiers in France, men from the Caribbean often entered into intimate relationships with French women, ranging from long-term courtships to brief encounters with prostitutes, which were more or less tolerated by the French. Ultimately, Goldthree argues that the dichotomy of race relations that West Indians experienced on the Western Front — poor relationships with their British commanders and favourable relations with the French — was the ultimate source of strain between Britain and the West Indies during and immediately after the war.

Given the racism that Black West Indians experienced during their soldiering, it is unsurprising that race is the focal point of the existing historiography. As alluded to above, this race-centric approach outlines a narrative in which West Indian soldiers, despite their demonstrated loyalty to the British Empire, were cast aside and neglected by

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<sup>26</sup> On British West Indians and the British Merchant Navy, see Alan Cobley, "Black West Indian Seamen in the British Merchant Marine in the Mid Nineteenth Century," *History Workshop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2004): 259–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/58.1.259>; Jonathan Hyslop, "Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c.1880-1945," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2009): 49–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909608098676>.

the British Army and imperial government. This narrative path contains several key road marks that the historiography maintains as pillars of the West Indian wartime narrative. The War Office's rejection of West Indian contingents in 1914-15, the slow deployment of the first West Indian contingents to the frontlines of Palestine until 1917, and the decision to employ most West Indian volunteers as labourers rather than soldiers have all been rightly presented by historians as evidence of the institutional racism in which West Indian soldiers operated during the Great War. Within this race-centred narrative, West Indian soldiers reach their breaking point in December 1918, resulting in the aforementioned mutiny at Taranto and disbandment of the BWIR.

Despite the obvious racial environment in which West Indians soldiered during 1914-19, race alone cannot explain everything regarding the British West Indian First World War experience. This is not to dismiss race's role in this experience or even diminish its importance in how the West Indian experience developed, but rather that the use of race as a monocausal explanation for everything that happened to West Indian soldiers presents an incomplete picture. For example, while race might explain the War Office's rejection of West Indian offers of service in 1914, it does not explain why Britain also prohibited white residents of the West Indies from forming contingents; nor does race explain the War Office's sudden reversal of its position on recruitment in 1915. Likewise, while race might explain why West Indian labourers mutinied at Taranto in 1918, it fails to address why West Indian infantrymen failed to mutiny in 1919 when posted to the Italian port despite the continued presence of institutional racism and hostility towards West Indian soldiers by British forces there.



The existing historiography has presented an incomplete picture of the West Indian wartime experience by focusing entirely on race. Indeed, as this dissertation will discuss in subsequent chapters, race has been a convenient explanation for watershed moments for West Indian soldiers in 1914-19 without analysis of other possible factors. C.L.R. James, for example, labelled British military leadership as inherently racist towards its Black subjects based only on the testimony of a single man, Arthur Cipriani, a nationalist Trinbagonian politician. This is not to discount Cipriani's experiences or testimony, but accepting one individual's experiences as indicative of 16,000 soldiers is no different than labelling all British generals as inept based solely on Denis Winter's *Haig's Command* or implying that all British soldiers felt disillusionment during the war based on Siegfried Sassoon's later works.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Elkins, Joseph, and Howe assume that all War Office and British military decisions were rooted in racial bias without considering strategic wartime requirements or comparing West Indian experiences to similar units of wartime volunteers.

This dissertation will add to the existing historiography by expanding the scope of examination to include multiple factors, including, but not limited to, race. In approaching the West Indian First World War experience in this way, this dissertation will present a more complete narrative inclusive of race, strategic considerations, and standard operating procedures as equal factors that influenced how British West Indians soldiered during the war. As well, this dissertation positions itself within the growing field of imperial histories of the First World War. The idea that the First World War was a war of

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<sup>27</sup> Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London: Penguin, 2001).

empires as opposed to one of Europe's great powers is best represented by the works of Erez Manela and Robert Gerwarth, who argue of a greater imperial war that was waged between 1911 (the Italian invasion and conquest of Libya) and 1923 (the Treaty of Lausanne).<sup>28</sup> The importance of imperial contributions within the context of Britain's Great War experience was addressed by Douglas Delaney in *The Imperial Army Project*.<sup>29</sup> Here, Delaney argues that British plans for war leading up to both world wars was imperial in nature: that the armies of India and the Dominions were just as important to Britain's war plans as the British Army was, albeit with little attention paid to colonial forces such as British African or British West Indian forces.

There are many difficulties in examining the British West Indian Great War experience, the greatest of which is the lack of soldier testimony. West Indian ex-servicemen published only three memoirs after the war, two of which were written by enlisted men. Furthermore, no collection of West Indian wartime letters or diaries are known to exist. This is not at all surprising. Education was a privilege in prewar West Indian society, with the best public and grammar schools catering to white children with limited Creole enrolment and very limited enrolment of Black students.<sup>30</sup> Even then, the limited enrolment of Black children in West Indian schools had as its objective to quell public discontent by providing the illusion of upward social mobility.<sup>31</sup> As such, literacy

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Gerwarth & Erez Manela (Eds.), *Empires at War: 1911-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Robert Gerwarth & Erez Manela, "The Great War as a Global War: Imperial Conflict and the Reconfiguration of World Order, 1911-1923," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 786-800.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Delaney, *The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India, 1902-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Kazim Bacchus, *Education As and for Legitimacy: Developments in West Indian Education Between 1846 and 1895* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), 275-97.

<sup>31</sup> Bacchus, 319.

rates were very low in the West Indies in 1914; as the ranks of both the WIR and BWIR were filled primarily by the unemployed and lower working class, and most educated white West Indians with financial resources paid their way to Canada or the United Kingdom in 1914-15 to enlist there, comprehensive West Indian soldier testimonies are non-existent.

This is not to say that no testimony exists. Many West Indian soldiers did write home to friends and family, many of whom forwarded these letters to newspapers for publication. Most testimonies referenced in this dissertation were published in either Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* or Trinidad's *Port of Spain Gazette*. This latter source is particularly important here, as Trinidad and Tobago provided the highest number of recruits to the British West Indies Regiment after Jamaica; however, Trinbagonian voices are utterly absent from existing discussions.<sup>32</sup> Other soldier testimonies were found in newspaper sources from The Bahamas, Panama, and the United Kingdom.

The lack of West Indian records will be addressed by an analysis of soldier service and pension files and the use of contemporary British Army training manuals. In this regard, this dissertation is heavily influenced by the methodology employed by Richard Grayson's 2009 study of Irish soldiers, *Belfast Boys*.<sup>33</sup> Grayson developed his methodology to provide what he described as a "street level view of military history," in

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<sup>32</sup> TT NATT TP, *Port of Spain Gazette*, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago; TT NATT CN, *Catholic News*, The Archdiocese of Port of Spain, National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago.

<sup>33</sup> Grayson, *Belfast Boys*.

which historians focus on the area from which men were recruited instead of the units in which they served.<sup>34</sup> Grayson described his methodology as follows:

'Military history from the street', a new socio-military history approach to the First World War, rests primarily on old sources available in a new war, and combining those with sources which have been underused (or not at all) by academic historians...at the core [of which] are the service records of non-commissioned officers and other ranks of the British army.<sup>35</sup>

Grayson's methodology is based on using as many sources as possible to analyze individual soldier histories. Service and pension records represent the essential record collection for social histories of First World War combatants, owing to the amount of individual personal detail contained within these records, but these are also supplemented by testimonies, newspaper records, parish records, and grave registries.<sup>36</sup> Utilizing as many sources of information as possible is crucial when records are missing or have been destroyed, as is the case regarding many West Indian records. Ninety percent of the West Indian pension files and all but five BWIR servicemen's files were destroyed during the 1940 London Blitz, which also destroyed most of the prewar officer corps' service files and over ninety percent of the Ministry of Pension records for First World War soldiers. Nevertheless, these surviving records are not without use; using C.L. Joseph's history of

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Grayson, "Military History from the Street: New Methods for Researching First World War Service in the British Military," *War in History* 21, no. 4 (2014): 469. This difference between units and abodes does not matter for a study of West Indian soldiers, who were grouped into battalions based on their nationality, however the distinction is important for historians of the British Isles where men were liable to serve in whatever battalions required men the most (thus, many Irish soldiers would serve in English, Scottish, or Welsh battalions, particularly in the war's final campaigns).

<sup>35</sup> Grayson, "Military History from the Street," 470.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Grayson states in over 70 percent of the soldiers discussed in *Belfast Boys* were only identifiable by examining other sources, such as newspapers, church lists and war memorials, and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Grayson, "Military History from the Street," 473-77.

recruitment broken down by West Indian territory as a reference, the pension files were examined based on each soldier's residency at the time of enlistment and compared to Joseph's initial table.<sup>37</sup> This comparison concluded that the surviving pension records adequately reflected the enlistment statistics for the entire British West Indies, with an average variation of 1.29 percent between both datasets.<sup>38</sup>

*Table Chapter 1.1 - Total Enlistments by Territory and by Pension Records*

<b>Territory</b>	<b>Wartime BWIR Enrolments</b>	<b>Percentage of Enrolments</b>	<b>Number of Surviving Pension Records</b>	<b>Percentage of Surviving Pension Records</b>	<b>Variation</b>
Jamaica	10,280	65.89%	559	68.76%	2.86%
Trinidad and Tobago	1,478	9.47%	44	5.41%	4.18%
Barbados	831	5.33%	35	4.31%	1.02%
British Guiana	700	4.49%	44	5.41%	0.93%
British Honduras	533	3.42%	21	2.58%	0.83%
Grenada	445	2.85%	9	1.11%	1.75%
Bahamas	441	2.83%	26	3.20%	0.37%
St. Lucia	359	2.30%	13	1.60%	0.70%
St. Vincent	305	1.96%	15	1.85%	0.11%
Leeward Islands	229	1.47%	13	1.60%	0.13%

Finally, the last archival and testimonial gap requiring attention is that of combat experience. One must remember that 1914-18 was a period of much social and imperial development and change. The period was defined first and foremost by war. The dichotomy between West Indian hopes regarding their military service and the realities of

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<sup>37</sup> Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment," 124.

<sup>38</sup> The exception to this was the Trinbagonian records, which were underrepresented in the surviving files. As well, the complete dataset related to this table can be found at Annex A to this dissertation.

their time in uniform forms a central aspect of the West Indian war myth. Combat experience remains one of the more difficult topics to address on a social level for the First World War given the lack of detail present in censored letters or diaries of the time; a problem that is made worse by a complete absence of wartime West Indian testimony.<sup>39</sup>

The most critical archival source regarding the British imperial First World War combat experience is the War Office 95 (WO 95) series of war diaries held by the National Archives at Kew.<sup>40</sup> These war diaries contain information compiled within the headquarters section of each battalion and include brief descriptions of daily life (for the unit, not the individuals), casualty statistics, and battle plans, amongst other details. At higher levels, such as brigade or division, war diaries might include operations orders, intelligence reports, and court-martial summaries. Such documents were often compiled by senior battalion officers such as the adjutant or second-in-command, often shortly after battles or operations.

As helpful as the war diaries are in describing battle on a tactical or strategic level, the documents are ill-suited for describing combat on an individual level. Furthermore, having been written for a restricted military audience, these diaries sacrifice all detail when listing routine or day-to-day operations. For example, when describing the battalion's mission to patrol portions of a railway line during the guerrilla phase of the East African Campaign, 2WIR's war diary simply records how many men left on patrol, on what date they came back, and how many German *askari* (colonial soldiers) were

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<sup>39</sup> Details of battle that exists tend to come from memoirs, often written and published many years, and sometimes decade, after the end of the war.

<sup>40</sup> NA, WO 95.

killed in action.<sup>41</sup> Completely missing from these records are details of what that combat resembled.

The battalion war diaries can be supplemented by analyzing an often-neglected source for contemporary military historians: training manuals and official publications. As Gary Sheffield and Paddy Griffith have argued, the British Army of 1914-1918 was a rigid institution with universal training and indoctrination methods for all soldiers regardless of race or class.<sup>42</sup> Aimée Fox expands on this point in her work *Learning to Fight*, in which she argues that the British Army amended its prewar training strategies to suit prewar civilians and an army that was fighting on a variety of fronts, each with different battlefield conditions.<sup>43</sup> As the training manuals are mostly available today, historians can imagine what combat looked like for individual soldiers. This is especially important for combat experiences that lack firsthand testimony and that differed from mainstream combat of the Western Front, such as the West Indians in East Africa. Although training manuals have received some attention from historians examining battles along the Western Front, theatres of operation involving West Indians have not received any consideration. While military doctrine often differed from reality, the works of both Sheffield and Griffith demonstrate that, more often than naught, British soldiers acted as the training manuals mandated during the war, especially during the campaigns of 1917-18.

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<sup>41</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/8, War Diary: 2<sup>nd</sup> West India Regiment 18 July 1917 – 2 March 1918.

<sup>42</sup> Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the trenches: officer-man relations, morale and discipline in the British Army in the era of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: the British Army's art of attack, 1916-18* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

This dissertation will examine several watershed moments in the West Indian wartime experience that are pillars of the existing historiography. Chapter 2 will briefly describe West Indian society and civil-military relations in the West Indies in the two decades preceding the First World War. Historians have largely ignored this period of West Indian history in the context of First World War studies, and its inclusion here aims to highlight a tradition of violent West Indian responses to perceived British breaches of the imperial social contract that will set up critical interwar events such as the Taranto Mutiny and the birth of West Indian independence movements. Chapter 3 will examine 1914-15, specifically regarding the War Office's initial decision not to accept West Indian recruits. The existing historiography has portrayed this decision as being purely racially motivated. This chapter will instead demonstrate that British fears of German naval raiders attacking West Indian shore installations were valid in the context of the war's early naval campaign. Likewise, chapter 3 will also discuss the commissioning of officers for the BWIR and how many were selected because of their experiences and demonstrated leadership and not because of their social status, as Glenford Howe and Richard Smith have argued.

Chapter 4 will examine the British West Indian combat experience in Egypt and Palestine by comparing the West Indian experience to other imperial soldiers in Egypt, especially units formed of civilian volunteers. Here, the prevailing historiographical narrative is that West Indian soldiers' deployment to the frontlines was delayed because the British Army considered them inferior soldiers. However, Chapter 4 will demonstrate that the length of time between the West Indian's enlistment and their use in combat was in line with British battalions when factors such as training, transport to Egypt, and the



nature of campaigning in 1916-17 is taken into consideration. Chapter 5 will focus on West Indian combat experience in Cameroon and German East Africa, which has been woefully ignored by the existing historiography, demonstrating that West Indian soldiers actively participated in combat operations for the better part of the First World War. Chapter 6 will outline the experience of West Indian soldiers in labour units in Western Europe and Mesopotamia from the perspective of military justice, discipline, and officer-man relations. West Indian labour battalions were those involved in the Taranto Mutiny of 1918; however, historians have limited the discussion of pre-mutiny West Indian labour experience to discussions of their dissatisfaction with being used as labour troops rather than infantry. This chapter will, in turn, demonstrate that most West Indian labour battalions were recruited as such and never trained nor organized for combat duties. Furthermore, chapter 6 will highlight the poor state of officer-man relations and leadership within most of the labour battalions, resulting in a higher number of military infractions than West Indian combat units and, ultimately, to the Taranto Mutiny. Finally, Chapter 7 will examine the Taranto Mutiny and subsequent disbandment of West Indian forces and the failure of the various West Indian colonial governments to reward and care for ex-servicemen during the interwar period.

## Chapter 2: Civil-Military Relations & Imperial Defence, 1898-1914

To adequately discuss the British West Indian experience of the First World War, one must first position prewar West Indian society within the broader British imperial framework. Within the existing historiography, historians have suggested that British West Indians were loyal imperial subjects before 1914. Glenford Howe, for example, labelled British West Indians of 1914 as being “conditioned as faithful patriots [whose] social progress was, in part, measured locally by the extent to which [West Indians] had adopted, internalised and exhibited British ideals and customs.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gordon Lewis commented on the prevalence of English values in West Indian society in his examination of British colonial rule, noting that West Indians “believed passionately in the rule of law; and nothing was more English than the constitutional methods the West Indian militant forces used in their historic struggle against British rule.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, examining the two decades preceding the start of the war highlights a very different British West Indies. Like other parts of the British Empire where rebellions, demonstrations, and revolts occurred before 1914, such as South Africa, Sierra Leone and, most importantly, Ireland, the British West Indies too experienced several violent episodes between 1890-1914.

Such violent episodes were not necessarily anti-imperial actions. Instead, they were in response to a perceived breach of contract by the imperial government or attempts by imperial citizens to renegotiate their position within the British Empire. Examples of the former include the Sierra Leone Hut Tax War of 1898-99, the Zulu Rebellion of 1906

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<sup>1</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon K. Lewis, “British Colonialism in the West Indies: The Political Legacy,” *Caribbean Studies* 7, no. 1 (1967): 5.

and, in the West Indies, the Port of Spain Water Tax Riot of 1903, while examples of the latter include prewar political violence in Ireland. In each case, separation from the British Empire was not the ultimate objective. As Gordon Lewis argues, despite the British West Indies witnessing “sporadic outbreaks of violence” in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the region did not “spawn...a terrorist-nationalist movement in open rebellion against the whole system.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, prewar tensions in Ireland were related to Ireland’s place within the British Empire and not, unlike interwar Irish tensions, about forming an Irish Free State.

Addressing prewar tensions between West Indians and the British Empire is essential to understanding why West Indian soldiers, who enlisted in the thousands between 1915-18, became radicalized and disillusioned with the empire following the war. Examining the desires of prewar Black West Indian society highlights some of the reasons why West Indians went to war. West Indians did not enlist in the British armed forces out of blind, patriotic loyalty but rather in their self-interest. In this way, West Indians were not unique within the British Empire, where many dominion and imperial subjects enlisted in droves hoping for social or political improvement after the war. Dominion governments hoped that a demonstration of loyalty would correspond with an even greater amount of autonomy after the war. Territorial expansion was also at the forefront of dominion administrators’ minds. South Africa eyed Germany’s South African colonies, while politicians in Australia and New Zealand hoped to annex Germany’s

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, 5.

Pacific island colonies.<sup>4</sup> In Ireland and India, nationalists hoped that a demonstration of imperial loyalty through wartime service would result in home rule and greater autonomy, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Discussing British prewar interests in the West Indies also sheds light on strategic considerations for the region in the event of war. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Britain's plan for defending the West Indies was a crucial factor that influenced Britain's initial refusal of a West Indian overseas contingent. Britain's West Indian colonies were once its most important given the wealth West Indian plantations produced for imperial coffers. Indeed, Britain deemed the region so significant that Britain dispatched significant naval and military forces to the Caribbean to protect its West Indian colonies when those forces were needed elsewhere in both the American and French Revolutionary Wars.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in the century that followed the defeat of Napoleonic France in 1815, the region gradually diminished in importance as the British Empire expanded. Efforts in India and Egypt overtook cotton production, sugar was successfully transplanted to the South Pacific, and tobacco production was dwarfed by cheaper, higher-quality output from Spanish and American plantations in the circum-Caribbean.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, by 1908 beet sugar production accounted for two-thirds of global sugar

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Garton, "The Dominions, Ireland, and India," in *Empires at War: 1911-1923*, ed. Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 152–77.

<sup>5</sup> Garton.

<sup>6</sup> See Andrew O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Roger Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> See Sven Beckert, *Empires of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015); Frank Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean: Plantations, Trade, and War in the Atlantic World* (Princeton: Markus Weiner, 2007).

production, with European markets dominated by beet sugar producers in France, Germany, and Russia.<sup>8</sup> Even with British tariffs, continental beet sugar was sold for lower prices than West Indian cane sugar in London due to the former's lower production and shipping costs.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the West Indies' sharp decline in imperial importance during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British military planners kept significant resources in the Caribbean to ensure the colonies' protection. The West India Regiment (WIR), initially raised to fight against Revolutionary France in 1793, formed an integral part of Britain's Regular Army during the Victorian era.<sup>10</sup> Britain maintained a naval squadron in the Caribbean until the start of the First World War. When the British Army discussed the possibility of war with Germany in 1904, the West Indies featured prominently in their defence planning.

By providing a brief discussion of the state of imperial identities, neo-imperialism, and civil-military relations within the British West Indies during the prewar period, this chapter argues that, before 1914, British West Indians were not blindly loyal imperial subjects, as Howe has argued. Just as historians must examine West Indian military service through contractual terms, so too must the prewar relationship between West Indians and the British Empire. While the British West Indies did not experience widespread revolution or wars of independence before 1914, British West Indians did react, sometimes violently, when the empire overstepped perceived boundaries or did not

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Munting, "The Russian Beet Sugar Industry in the XIXth Century," *Journal of European Economic History* 13, no. 2 (1984): 293–94.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Beachley, "The British West Indies Sugar Industry 1865-1900," PhD Dissertation (Edinburgh University, 1951), 297–323.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve: The Story of the West Indian Regiments of the British Army* (London: Hansib Caribbean, 1997), 121–250.

meet West Indian societal expectations of the unwritten social contract between empire and subject. As this chapter will demonstrate, civil disobedience and even violence stemming from perceived breaches in this social contract were commonplace in the British Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century. While the examples of civil disobedience and rebellion presented in this chapter sought to maintain the social contract rather than abandon empire altogether, prewar breaches of the British imperial social contract nonetheless represent fractures in the British imperial framework. Furthermore, as this dissertation will argue in subsequent chapters, while the First World War temporarily mended these fractures in the name of imperial loyalty and the hopes of widespread societal gains, unfulfilled expectation after the war formed the metaphorical wedge that ultimately fractured imperial identities in the West Indies and instead gave rise to the interwar West Indian nationalist movement.

### **Civil Disobedience and Anti-Imperial Sentiments**

The British West Indies were not a conditioned bastion of imperial loyalty in the Caribbean but were rather a troubled realm of empire where civil strife and anti-imperial sentiments were commonplace. Slave revolts and rebellions were a constant threat in the minds of the minority white planter population, to the point that Britain maintained an army garrison to protect plantations and planter owners from internal revolt rather than from foreign invaders.<sup>11</sup> Even following Britain's 1833 abolition of slavery, uprisings and

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<sup>11</sup> See Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies*.

riots motivated by race and class inequities were common in the British West Indies and would continue into the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

The 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica particularly stands out amongst race riots in the West Indies. The revolt was amongst the deadliest in the British West Indies, lasting several days and leading to the deaths of hundreds and the destruction of over one thousand buildings.<sup>13</sup> Beginning as a response to the arrest of a Black Jamaican for trespassing on an abandoned plantation, the uprising and its subsequent brutal suppression by the military garrison (including the all-Black West India Regiment) resulted in the end of Jamaican representative government and the island's reversion to a crown colony.<sup>14</sup> This last change in government was enacted to prohibit Black participation in governmental affairs and reduce the power of the local plantocracy by placing the vast majority of political power with the office of the colonial governor.<sup>15</sup> In 1884, a form of representative governance returned to Jamaica; however the assembly was a mixture of nine locally-elected representatives and six members appointed by the governor, who was himself appointed by the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

As the British imperial economy shifted from the West Indies to India in the second half of the nineteenth century, economic production throughout the West Indies

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<sup>12</sup> See Jonathan Dalby, "Precursors to Morant Bay: The Pattern of Popular Protest in Post-Emancipation Jamaica (1834-1865)," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 50, no. 2 (2016): 99–VIII.

<sup>13</sup> Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 173–90.

<sup>14</sup> Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 319; Christine Chivallon and David Howard, "Colonial Violence and Civilising Utopias in the French and British Empires: The Morant Bay Rebellion (1865) and the Insurrection of the South (1870)," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 3 (2017): 542.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Chivallon and Howard, "Colonial Violence," 542.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur E. Burt, "The First Representative Government in Jamaica, 1884," *Social and Economic Studies* 11, no. 3 (1962): 241–59.

began to reduce in both scope and importance, resulting in a reduction of the local workforce employed in the West Indies' traditional agricultural industries.<sup>17</sup> Starting in the post-abolition era and continuing after Morant Bay, British cotton production for export gradually shifted from the Caribbean to India and, later, Ghana and Egypt. The sugar industry — the most important in the British West Indies — initially remained intact; however, the sugar industry suffered during the 1880s following the large-scale acquisition of fertile sugar-producing land throughout Latin America by American corporations and the domination of Latin American financial and governmental institutions following aggressive expansionist policies of American Banks.<sup>18</sup> Unable to compete with American competition, West Indian plantations responded with a sharp reduction in output, causing widespread unemployment amongst the local population.<sup>19</sup> The worsening of the West Indian economic situation, in turn, resulted in extensive civil disobedience throughout the region; between 1893 and 1903, there were riots in British Guiana, Montserrat, Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>20</sup>

Amongst the civil disturbances before 1914, the Port of Spain Water Riots of 1903 stands out in terms of violence and resistance to colonial authority. The riot — which saw 16 individuals killed, the landing of armed Royal Navy sailors, and the destruction of the 'Red House' where the imperial government convened — resulted from the imposition of

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<sup>17</sup> Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 299–300; Beckert, *Empires of Cotton*, 267; 299–300.

<sup>18</sup> Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 150–76, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226459257.001.0001>.

<sup>19</sup> Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 299.

<sup>20</sup> Moya-Pons, 299–300. It should be noted that coffee and tobacco, which were both staples within other imperial Caribbean economies, were not as important in the British West Indies, where sugar and cotton reigned supreme.



additional water taxes on Port of Spain's residents without public consolation or debate.<sup>21</sup> The subsequent British governmental inquiry deemed Trinidad and Tobago's governor to have acted inappropriately and not in the interests of citizens on the island through his forbiddance of public debate regarding the water tax. The tax itself was considered legitimate.<sup>22</sup>

While the water riots can be easily mistaken as nothing more than public disobedience on the surface, similar events were occurring during the same period throughout the British Empire, particularly in other regions where racial tensions existed. Indeed, Britain's aggressive expansion of empire in the nineteenth century was met with resistance, most notably in India in 1857 and Zululand in 1879. While Britain at the end of the nineteenth century was a liberal state, the same could not be said for its empire. As Alan Lester, Kate Boehme, and Peter Mitchell state, "liberal rhetoric would never override basic economic or geopolitical self-interest. Where trade-offs were necessary the interests of white Britons always came first."<sup>23</sup> Such one-sided trade-offs inevitably resulted in demonstrations, acts of violence, and even war. Rebellions and conflicts about the imposition of imperial taxes erupted in Sierra Leone and New Zealand in 1898 and Natal in 1904. Although the underlying cause for each rebellion was the imposition of new taxes, the actual reasons stemmed from more deep-seated resentments over imperial

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<sup>21</sup> "A Serious Riot," *Portsmouth Evening News*, 24 March 1903, 6.

<sup>22</sup> "Full Text of Trinidad Riot Report," *Daily Gleaner*, 08 August 1903, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Lester, Kate Boehme, and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 338.

rule, the disenfranchisement of native populations, and tensions between citizens of colour and white settlers.<sup>24</sup>

Faced with interference from the colonial government and the collapse of traditional industries, tens of thousands of West Indians would look beyond the borders of the British Empire for gainful employment and to improve their quality of life during the Edwardian era. Beginning in the mid-1890s, West Indian migratory workers flocked to the banana and sugar plantations of Britain's new imperial rival in the Caribbean, the United States. One of the world's emerging imperial powers at the dawn of the twentieth century, American expansionism first touched into the Spanish Caribbean in the early 1890s with the establishment of sugar corporations in Cuba.<sup>25</sup> By 1898, American imperial interests brought war with Spain. Following a short, three-month war, the United States controlled Cuba, the Philippines, and several Spanish possessions in the Pacific.

As the United States expanded its sphere of influence in the Caribbean, more American corporations established plantations and projects, and, as these plantations grew, British West Indians flocked to American territories in search of steady employment that they could not easily find in Britain's realm. One of the largest employers of British West Indians was the United Fruit Company. Created in 1899, United Fruit purchased hundreds of thousands of acres of land in the wider Caribbean

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<sup>24</sup> Paul S. Thompson, "The Zulu Rebellion of 1906: The Collusion of Bambatha and Dinuzulu," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 36, no. 3 (2003): 533–57; Sean Reading, "A Blood-Stained Tax: Poll Tax and the Bambatha Rebellion in South Africa," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (2000): 29–54.

<sup>25</sup> Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 281–82; J.R. McNeil, *Mosquito Empire: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 305.

after the Spanish-American War and employed thousands of West Indian migratory labourers at banana plantations in Cuba and throughout Latin America.<sup>26</sup>

As crucial as the banana industry was to migratory West Indian labour employment, no project would surpass the Panama Canal construction project regarding economic importance for West Indian transient workers. Dating from France's first attempts to construct a Panama Canal in the 1880s, West Indian labourers were a mainstay in Panama and continued to be following America's resumption of construction activities in 1904. British West Indian numbers in Panama were so great that Britain appointed a British envoy to Panama, and thirteen Church of England congregations were established there to serve both white and Black West Indians working on the canal.<sup>27</sup> While there are no exact figures for the number of West Indians employed on the project, Jamaican reporter Herbert deLisser stated that, in 1913, approximately 30,000 Jamaican men, women, and children were residing in the Panama Canal zone working on the project.<sup>28</sup>

Between their employment on banana plantations and the Panama Canal, West Indian labourers — Jamaicans, especially — represented the bulk of the American workforce in the Caribbean and Latin America. While the United States government and American corporations looked to the British West Indies for sources of cheap, skilled labour, West Indians themselves looked to the United States for meaningful employment;

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<sup>26</sup> Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 279–81; James W Martin, *Banana Cowboys: The United Fruit Company and the Culture of Corporate Colonialism* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 53–54.

<sup>27</sup> "Canal Changes," *Daily Gleaner*, 18 January 1910, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert G. deLisser, "The Immediate Future of the Jamaica Labourers who are now Employed in the Republic of Panama and Canal Zone," *Daily Gleaner*, 04 June 1913, 6.

for "...something like \$1...and three meals a day."<sup>29</sup> British West Indian sugar producers found themselves unable to compete with American corporations in the wake of the United States' economic expansion. The result was a reduction in sugar harvesting and the subsequent unemployment of most of the West Indian workforce.<sup>30</sup> West Indians who could emigrate to American territories readily did so. Those who remained in the West Indies were faced with rampant unemployment, social inequity, and the inability to own land as independent sugar producers, and responded with the revolts and rebellions that necessitated — in the opinion of plantation owners — the maintenance of an imperial garrison.

### **Planter Society and the Prewar West Indian Imperial Garrison**

In addition to reducing the region's economic capabilities at the turn of the twentieth century, the British West Indies also witnessed a decline in Britain's military presence. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and the ensuing period of *Pax Britannia*, the Anglo-Caribbean remained relatively unthreatened during the remainder of the long nineteenth century. Defence of the British West Indies from foreign invasion remained, primarily, a naval responsibility. Yet, with an absence of any real threat to British rule in the Caribbean after 1815, the Royal Navy's presence in the Caribbean gradually diminished. From 1830 onwards, the Bermuda-based North American and West Indies Squadron protected Britain's maritime trade in the region, suppressed the African slave trade, and guarded the West Indies against foreign invasion. The West Indies'

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<sup>29</sup> "The Immediate Future of the Jamaica Labourers who are now Employed in the Republic of Panama and Canal Zone," *Daily Gleaner*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 299.

position as a naval afterthought was cemented in 1889 following the closure of the Royal Navy's base at English Harbour, Antigua.

While defending against foreign threats was a naval responsibility, maintaining internal order and protecting property against slave revolts and civil unrest was the army's responsibility. The first British soldiers were posted to Jamaica and the Leeward Islands in 1678 and would remain there until 1962.<sup>31</sup> Yet, throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, being posted to the West Indies was regarded as a death sentence by many British regulars. Tropical disease, especially yellow fever, wreaked havoc on the ranks of new soldiers; during the Caribbean campaigns against Revolutionary France of 1791-1801, approximately 51 percent of white British soldiers died from disease.<sup>32</sup> Yet, while yellow fever terrorized the ranks of white soldiers and settlers, it did not have the same effect on enslaved persons, either those transported from Africa or born in the West Indies. Necessity led the British Army to establish the all-Black West India Regiments (WIR) in 1795.<sup>33</sup>

Armed slaves were a mainstay of Caribbean warfare for over a century preceding the French Revolutionary Wars. France employed armed slaves as early as 1635 in St. Kitts, while British forces employed armed slaves as rangers and irregular light infantry

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<sup>31</sup> Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies*, xiii.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War Against Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 333.

<sup>33</sup> At any given time between 1795 and 1888, between two and fifteen West India Regiments existed, each consisting of a single battalion of infantry. In 1888, the last remaining West India Regiments amalgamated to form the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions, West India Regiment. As this dissertation primarily discusses the post-1888 WIR that drew its histories and traditions from the numbered West India Regiments, the term WIR will be used throughout this dissertation in reference to both the West India Regiments and West India Regiment. See Roger Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 3-19.

during the 1739-48 War of Jenkins' Ear.<sup>34</sup> But while earlier uses of armed slaves in Caribbean conflicts were temporary measures, the WIR's establishment was on a permanent and professional basis. Soldiers were initially pressed into service, loaned by slaveholders, or purchased outright from slavers; their uniform was identical to other British soldiers of the period, and were trained in contemporary line-and-volley tactics. Consisting primarily of Black soldiers commanded by white officers, The WIR proved so effective in battle and against regional diseases that, after Napoleonic France's surrender in 1815, the WIR was maintained as a permanent unit of Britain's Regular Army.

Despite their demonstrated effectiveness, the WIR was not well-received by the West Indies' white planter population. Since the regiment's creation, Caribbean planter society distrusted WIR soldiers. Although the temporary arming of enslaved persons for short service in wartime was seen as a necessity of Caribbean warfare, planters viewed the provision of military uniforms, weapons, and, most importantly, training to Black soldiers as a line that could not be crossed.<sup>35</sup> That the WIR was to form part of Britain's permanent West Indian garrison, tasked with guarding against slave revolts and allowing for the reduction of the white garrison, was not a decision that was favoured by the white planters. Fears of WIR soldiers turning their weapons on white plantation owners only

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<sup>34</sup> Buckley, 1–3; Maria Bollettino, "Of Equal or More Service: Black Soldiers in the British Empire in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 3 (2016): 1–24.

<sup>35</sup> Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 140–44.

increased in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804.<sup>36</sup> Despite the WIR mobilizing to maintain public order during the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion and the 1876 Barbadian riots, fears of a WIR-led insurrection continued into the twentieth century. Such fears were rooted in several regimental mutinies in the nineteenth century, especially following the mutiny of 2WIR in 1837, when soldiers stationed in Trinidad attempted to commandeer a merchant ship to sail to West Africa.<sup>37</sup> These fears only compounded near the turn of the twentieth century due to riots in St. Kitts and British Guiana in 1896, Trinidad in 1903, and open conflict in Jamaica between the Kingston Police Force and members of the West India Regiment in 1894.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, planter fears of a WIR rebellion were eased by the continued presence of white British soldiers as part of the West Indies garrison and the Royal Navy. The white soldiers' primary purpose was to protect the white planter elite who were ever fearful of revolts by the primarily Black working-class and the

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<sup>36</sup> The Caribbean's only successful slave revolt of the imperial age, the Haitian Revolution, saw the ousting of white French planters and politicians from Sainte Dominique in 1804. The revolution would have reverberating effects throughout the Atlantic World, one of which was the entrenchment of fears amongst white slave holders and plantation owners in the West Indies, Latin America, and the southern United States. See Paul LaChance, "Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in Louisiana," in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* ed. David P. Geggus, The Carolina Lowcountry and the Atlantic World (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 209-30.

<sup>37</sup> Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 173-90; 207; Jonathan Dalby, "Precursors to Morant Bay: The Pattern of Popular Protest in Post-Emancipation Jamaica (1834-1865)," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 50, no. 2 (2016). The Morant Bay rebellion remains the most infamous of Jamaica's nineteenth century civil disturbances, being a result of racial discrimination towards the Black population, the denial of suffrage within Jamaica, and poor job markets in the aftermath of the American Civil War.

<sup>38</sup> "Soldiers vs. Police," *Daily Gleaner*, 11 June 1894, 4. The Gleaner hints that the animosity between the WIR and Kingston police was an ongoing issue, describing the events of 8 June 1894 as having "...once more resulted in open conflict between the two in the streets of [Kingston]." The cause for this particular disturbance was a WIR soldier having been arrested for using "bad language" in public, with the end result being "...a nightly riot of serious proportions."

primarily Black WIR.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in the twentieth century's first decade, land defence forces within the colonies consisted of the various battalions of the West India Regiment, dispersed throughout the West Indies and West Africa, and multiple deployments of white British soldiers to the region.

In the decade preceding the First World War, however, the War Office withdrew the entirety of the white garrison from the West Indies, leaving responsibility for maintaining internal order solely to the West India Regiment.<sup>40</sup> This decision stemmed from a series of reforms enacted by Britain to overhaul its army following the poor performance of Britain's militia and yeomanry forces in the South African War (1899-1902). Given Britain's difficulties engaging Boer forces during that war, senior British commanders doubted the army's ability to effectively wage war against a major power, leading the British Army's last commander in chief, Lord Roberts, to refer to the army as being "absolutely unfitted and unprepared for war".<sup>41</sup> Britain's new Secretary of State for War, Sir Richard Haldane, shared Roberts's concerns. In addition to their criticisms of the army's abilities, both Haldane and Roberts recognized that the army was too small to

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<sup>39</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10/92, "West Indies: Memorandum No. 356 on Measures for Maintenance of Internal Order," 1905.

<sup>40</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10/85, "Committee of Imperial Defence: Minutes of the 81<sup>st</sup> Meeting," 21 November 1905.

<sup>41</sup> For Roberts' quote, see "A Defenseless Empire: Lord Robert's Exposition of the British Military Situation," *The New York Times*, 06 July 1905, 6. Robert's fears regarding the British Army were founded in his fear of German militarism during the early twentieth century, while Haldane's rationale for the army's reformation was based on the assurances of the Admiralty that the Royal Navy could thwart any attempt at foreign invasion and the aforementioned poor performance of the British militia (infantry) and yeomanry (militia cavalry) during the South African War. These reforms would come to be known as 'Haldane's Reforms' and involved the professionalization of officer training, the professionalization of the militia and yeomanry through the Territorial Army, and the creation of officer training units at schools and universities. See Higgens, "How Was Richard Haldane Able to Reform the British Army?."; Risio, "Building the Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation and Tactical Development From the Boer War to the Great War, 1899-1914."



fight a major European power, especially as Britain was alone amongst the great powers of Europe in not having compulsory peacetime military service. The issue of size was further complicated because, at any given time, two-thirds of the Regular Army was stationed outside of Britain garrisoning locations such as Northern India, West Africa, and the West Indies. While Roberts advocated for Britain to enact mandatory military service as a means of expanding the army, Haldane offered an alternative: recalling the majority of British battalions posted to imperial garrison duties. Haldane argued that Britain's naval might alone could protect its overseas colonies, while local forces such as the WIR could hold their own if necessary.<sup>42</sup> The imperial government accepted Haldane's proposal, and in 1905 the vast majority of Britain's overseas white soldiers were recalled to Britain, including white soldiers in the West Indies.

Haldane's decision to withdraw the entirety of the white garrison and leave only the West India Regiment behind had, in the words of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), "...created considerable alarm..." amongst the West Indies' white planter elite.<sup>43</sup> A report by the London *Evening Standard's* Kingston correspondent on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1905, stated that white citizens in Kingston and throughout Jamaica felt:

On any night, at any time, over some quarrel between one of these soldiers and a constable or a civilian, there might be a disturbance, soon involving other soldiers and constables or civilians, that might be fraught with the most serious consequences. The people, it must be remembered, are easily excited...And it is not too extravagant to say that a *fracas* which originated by a soldier slashing a constable or a civilian with a

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<sup>42</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10/85, Letter, "Arthur James Balfour to Lord Roberts," 20 November 1905; Higgs, "How Was Richard Haldane Able to Reform the British Army?," 23-29. According to Balfour's letter to Roberts, the latter had suggested a ten-month conscription for all males once they reach the age of 18 (within the Regular Army) followed by 10-12 years of service in the Militia with sporadic training.

<sup>43</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10/85.

razor tied to the end of a stick (the favourite weapon) might end in the wholesale destruction of life and property. Now the presence of the European infantry in the past not only, apparently, negated [sic] any scheme for augmenting the [WIR] in the island, but provided a force, the knowledge of the power of which was considered to appreciably influence the rioters under such circumstance.<sup>44</sup>

The CID shared the planters' fears regarding West Indian defence, especially considering the poor reputation that the WIR had earned since its inception. Despite being part of Britain's Regular Army, the WIR was an undesirable posting for British officers and was often reserved for the lower tiers of the Sandhurst graduating classes and those who treated service there as "nothing more than something to be endured before moving on to better things."<sup>45</sup> Although WIR soldiers provided good service supporting Britain's efforts in the South African war by guarding prisoner of war camps at Bermuda and St. Helena, the army disbanded 3WIR in 1903, with the regiment's complete disbandment remaining a possibility.<sup>46</sup>

To further complicate matters, by 1910, the WIR was looked down on by the West Indies' Black population. The Panama Canal project bled the regiment of its traditional recruiting base (semi-skilled labourers), leaving instead only men who were described as being "...both mentally and physically inferior [to former WIR soldiers], and...practically illiterate."<sup>47</sup> By the immediate prewar period, War Office policy meant that the WIR only

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<sup>44</sup> "West India Garrisons", *Liverpool Evening Standard*, 23 November 1905, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Army and Navy Gazette*, 10 October 1903, 963; Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 248-49. Boer prisoners of war were primarily interned at either Bermuda or St. Helena from 1899-1902, and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> battalions of the WIR were posted to both locations at various times during the South African War to guard the prisoner of war camps.

<sup>47</sup> "The Future Prospects of the West India Regiment," *Daily Gleaner*, 8 September 1913, 6. On West Indian migratory labour during the construction of the Panama Canal, see Goldthree, "A Greater Enterprise Than the Panama Canal."

recruited in Jamaica, as opposed to throughout the entire West Indies as it had earlier.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, by 1914, most West Indians viewed the WIR as a Jamaican regiment rather than a West Indian unit, and a unit of failed officers and illiterate, weak, and disease-ridden troops by Jamaican society.<sup>49</sup>

Alongside the WIR, there existed a number of militia forces throughout the West Indies, including volunteer infantry, artillery, and yeomanry units. These units consisted of part-time citizen-soldiers and were organized along the same lines as their militia counterparts in Britain.<sup>50</sup> Britain's militia, yeomanry, and volunteer infantry had their genesis in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as a supplement to defence against invasion and were employed at various times in the nineteenth century to aid civil power. In addition to their local defence duties, British West Indian militia units would bolster local police forces and protect plantations in the event of revolution, rebellion, or riot amongst the islands' predominantly Black populations. The maintenance and administration of these volunteer corps were at the discretion of the individual island governors. As there was no unified West Indian militia command, these units varied greatly between islands. For example, militia units in Trinidad and Tobago, with the exception of the Trinidad Mounted Infantry, were predominantly white. The entirety of Trinidad's police force collectively formed the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion of the Trinidad Volunteer

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<sup>48</sup> "The Future Prospects of the West India Regiment," *Daily Gleaner*, 8 September 1913, 6

<sup>49</sup> "West India Regiment," *Gleaner*, 6. The disease which was referenced was hookworm disease. On the sentiments of other West Indians towards the WIR in the First World War era, see Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*.

<sup>50</sup> Such units were the forerunners of the Territorial Army that was created as part of Haldane's army reforms in 1907 and would be termed 'reservists' using a modern definition. It is important to note, however, that volunteer units formed abroad fell under the jurisdiction of the local governors and not the War Office and were thus not affected by Haldane's reforms.

Light Infantry. There was no direct racial restriction on militia enrollment in Jamaica, but membership was limited to landowners and those who received an excess of £30 per year in salary.<sup>51</sup>

The Caribbean planter elite and their representatives in London — the West India Committee — hoped that these militia forces could assume the role of the departing white garrison, thus negating the need for the WIR. However, although the War Office often doubted how effective the WIR would be in a major, conventional war, West Indian militia forces were held in even lower regard. West Indian police and militia forces were called out numerous times during the Caribbean's civil uprisings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each time, their capabilities were found wanting, especially when compared to their Regular Army counterparts. During the 1903 Water Riots in Port of Spain, the Trinidad Light Horse were described as having "...signally failed...when called upon to support the police," with the Trinidad Volunteer Light Infantry not being able to organize and deploy until the riot had practically finished.<sup>52</sup> In 1906, volunteer forces in Guiana failed to turn out at all amidst riots in Georgetown, which were only put down by the reinforcement of police units with armed sailors and marines from Royal Navy gunboats docked in the town.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, the CID was hopeful that West Indian militia units could at least be trained to an acceptable standard to allow them to protect the white

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<sup>51</sup> Jamaica, Law 35 of 1879, *The Militia Law*.

<sup>52</sup> "Full Text of Trinidad Riot Report," *Daily Gleaner*, 08 August 1903, 10.

<sup>53</sup> "The Rioting in Demerara," *Daily Gleaner*, 02 January 1906, 10.

minorities from the region's "Black and coloured populations."<sup>54</sup> The CID suggested that West Indian militia forces convert to mounted units, stating that "the mobility and power of concentration of mounted volunteers" would provide "the best guarantee for the security of life and property...[the] systematic patrolling of disturbed districts, and [the collection of] white refugees".<sup>55</sup> Britain had a tradition dating back to the French Revolutionary Wars of utilizing mounted soldiers to aid local police forces, and the CID hoped that a similar approach would work in the West Indies.<sup>56</sup> Despite the militia's shortcomings in the Port of Spain and Georgetown riots, the CID felt that, with further professional development and training (presumably from British Regular Army formations), these militia units would become capable fighting forces.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the inherent potential that the CID saw within the existing West Indian volunteer forces, the West India Committee was steadfast in their opposition to the white garrison's planned withdrawal, arguing that, without the white garrison, the colony might succumb to internal revolution.<sup>58</sup> The War Office retorted that the presence of the white garrison and the Royal Navy in the Caribbean served as a crutch to the planter society that encouraged ignorance of local defence matters.<sup>59</sup> Eventually, a compromise between the necessities of British military reform and the desires of West Indian planters was reached;

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<sup>54</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10/92, p. 2. The CID's exact wording is included here to provide a sense of racial views within the British army command during the period immediately preceding the First World War.

<sup>55</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10/92, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> See Oskar Teichman, "The Yeomanry as an Aid to Civil Power, 1795-1867," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 19, no. 75 (1940): 127-43.

<sup>57</sup> This presumption is made on the basis that temporary secondment to garrison forces for the purposes of training had existed in the Jamaican Militia Infantry since its formation in 1879. See Jamaica, Law 35 of 1879, *The Militia Law*.

<sup>58</sup> "The Reduction of Garrisons," *Daily Gleaner*, 19 May 1906, 3.

<sup>59</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10/92.

the Admiralty committed to maintaining two cruisers in the Caribbean whose crews would be available to bolster police and local defence forces only when necessary.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, the internal defence of the West Indies would remain a West Indian affair rather than a British one.

*Table Chapter 2.1 - British Army Organizational Comparison*

<b>Organization Pre-Haldane Reforms (1907)</b>	<b>Post-Haldane Reforms<sup>61</sup></b>	<b>Contemporary Equivalent</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
Regular Army	Regular Army	Regular Army	The full-time, professional military force.	West India Regiment
Militia	Special Reserve	Supplementary Reserve	Ex-soldiers & part-time reservists who served as the reserve for their Regular regimental units.	No West Indian Example
Yeomanry	Territorial Army	Primary Reserve	Part-time soldiers in a cavalry unit. Such men were liable only to serve at home and could only fight abroad if they volunteered to do so.	Trinidad Light Horse
Volunteer Force			Part-time soldiers in an infantry unit. Such men were liable only to serve at home and could only fight abroad if they volunteered to do so.	Trinidad Volunteer Light Infantry

## Conclusion

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<sup>60</sup> TNA, CAB 38/11/5.

<sup>61</sup> The creation of the Territorial Army in 1907 did not extend to the colonies. Therefore, West Indian Yeomanry and Volunteer Infantry continued to be different corps after 1907.

Although the 1903 water riots marked the last large civil disturbance in the West Indies before the First World War, subtle challenges to imperial power continued to exist. Despite the completion of the Panama Canal, thousands of West Indian workers continued to abandon British territory and flock to American plantations, and nascent social and labour movements were formed on the eve of the First World War to advance both Black and working-class rights within the British West Indies.<sup>62</sup> The most famous of these movements became the Universal Negro Improvement Association, formed by Black Jamaican labour leader Marcus Garvey in 1914 to improve working and living conditions for all citizens of the African diaspora — albeit within an imperial framework. While the white upper-class of the Caribbean continued to mistrust the Black majority in the wake of the Water Tax Riot, fears of open rebellion in the wake of the British garrison's withdrawal did not come to fruition.

Challenges to Britain's imperial authority in the Caribbean are better characterized as negotiations rather than open rebellion (as was the case in South Africa in 1906, or as would be the case in Ireland in 1916). Black West Indians understood that their social and political situations could improve but felt that this improvement was still possible within the British Empire. In this regard, West Indian discontent is similar to the position of Irish

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<sup>62</sup> Given the nature of power structures within both the West Indian political and mercantile realms, the advancement of working class and Black rights often went hand-in-hand.

nationalists during the Home Rule Crisis or Gandhi's early views on India's place within the British Empire.<sup>63</sup>

By the summer of 1914, citizens of the West Indies focused on Ireland and the Home Rule crisis. The Irish problem captured the attention of millions throughout the empire, leaving little doubt that Britain would find itself at war within the year: not against a continental army, but against its own citizens in an Irish civil war.<sup>64</sup> Still, the drama unfolding in Ireland was met with some contention in the British West Indies; the Irish-born Jamaican resident Henry Bunbury said, in 1914, that "...a few of those two hundred [million pounds] spent in bringing Ireland to the verge of Civil War would make this neglected island [Jamaica] a Paradise [sic]...of health, prosperity and happiness."<sup>65</sup> Up to the eve of what would become the gradual demise of the British Empire, some in the West Indies felt that more could be done for their current situation.

At the start of the First World War, the British West Indies formed a complicated corner of the larger empire. Out-migration to American plantations continued in large numbers, and although the Panama Canal was completed in 1914, thousands of West

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<sup>63</sup> Arafaat A. Valiani, "Recuperating Indian Masculinity: Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian Diaspora in South Africa (1899-1914)," *South Asian History & Culture* 5, no. 4 (2014): 505–20. Prior to becoming the father of Indian independence, Gandhi was employed as a lawyer in British South Africa, where he organized and led the Indian Ambulance Service (South African War) and the Indian Stretcher Bearer Corps (Zulu Rebellion) as a means of demonstrating what India could offer the British Empire in time of war. It should be noted that Gandhi's actions occurred prior to Kitchener's Indian Army Reforms, during a time in which the Indian Army was viewed as little more as an imperial paramilitary force – much like the West India Regiment. Such sentiments of imperial positioning and negotiation are also similar to the views of the Indigenous groups of the British Dominions during the First World War. See Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples*.

<sup>64</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16–25.

<sup>65</sup> Henry S. Bunbury, quoted in "A Poetical Policy Butchered up by Sophisticated Reasoning," *Daily Gleaner*, 03 February 1914, 9.



Indian workers remained in Panama. The defence of the colonies rested with the WIR, the Royal Navy, and a plethora of local defence militias, with the latter two accepting a secondary role of protecting the minority white population against unrealized fears of a WIR insurrection. By the end of the year, all would be mobilized against threats of German invasion or attacks.

### Chapter 3: Recruitment

Like other newspapers throughout the British Empire, West Indian publications spread fears of war in the summer of 1914. The Irish Home Rule crisis that had gripped British headlines since April seemed to be approaching its climax with discussions of a potential British civil war dominating the West Indian press. Less commented on was the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Duchess Sophia.<sup>1</sup> The assassination of the heir to a European royal house was sensational news, albeit an event thought to be of little consequence to Britain or its empire and, by July, the assassination had shifted to the back pages of West Indian newspapers. Still, any discussion of possible war was focused on Ireland rather than Europe. Indeed, Trinidad's *Catholic Times* commented on British warships firing a 21-gun salute to Kaiser Wilhelm II during a visit to Germany to celebrate the Kiel Canal's completion.<sup>2</sup> There were no fears of war in Jamaica, where soldiers of 2WIR participated in a series of public engagement campaigns, such as the battalion cricket team touring the island and the regimental band performing public concerts.<sup>3</sup>

As July progressed, attitudes about this renewed Balkan crisis shifted in British and West Indian newspapers. By the end of July, numerous West Indian newspapers printed articles detailing the expected European war and how Britain might become involved.<sup>4</sup> The thought of the British Empire potentially going to war was distressing to

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<sup>1</sup> "Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Wife are Shot Dead in the Main Street of the Bosnian Capital," *Daily Gleaner*, 30 June 1914, 1; "Telegrams of the Week, Austria," *Catholic Times*, 04 July 1914, 6.

<sup>2</sup> "Telegrams of the Week, Germany," *Catholic Times*, 04 July 1914, 6.

<sup>3</sup> "Cricket Field," *Daily Gleaner*, 30 June 1914, 10; "Garden Fete," *Daily Gleaner*, 30 June 1914, 10; "W.I. Regiment," *Daily Gleaner*, 02 July 1914, 6.

<sup>4</sup> "Europe is now faced with War of Nations," *Daily Gleaner*, 27 July 1914, 1.

West Indians, particularly those in Jamaica where the German warship *Dresden* was docked.<sup>5</sup> Adding to these fears was the fact that only one of the five Royal Navy ships assigned to the North America and West Indies Station, *Suffolk*, was present in the Caribbean.<sup>6</sup> The cruisers *Cornwall* and *Hermione* were undergoing refit in the United Kingdom, while *Essex* and *Lancaster* were stationed in the North Atlantic at Quebec City and Bermuda, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The navy, which the Committee for Imperial Defence had assured West Indian planters would remain for their protection, had been dispersed.

Following the fleet review at Spithead on July 20<sup>th</sup>, the Royal Navy remained on a war footing with its ships deployed to the North Sea and its wartime base of Scapa Flow. Russia's declaration of war on Austria-Hungary following the latter's invasion of Serbia signalled the start of widespread conflict, and Germany's subsequent declaration of war against Russia indicated how the systems of military alliances would drag Europe and her empires into a world war. On August 1<sup>st</sup>, Jamaica's *Gleaner*'s front page read, "Europe a vast armed camp, stands on the Abyss of Universal War."<sup>8</sup> Two days later, the British Empire was at war.

Popular responses to Britain's and the dominions' entries into the First World War have been well documented within both the existing historiography and popular memory

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<sup>5</sup> "German Cruiser," *Daily Gleaner*, 13 July 1914, 1; "Warship which brought Gen. Heurtaud Party to Jamaica," *Daily Gleaner*, 27 July 1914, 1; Frank Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War, 1914-1918* (London: The West India Committee, 1925), 19.

<sup>6</sup> OWNH & NA, ADM 53/69760, "HMS SUFFOLK, 21 February 1914-12 February 1915," found at <http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-LogBooksWW1.htm>; Cundall, 19.

<sup>7</sup> OWNH & NA, ADM 53/45999, "HMS LANCASTER, 15 September 1913-06 September 1914"; ADM 53/41085, "HMS ESSEX, 01 January 1914-24 December 1914"; ADM 53/44175, "HMS HERMIONE, 17 July 1913-01 August 1914"; ADM 53/38657, "HMS CORNWALL, 22 December 1913-13 December 1914," found at <http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-LogBooksWW1.htm>

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, 01 August 1914, 1.

of the war. In Britain, the period immediately following the declaration of war has come to be defined by the middle class's 'rush to the colours', embodied in the creation of the so-called 'Pals Battalions'.<sup>9</sup> A similar rush occurred in the dominions where citizen-soldiers with little or no military experience expanded the armed forces of their respective countries through rapid recruitment, forming units based on regional and territorial geographies.<sup>10</sup> Citizens of the British Empire have been portrayed as rushing to the defence of the mother country in her time of need, ignorant of the horrors of modern, industrial war.<sup>11</sup>

Early campaigning by West Indian colonial governments to convince Britain to allow West Indian contingents to be formed for overseas service are an integral aspect of the West Indian war narrative. While Britain enthusiastically accepted service contingents from other parts of the empire, West Indian offers of service were initially rejected because of the need to defend the West Indies from German attack. As the West Indies' war memory is defined by the oppressive relationship between Black West Indian soldiers and the white British military establishment, so, too, has Britain's rejection of West Indian contingents in 1914 been viewed through a racial lens within the existing literature. Richard Smith argues that Black West Indian contingents were turned down because of Britain's desire to maintain a racial and masculine hierarchy that would be

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<sup>9</sup> 'The Colours' being representative of personalized flags carried by most British regiments, and the 'Pals Battalions' being the catch-all term used to describe the hundreds of new battalions created during 1914-15 as a result of exponentially increased British army recruiting. See Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Vance, *Death so Noble*, 136-42.

<sup>11</sup> This is discussed at length in Gregory, *Last Great War*, 9-39.

challenged should the Black Jamaican majority be armed and trained for warfare.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Glenford Howe argued that Black West Indians were turned away in order to preserve the inequality between white and Black citizens of empire.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, Howe states that the British Government feared that gaining combat experience against white Europeans would empower Black British West Indians to eventually rise up against the British.

This chapter will examine initial responses to the start of the First World War in the British West Indies, with particular attention paid to enlistment statistics and public perceptions of the early war effort. This chapter does not refute the arguments of Smith, Howe, and earlier historians about racism and Britain's 1914 decision not to raise a British West Indian contingent. There were undoubtedly some in the War Office who held low opinions of Black soldiers. Indeed, fears of the possible ramifications from Black colonials fighting white Europeans influenced Britain's decision never to use Black combat troops on the Western Front. Yet this chapter does question the universality that other historians have used race as the sole influence on the initial recruitment of British West Indian soldiers. No matter how prevalent the opinions described by Howe and Smith were within British governmental circles, the fact remains that, by the end of 1914, Britain was simply not in a position to turn recruits away. Other factors, namely Britain's strategic plan for 1914-15 and threats posed by the German Navy, each dictated the British West Indian experience of 1914-15, in addition to race. Thus, this chapter will

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 48–51; 55–61.

<sup>13</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 30.

differ from earlier work is by positioning the Colonial Office's and War Office's decision within the broader context of the British war effort.

### **The German Naval Threat to the British West Indies**

Like their dominion counterparts, West Indian colonial governments offered to form volunteer contingents for overseas service to the War Office.<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, the War Office and the Colonial Office turned down the offer of service, stating that "no West Indian contingent [could] be accepted for service at the front on the ground that the men [could] best serve their country by defending their own colonies from the enemy."<sup>15</sup> West Indians who wished to serve in combat roles were permitted to pay for passage to Britain or Canada to enlist in regiments there, to join the Royal Navy, or, for Francophone citizens who were primarily in Trinidad and Tobago, to join French fighting forces in Martinique.<sup>16</sup> New recruits could also enlist in the West India Regiment. Still, the War Office maintained the WIR's prewar rotational system that saw both battalions rotating every three years between West Indian 'home' service and West African 'garrison' service.

The War Office's concern for West Indian defence was valid in 1914. Local newspapers reported on the suspected presence of German warships in the Caribbean, mainly the cruiser *Dresden* that had departed Kingston shortly before Britain's entry into

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<sup>14</sup> "A West Indian Contingent," *Daily Gleaner*, 16 October 1914, 8; "The West Indian Offer for Service," *WICC*, Vol 24, 20 October 1914, 481.

<sup>15</sup> "Recent Defeat in the Pacific," *Daily Gleaner*, 4 December 1914, 6.

<sup>16</sup> 74 West Indians enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force and 34 Trinbagonians fought with the French Army during the war, of whom 9 were killed. See LAC RG 150; C.B. Franklin, *The Trinidad and Tobago Year Book, 1919* (Trinidad: Franklin's Electric Printery, 1919), 60. An indeterminate number served in British regiments, however, that number can be estimated to be between 500-1000. BASED ON? WHY?

the war. By August 20<sup>th</sup>, another German ship, the *Karlsruhe*, was operating in the region and had engaged the cruiser HMS *Bristol* in an attempt to attack local merchant shipping.<sup>17</sup> Although the bulk of the German fleet was at Wilhelmshaven, eight cruisers were at various positions within Germany's overseas empire, including the *Dresden* and *Karlsruhe*, mentioned above. While this flotilla paled in comparison to the usual number of British ships in the Atlantic, most of the British fleet was engaged in the North Sea, attempting to blockade Germany or battle Germany's High Seas Fleet. As a result, fear of a German attack or even invasion was prevalent in the West Indies.<sup>18</sup> On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, Nassau's *Tribune* reported:

[Bahamians] fear that on the war principle of "harassing the enemy" some German ship, knowing that we are absolutely defenceless and unprotected might be led to drop in here, occupy the town, clean out the banks and perpetrate any other acts of destruction they might think of; with just as much justification as they have in capturing a British ship on the high seas; or a British colony in sending a force and capturing a German settlement on the West Coast of Africa.<sup>19</sup>

Fear of a German naval assault was shared in other parts of the British Empire. In Newfoundland, both the local government and Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve were fearful of *Dresden* sailing unopposed into St. John's harbour and shelling the city.<sup>20</sup> In Australia, the government feared that the German Navy would attack Australia as a reprisal for the seizure of German New Guinea.<sup>21</sup> In December 1914 German warships

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<sup>17</sup> "English and German War Vessels Have a Naval Duel in the Caribbean Sea. The Karlsruhe Hit Three Times," *Daily Gleaner*, 20 August 1914, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 19–20.

<sup>19</sup> "Germans begin advance along huge battle line," *The Tribune*, 22 August 1914, 2.

<sup>20</sup> "Chasing the Germans – Three More British Cruisers Here," *Evening Telegram*, 14 August 1914, 3; Westcott, "Defending the Dominions," 6–18.

<sup>21</sup> "The Federal Parliament – The Senate," *The Advertiser (Adelaide)*, 15 October 1915, 7.

shelled the towns of Scarborough, Hartlepool, and Whitby on England's east coast despite the Royal Navy's heavy presence in the North Sea and English Channel. In Britain, questions arose following the German raid as to the Royal Navy's capability of protecting the British Isles; and if Britain could not adequately defend its own shores, the antiquated flotilla patrolling the Caribbean surely could not.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, an obsession with invasions and control of the seas was firmly engrained within the British psyche. Since the American War of Independence, British policy makers had determined that defending Britain could only be achieved by British naval supremacy. Britain's military experience of the past century and a half was tied to its performance as a naval power. The loss of the American Colonies due to the Royal Navy's inability to land army reinforcements amidst the presence of the French and Spanish fleets demonstrated the importance of naval supremacy to imperial maintenance. Conversely, Britain's seizure of the French and Spanish West Indies and the landing of the British Army in Portugal during the Napoleonic Wars highlighted the importance of controlling the seas. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain expanded its empire through military and diplomatic conquests that were made possible by the Royal Navy. Germany's early successes over the British Navy made some question Britain's naval supremacy, without which the empire was thought to be defenceless.

It is difficult to imagine now, but the German Navy did pose a threat to the British West Indies during the war. The German fleet outside of the North Sea experienced great successes in the fall of 1914, particularly the cruiser SMS *Emden*; operating alone in the

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<sup>22</sup> "Amateur Strategists," *Thanet Advertiser*, 23 December 1914, 2.



Indian Ocean, *Emden* captured or sunk 22 merchant ships and bombarded the oil facilities at Madras, India over three months.<sup>23</sup> *Karlsruhe* operated in the Caribbean and South Atlantic until December 1914, free to manoeuvre on account of its faster speed than any rival British ships in the area.<sup>24</sup> Matters worsened in late 1914. In November, *Karlsruhe* transferred a portion of its armament to the ocean liner *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, allowing the latter to operate as a commerce raider in the Caribbean. In December, the HMS *Good Hope* and HMS *Monmouth*, both ships of the West Indies Station, were destroyed at the Battle of Coronel.<sup>25</sup> This left only four ships in the Caribbean to combat the raiding threat: the older *Essex* and *Berwick*, and the French ships *Descartes* and *Conté* (HMS *Bristol*, which had unsuccessfully engaged *Karlsruhe* in August 1914, was ordered to patrol the Brazilian Coast in September 1914).

The presence of German naval forces in the Caribbean and the Royal Navy's inability to combat these forces threatened the security of the British West Indies. While a German invasion of the islands was unrealistic, especially in 1914, the *Emden*'s experience bombarding Madras and raiding ports in the Indian and Pacific Oceans demonstrated the potential for damage to West Indian shore installations. Furthermore, the training of German naval personnel in infantry tactics meant that raiding parties could

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<sup>23</sup> Terrell D. Gottschall, "'Nine Months by Sand and Sea': The Naval Odyssey of Helmut von Mücke, 1914-1915," *The International Journal of Maritime History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 486-87.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Holmes, *The Bahamas During the Great War* (Nassau: The Tribune, 1924), 55.

<sup>25</sup> Holmes, 57.

be landed ashore for sabotage operations, and the prewar ineptness of the various West Indian defence forces left the islands vulnerable to German attack by both sea and land.<sup>26</sup>

Local governors responded quickly to the threats, both real and imagined, against their islands. In Jamaica, the colonial government declared martial law on August 5<sup>th</sup>, which included press censorship and rationing for the island.<sup>27</sup> Regional local defence forces expanded, with old formations bolstered by new enlistees and new regiments standing up for the duration of the war. Jamaica raised the Jamaica Reserve Regiment and the Kingston Volunteer Light Infantry to guard the island against invasion. An association of local footballers and cricketers attempted to form a 'Pals battalion' for local defence.<sup>28</sup> In Trinidad and Tobago, the entirety of the local constabulary re-mustered as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Trinidad Volunteer Light Infantry. In British Honduras, local defence forces mobilized, and a further 150 men enlisted within ten days of Britain's entry into the war. The entirety of the British Guinean militia also mobilized.<sup>29</sup>

Similar actions regarding local defence were taken in other parts of the British Empire. Canada deployed its navy to the Gulf of St. Lawrence to deny German access to the St. Lawrence Seaway.<sup>30</sup> Newfoundland armed coastal freighters as auxiliary warships,

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<sup>26</sup> Gottschall, "Nice Months by Sand and Sea," 485. Training naval personnel in land tactics was common within European navies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with Britain even deploying a division of excess sailors to the Western Front with the BEF (aptly named the Royal Naval Division). The most notable example of German sailors being utilized in the same manner is the crew of the *SMS Königsberg*: 583 sailors who fought as guerillas during the East African Campaign following the ship's scuttling in 1915. See Edwin P Hoyt, *Guerilla: Colonel Von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 105–9.

<sup>27</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 19–20.

<sup>28</sup> "No Company of Athletes," *Daily Gleaner*, 21 October 1914, 6; Cundall, 21.

<sup>29</sup> "The Homeward Mails," *WICC*, Vol 24, 402-3, 404; "No Title (Letter to the Editor)", *The Clarion*, 13 August 1914, quoted in *The Tribune*, 11 September 1914, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Westcott, "Defending the Dominions," 30–31.

constructed naval fortifications at St. John's, and deployed members of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment to strategic locations to guard against German naval landing parties.<sup>31</sup> In Newfoundland and Barbados, plans were drawn up by local defence commanders to blockade St. John's' and Bridgetown's harbours in the event of a raid by scuttling merchant vessels at narrow chokepoints.<sup>32</sup> In Antigua, trenches were dug along the coast to repel hostile landing parties. Trinbagonian defence forces, including light artillery pieces, were deployed around the island to cover the nearby oil fields.<sup>33</sup> In Jamaica, the British Royal Garrison Artillery remained to defend the approaches to Kingston and Port Royal, while *HMS Berwick* landed a pair of heavy guns at St. Lucia that were mounted on Vigie Hill overlooking Castries Harbour.<sup>34</sup> *Berwick's* guns would be joined in 1915 by a contingent of the Canadian Garrison Artillery that was deployed to Castries.<sup>35</sup>

France, having a number of imperial possessions in the Caribbean, shared Britain's concerns regarding German raiders and placed significant military resources in the region under British control. The French protected cruiser *Descartes* was sent to St. Lucia to serve as Castries Harbour's permanent guardship.<sup>36</sup> Castries was a deep-water

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<sup>31</sup> Westcott, 27–29.

<sup>32</sup> T.E. Fell and A. Somers Cocks, "Barbados," in *The Empire at War*, ed. Charles Lucas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 360–61.

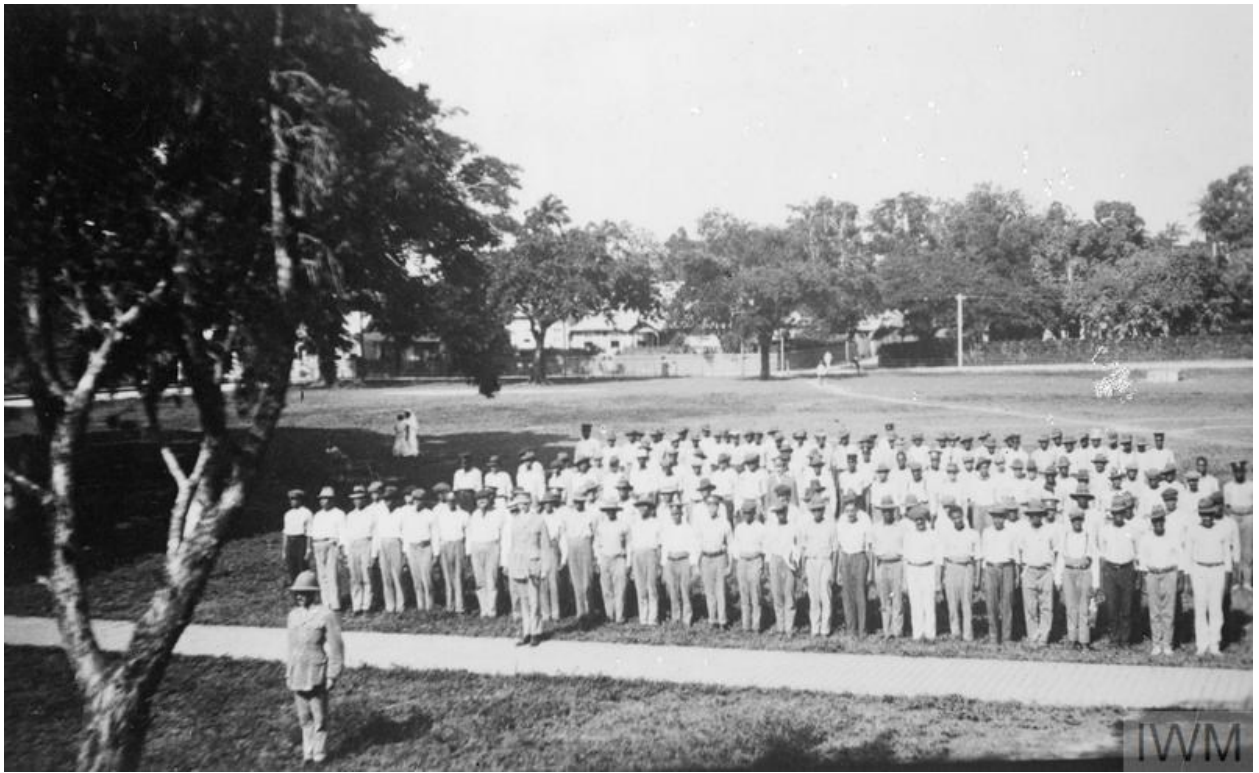
<sup>33</sup> F.H. Watkins, J.A. Burdon, and H.A. Alford Nicholls, "The Leeward Islands," in *The Empire at War*, ed. Charles Lucas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 374–75; H.H. Hancock, "Trinidad and Tobago," in *The Empire at War*, ed. Charles Lucas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 407–8.

<sup>34</sup> J. Desmond Fisher, "St. Lucia," in *The Empire at War*, ed. Charles Lucas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 401.

<sup>35</sup> "Notes of Interest," *WICC*, Vol 30, 178.

<sup>36</sup> Fisher, "St. Lucia," 401–2. A protected cruiser was a type of warship with light armour around the engine rooms and coal bunkers and was the predecessor of the light cruisers of the First World War. They were, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, obsolete.

port with a narrow entrance, making the harbour an ideal location to coal Europe-bound merchant ships in the Caribbean, and was identified as a port of strategic significance alongside Kingston, Bermuda and Halifax in Britain's plans for war in the Caribbean (albeit a theoretical war against the United States).<sup>37</sup> Joining *Descartes* under British control was the modern cruiser *Condé*, which patrolled the Caribbean in search of German raiders alongside Royal Navy vessels.<sup>38</sup>



*Figure Chapter 3.1 - BWIR Recruits from Trinidad Light Infantry*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> TNA, CAB 38/3/67, "Memorandum on the Standards of Defence for the Naval Bases of Halifax, Bermuda, Jamaica, and St. Lucia," prepared by the Intelligence Department, War Office, 17 September 1903; Fisher, 400–401.

<sup>38</sup> "German Cruisers in West Indies," *Dundee Courier*, 09 October 1914, 4.

<sup>39</sup> IWM, Q54220, "Recruiting and Training in the West Indies: Trinidad: The Trinidad Light Infantry enrolled in the British West Indies Regiment."

The seemingly questionable diversion of valuable military resources from the Western Front to the British West Indies reflected the importance of West Indian raw materials to the wider British war effort, especially when the British Army's exponential growth of 1914-15 is factored into consideration. Britain's Caribbean colonies exported several tons of tobacco, rice, sugar, rum, cattle feed, cacao, and cigarettes to the United Kingdom. Of these commodities, perhaps most important was the 250 tons of rice provided by British Guiana for the sole purpose of feeding the Indian Corps on the Western Front, which by the end of 1914 consisted of approximately 45,000 Indian soldiers.<sup>40</sup> Owing to the many religious and cultural dietary requirements of Indian soldiers, the British Army provided rice to the Indian Corps as both a familiar and acceptable staple for their rations.<sup>41</sup> By the end of 1914, Indian soldiers accounted for one-third of the manpower of the British Expeditionary Force, and their presence on the Western Front would be crucial for British military success until the New Armies started arriving at year's end. This rice, in addition to the other commodities shipped from the West Indies to Britain, was key to sustaining the Indian Corps in the field.

Other West Indian exports were also important to Britain's war effort, mainly sugar and rum. Sugar was particularly important as a morale booster for British soldiers, who were allocated three ounces of sugar each day in their issued rations.<sup>42</sup> Soldiers used

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<sup>40</sup> "Gifts from the West Indies and Bermuda," *WICC*, Vol 24, 29 December 1914, 605-6; Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-1915* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), 75-77.

<sup>41</sup> David Omissi, "Europe Through Indian Eyes: Indian Soldiers Encounter England and France, 1914-1918\*," *The English Historical Review* CXXII, no. 496 (2007): 393; George Morton Jack, "The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914-1915: A Portrait of Collaboration," *War in History* 13, no. 3 (2006): 335.

<sup>42</sup> On British Army rations in the First World War, see Rachel Duffett, "A Taste of Army Life: Food, Identity and the Rankers of the First World War," *Cultural and Social History* 9, no. 2 (2012): 251-69.

sugar to sweeten their daily tea ration, and it was used by military cooks as an ingredient in a variety of standard meals including breakfast porridge, bread pudding, or several variations of bread rolls.<sup>43</sup> Assuming that the BEF consisted of 250,000 soldiers when it split into the First and Second Armies at the end of 1914, 1914 war exports of West Indian sugar were enough to maintain the army in the field for 351 days.

*Table Chapter 3.1 - West Indian War Exports, 1914<sup>44</sup>*

Commodity	Origin Colony	Amount Exported as War Materials, Aug-Dec 1914
Sugar	Barbados Guiana Jamaica	~ 16,457,143 lbs <sup>45</sup>
Rice	Guiana	500,000 lbs
Rum	Jamaica	7,000 gallons
Molascuit (cattle feed)	Guiana	150,000 lbs
Cacao	Grenada Trinidad & Tobago	~ 1,776,550 lbs <sup>46</sup>
Cigarettes	Jamaica	300,000
Arrowroot	St. Vincent	~320,000 barrels <sup>47</sup>

Rum was another invaluable commodity exported from the West Indies to support the British war effort. Rum rations had long been standard in naval service, however, in the winter of 1914-15 the British Army decided to reintroduce a daily rum ration of 2.5

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<sup>43</sup> Archive.org, *Manual of Military Cooking and Dietary; Mobilization* (London: HMSO, 1915).

<sup>44</sup> "Gifts from the West Indies and Bermuda," *WICC*, 605-6.

<sup>45</sup> *WICC* Vol 24 states that Guiana shipped 60,000 lbs of Sugar, and that Barbados, Guiana and Jamaica together shipped an addition £90,000 worth of sugar. The remaining 40,910 lbs of sugar is estimated based on sugar prices quoted in Charles Lucas (Ed.), *The Empire at War*, Vol 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 326-7.

<sup>46</sup> *WICC* Vol 24 states that Grenada and Trinidad & Tobago together shipped £46,000 worth of cocoa from August-December 1914. Using quotes Lucas (Ed.), *The Empire at War*, 326-7, this is estimated to have been 1,776,550 lbs.

<sup>47</sup> *WICC* Vol 24 states that St. Vincent provided £2,000 of arrowroot. Using quotes from *HOC*, Debate 27 August 1914, vol. 66, cc129-30, this is estimated to have been 320,000 barrels.

ounces per soldier when in the trenches.<sup>48</sup> Alcohol was used to warm soldiers during cold nights, as a stimulant prior to combat, and as a treatment for shell shock. Writing on rum rations in the Canadian Corps, Tim Cook states that “rum protected men from physically and psychologically crumbling under the rigours of trench warfare,” and that, “rum was one of the few rewards for men who went beyond the call of normal soldiering” by volunteering for trench raids, defence construction, or other tasks ‘beyond the wire.’<sup>49</sup> Cook similarly states that ‘186 proof Jamaican rum’ was the standard rum ration; even before being watered down, the West Indies provided enough rum in 1914 for just under half a million daily rum rations.

In addition to these traditional West Indian resources, the region was also a strategic exporter of a more modern resource: oil, specifically from Trinidad and Tobago. In 1914, Trinidad accounted for 5.6 percent of the British Empire’s oil production, approximately twenty-three million barrels of oil.<sup>50</sup> At the start of the Great War, Trinidad was the British Empire’s fourth largest producer of oil behind Great Britain, Egypt, and India; by 1918, Trinbagonian oil output tripled and only eastern British imperial oil fields — including those in modern-day Kuwait — were more productive.<sup>51</sup>

Oil was of paramount importance to the British war effort. By the early twentieth century, British naval supremacy had diminished as European and Asian navies reached

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<sup>48</sup> Edgar Jones and Nicola T. Fear, “Alcohol Use and Misuse within the Military: A Review,” *International Review of Psychiatry* 23 (2011): 167.

<sup>49</sup> Tim Cook, “‘More a Medicine than a Beverage’: ‘Demon Rum’ and the Canadian Trench Soldier of the First World War,” *Canadian Military History* 9, no. 1 (2012): 11.

<sup>50</sup> “The Trinidad Oil Industry,” *WICC*, Vol 24, 29 December 1914, 606; Timothy Winegard, *The First World Oil War* (Toronto, Buffalo, & London: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 245.

<sup>51</sup> Winegard, *First World Oil War*, 245.

parity. *HMS Dreadnaught*, launched in 1906, ushered in a new era of warship, with similar designs from Germany, France, Japan, and the United States challenging Britain's control of the seas in the prewar period.<sup>52</sup> While the calibre and layout of capital ship armament achieved an international standard following *Dreadnaught's* commissioning, the Royal Navy sought to maintain naval supremacy by revolutionizing ships' engine rooms.

Despite *Dreadnaught's* revolutionary armament, its propulsion system was identical to the aptly named 'pre-dreadnaughts' that it made obsolete. In the first years of the twentieth century, Britain started transitioning from a navy propelled by coal to one powered by oil. Oil provided significant advantages to warships. According to Martin Gibson, "for the same performance, an oil ship would be smaller than a coal one and require a smaller crew. For the same size, the oil vessel would be faster and better armed and armoured."<sup>53</sup> This was best reflected in Britain's 1912 *Queen Elizabeth* class of dreadnaught battleships, the first capital ships that were exclusively oil-fueled, which were "the first dreadnaughts to be armed with 15 inch guns and [were] faster than any other battleship without sacrificing protection" because of their oil engines.<sup>54</sup>

Germany's reluctance to construct capital ships with oil propulsion systems in the prewar period meant that Britain held advantages in power and speed with all capital ships laid down after 1912. As well, the entirety of Britain's destroyer force, ships that

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<sup>52</sup> *Dreadnaught* was revolutionary on account of its central, heavy battery of ten large-calibre naval guns. Earlier capital ships carried only four large guns which were reserved for shore bombardment, carrying instead upwards of twenty smaller-calibre guns with which to engage warships.

<sup>53</sup> Martin William Gibson, "British Strategy and Oil, 1914-1923," PhD Dissertation (University of Glasgow, 2012), 32.

<sup>54</sup> Gibson, 'British Strategy and Oil', 33.



would be critical in the ensuing U-Boat campaign, were exclusively oil fueled since 1905.<sup>55</sup> Events in the war's opening six months increased the importance of Trinbagonian oil. Although Indian Expeditionary Force D secured the British oil fields near Basra in November 1914, by January 1915 Ottoman forces were attacking Egypt with the aim of capturing the Suez Canal. If successful, these raids would have threatened the Egyptian oil fields and a seizure of the Suez Canal would have re-routed all British-bound Indian convoys around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks to the voyage. Furthermore, the German raids on the English coast demonstrated Britain's vulnerability despite the presence of the Royal Navy, and, by January 1915, zeppelin raids were targeting Britain. Thus, by the start of 1915, Trinidad and Tobago went from being the fourth-largest British producer of oil to the only oil-producing British territory not in imminent danger, save for the presence of German ships that had been on imperial duties.

Beyond the European theatre of operations, Britain's war strategy for 1914 was to neutralize the German fleet abroad. In November 1914, the commerce raider *Karlsruhe* sank after a magazine explosion destroyed the ship, just days before *HMAS Sydney* sunk the raider *Emden* in the Indian Ocean.<sup>56</sup> On December 8<sup>th</sup>, most of the German East Asia Squadron was destroyed in the Battle of the Falkland Islands while attempting to return to Germany and join the High Seas Fleet.<sup>57</sup> Next came Britain's destruction of the *SMS*

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<sup>55</sup> Gibson, 'British Strategy and Oil', 32.

<sup>56</sup> Priscilla Roberts and Spencer C. Tucker, "Cruisers," in *The Encyclopedia of World War I: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), <http://legacy.abc-clio.com.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/reader.aspx?isbn=9781851094257&id=WW1E.457>.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Overlack, "The Force of Circumstance: Graf Spee's Options for the East Asian Cruiser Squadron in 1914," *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 4 (1996): 657, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944660>.

*Dresden* at the Battle of Más a Terra in March 1915.<sup>58</sup> The last of Germany's Western Atlantic raiders, the merchant cruiser *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, was interned in the United States on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1915, due to widespread illness amongst the crew.<sup>59</sup> Just over two weeks later, on April 29<sup>th</sup>, the Governor of Jamaica sent a letter to the War Office once again offering to send a Jamaican Contingent to the United Kingdom for service. Given that the threat of German bombardment of the West Indies was neutralized, the War Office unsurprisingly accepted the offer of service and extended the proposal to the governors of the other West Indian colonies.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the War Office's emphasis on defending the West Indies, conversations were held between the War Office, Colonial Office, and West Indian governments during the early months of the war aimed at reaching a compromise between West Indians serving abroad and at home. In December 1914, following the destruction of Germany's East Asia Squadron at the Battle of the Falkland Islands, the Colonial Office requested permission to raise West Indian contingents for active service. The War Office appeared willing to release some West Indians for overseas service, offering to raise a garrison battalion for service in occupied Cameroon.<sup>61</sup> The Colonial Office rejected this offer, stating their preference to allow West Indians to fight rather than serve as garrison troops.

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<sup>58</sup> *Dresden* was scuttled by her crew to prevent capture. The ship was the lone German survivor of the Battle of the Falkland Islands, and British naval forces tracked it to neutral Chili where it was shelled, resulting in the ship's scuttling and the internment of its surviving crew.

<sup>59</sup> Nick Hewitt, *The Kaiser's Pirates: Hunting Germany's Raiding Cruisers in World War I* (New York: Skyshore, 2013), 320–22.

<sup>60</sup> TNA, CO 137/712, Letter, War Office to Jamaica, 19 May 1915. The diminished threat of German cruisers to the West Indies is mentioned in a West India Committee Circular as being the primary reason for the reversal of the 1914 decision to turn down West Indian Contingents. See "West Indian Contingents for the War," *WICC*, Vol 30, 1 June 1915, 233.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment," 99.

By April 1915, Buckingham Palace became involved in the discussions surrounding West Indian contingents, with King George ultimately expressing his desire for West Indian contingents to be raised. While the War Office frequently commented on the diminished threat of raiding in the Caribbean as the reason for opening West Indian recruitment, George V's intervention certainly carried significant weight.

### **Initial Recruitment of West Indian Soldiers**

In addition to the prioritization of imperial defence over the formation of war contingents, it is true that many in the British Government were cold to the notion of using Black soldiers in combat operations against white continental soldiers, and this stemmed from a variety of reasons. Ray Costello mentions that British politicians and military leaders feared that the provision of military training and combat experience to Black soldiers could lead to “rebellion against their colonial masters.”<sup>62</sup> Fears of trained, Black soldiers rebelling were not limited to the First World War; Caribbean slaveholders expressed similar fears following the establishment of the WIR, as did American slaveholders following the Haitian Revolution.<sup>63</sup> Smith and Howe both comment on the ‘appropriateness’ of the situation: Britain had no issue with using Black soldiers against African *askaris* (African troops in the German Army), but that the use of Black soldiers against white Germans was considered uncivilized and inappropriate.<sup>64</sup> For his part, C.L.R. James lamented that West Indian soldiers were denied their right to engage in

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<sup>62</sup> Ray Costello, *Black Tommies: British Soldiers of African Descent in the First World War* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2015), 27.

<sup>63</sup> David Geggus, “The Arming of Slaves in the Haitian Revolution,” in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 228–29.

<sup>64</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 30–31.

combat simply because of their race.<sup>65</sup> While racial prejudice certainly played a role, it was not the only reason Black West Indians were barred from volunteering for overseas service.<sup>66</sup>

First, the War Office's 1914 decision to prohibit West Indian recruitment extended beyond the Black population and was applied to all citizens in the circum-Caribbean. White residents — even those in the white bastion of Barbados — were forced to pay for passage to Canada or the United Kingdom if they wished to enlist.<sup>67</sup> When white West Indians formed unofficial contingents, British recruiters still integrated them into British battalions, and they were split up and dispersed throughout the army as needed. An examination of the 1919 *Trinidad Year Book* shows that, amongst the soldiers who formed the First Merchant's Contingent of 1915 (the largest of the war at 113 recruits), recruits were assigned to 34 different British battalions.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, an examination of white Jamaicans who enlisted during the war shows that 259 men joined combat arms of the British Army during the war.<sup>69</sup> At worst, the number of white recruits could have formed a micro-contingent within a British battalion. For example, the

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<sup>65</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies, with the Pamphlet 'the Case for West-Indian Self Government'*; (Nelson, UK: Cartmel & CO, 1932), 69–82.

<sup>66</sup> Costello, *Black Tommies*, 28. For context, one of the biggest supporters of a British African Army in Europe was Winston Churchill, whose belief in Anglo-superiority and positioning within empire is well documented. See, for example, Roderick P. Neumann, "Churchill and Roosevelt in Africa: Performing and Writing Landscapes of Race, Empire, and Nation," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 36 (2013): 1371–88.

<sup>67</sup> In Britain, the recruitment of Black soldiers was discouraged but was not prohibited; soldiers of colour would be dispersed amongst the numerous battalions of the New Armies over the course of the war, intermixed with white soldiers and prohibited (at least within the infantry) of forming their own all-Black units. In this regard, British attitudes towards Black soldiers mirrors the attitudes of Canada and Australia towards Indigenous recruitment during the war. See Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples*.

<sup>68</sup> Franklin, *Year Book*, 52–54.

<sup>69</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 76–77.

Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps — the all-white Bermudian local defence force — formed an overseas contingent that was attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment as an extra infantry company.<sup>70</sup> Given that the established strength of a rifle company in 1914 was approximately 180 soldiers, white West Indian contingents could have remained intact and been assigned to British battalions.<sup>71</sup> However, the War Office's denial of West Indian contingents meant that white West Indians were dispersed throughout the army.

Those who lacked the financial means to travel to Canada or the United Kingdom to enlist and who wished to serve in the army rather than the navy had another choice available to them: service in the West India Regiment. At the outbreak of war, 1WIR engaged in combat operations in Cameroon, and 2WIR was less than a year away from rotating to Sierra Leone. Sixty-five soldiers enlisted in the WIR during the war, with the majority joining between August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1914 and July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1915.<sup>72</sup> Every soldier who joined the WIR was Jamaican, and each signed a twelve-year contract.

Despite the low number of WIR recruits during the war, trends can be identified within the enlistment statistics when compared to Jamaican news reports at the same time. The enlistment of four soldiers into the WIR on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914, occurred one day after the *Daily Gleaner* published, as its front-page story, that Indian soldiers were deploying to Europe to replace the 5,000-6,000 British soldiers killed up to that point.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment," 134.

<sup>71</sup> General Staff, War Office, *Infantry Training (4 Company Organization)*, (London: HMSO, 1914), xiv.

<sup>72</sup> TNA, WO 363, *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*.

<sup>73</sup> "5,000 to 6,000 British Troops Killed in Fights: Britain is Warned to Expect Terrible Losses: Franco-British Army Resumes the Offensive," *Daily Gleaner*, 31 August 1914, 1.

Similar spikes in WIR recruitment occurred following news of the Royal Navy's defeat at Coronel in November 1914 (three recruits enlisted in the days following the press's reporting of the loss), again when the *Gleaner* referenced the Battle of Coronel in a January 9<sup>th</sup> article (four recruits on January 9<sup>th</sup>); and finally between October 12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup>, 1915, when five recruits joined the WIR amidst reports that Bulgaria was entering the war alongside the Central Powers.<sup>74</sup>

Spikes in West India Regiment recruitment correlating to news reports of British deaths (in August 1914, or at Coronel) or difficulties (Bulgaria's entry into the war) align with a broader theme in British First World War historiography. Consistent with Adrian Gregory's findings on British recruitment in *The Last Great War*, as newspapers communicated the realities of war, so too did public perceptions on the war change from fear and uncertainty to dedicated support for the British war effort.<sup>75</sup> Although British colonial leaders in the West Indies were eager to offer support to Britain in August 1914 through offers of war contingents and commodities, such eagerness for the war was not immediately reflected in the attitudes and actions of West Indians.

It was only when the realities of industrial war, or at least Britain's precarious situation on the continent, were made apparent in the press that enlistment in the WIR became popular. Public calls for West Indian participation in the war did not begin until September, as news reports of the British Expeditionary Force's early battles started to appear in West Indian newspapers. News reports of Britain's 'rush to the colours' and the

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<sup>74</sup> "Recent Naval Battle of Chile," *Daily Gleaner*, 11 November 1914, 1; "Admiralty is Censured," *Daily Gleaner*, 09 January 1915, 1; "Bulgar's Stand," *Daily Gleaner*, 11 October 1915, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 40–69.

growth of the British Army also influenced West Indian calls for a regional military contingent. Just days after Nassau's *Tribune* reported that 97,000 Britons enlisted in a single day, locally organized recruiting committees gave notice of their intent to hold public meetings to discuss how Bahamians could do their part in the war effort.<sup>76</sup> In Jamaica, a former British soldier pointed to the ongoing recruitment campaigns in Britain and Canada as an obvious need for more enlistees and called on steamship companies to provide free passage so that he and other former soldiers could re-enlist — a luxury that, in 1914, was only available to those with the financial means of booking passage to Canada or Britain.<sup>77</sup>

The 'war fever' and 'rush to the colours' that has become a staple of the British Empire's war myth simply did not occur, at least not in the West Indies. West Indians, whom Howe argues were overwhelmingly patriotic on account of "centuries of indoctrination reinforced by the barrage of war propaganda," did not overtly protest the restrictions on recruitment beyond scattered complaints to the editors of various Caribbean newspapers.<sup>78</sup> It is particularly telling that, in a region with a rich history of popular protest against perceived imperial mistreatment, that no massed-protests came about from the War Office's position of local West Indian defence over expeditionary

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<sup>76</sup> "Notice: Bahamas Volunteers for the War," *The Tribune*, 22 September 1914, 2. Four meetings were held in Nassau during that week. Owing to the lack of a West Indian contingent, these first Bahamian recruits joined the Royal Navy, with 225 enrolling by the end of September. See Holmes, *The Bahamas During the Great War*, 21–22.

<sup>77</sup> "Soldiers are Wanted," *Daily Gleaner*, 19 September 1914, 13.

<sup>78</sup> For quote, see Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 7–8. IS THIS FOR QUOTE part needed? If it's Howe's writing and not another person he's quoting, then remove it.

service. Furthermore, the WIR remained a viable option for any citizen wishing to ‘do his bit,’ yet only sixty-five individuals took this route.

When the War Office accepted West Indian service in May 1915, the Jamaican Government hoped to send a contingent of 200 to 300 soldiers to the United Kingdom for training by the end of the year.<sup>79</sup> With recruitment from the remainder of the British West Indies, the War Office hoped that a single battalion of 1,000 soldiers could be formed. The reality surpassed all expectations. Almost 4,000 West Indians had been accepted for service by the end of 1915. Owing to the large number of enlisted West Indians who continued to arrive in southern England for training over the latter half of 1915, the War Office decided to keep the contingents together rather than dispersing the men throughout the army, and in November designated the troops as the British West Indies Regiment.

Why the War Office raised a new regiment rather than simply expanding the WIR remains unknown, especially as every other Regular Army regiment increased its number of battalions during the war.<sup>80</sup> Practicality perhaps played a role: had the WIR been expanded, the imperial government would have borne all costs related to its service. Yet, establishing a new regiment meant that the imperial government could pass some costs to West Indian colonial governments (i.e. transportation to and from the West Indies, as discussed below). The WIR’s poor reputation in West Indian society, as alluded to above and will be discussed further in Chapter 5, likely also played a part. It is particularly

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<sup>79</sup> CO 137/712, Telegram, Jamaica Governor to War Office, 20 May 1915.

<sup>80</sup> The Essex Regiment, for example, increased in size from 8 battalions in 1914 to 30 battalions by 1918. See Chris Baker, “The Long, Long Trail: Researching Soldiers of the British Army in the Great War of 1914-1919,” 21 May 2021, <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk>.



telling that, when permitted to join the WIR in 1914, West Indians did not rush to the recruiting stations as they would in 1915.

Despite the War Office approving the creation of West Indian contingents in May 1915, recruiting did not begin in earnest until that summer. West Indians were aware of the easing of recruitment restrictions from June onwards. However, West Indian recruits were not initially enlisted into a regiment; rather, the War Office planned to disperse the West Indians throughout the British Army on an ‘as-needed’ basis. As such, the first West Indian Contingents were authorized under the following conditions:

1. That soldiers in the West Indian Contingents would only have the option to enlist for the duration of the war unlike recruits for the West India Regiment who could still join for the standard prewar twelve-year term;
2. That medical examinations be conducted in the West Indies per army regulations before any West Indian entered service;
3. That all military training and issuing of equipment would occur in the United Kingdom;
4. That the West Indian governments would use local funds to pay for the soldiers’ transportation to the United Kingdom; and
5. That West Indian soldiers could be “...appointed to any Regiment of Infantry of the Line” as the army saw fit to do.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> TNA, CO 137/712, “War Office to Jamaica,” 19 May 1915; CO 137/712, “Statement showing terms and conditions of service,” 4 March 1915.

The third point above was representative of all military forces recruited within the Anglo-Atlantic world during the First World War outside of the West African Frontier Force and West Indian Regiment, who were engaged in combat in German West Africa from August 1914 onwards. The First Canadian Expeditionary Force (later 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division) trained in the United Kingdom from November 1914 to March 1915 before their deployment to Europe. Similar to the West Indian Contingents, the 1<sup>st</sup> Newfoundland Regiment completed basic training and garrison duties throughout England and Scotland for almost a year while the War Office and army attempted to find a suitable role for them in the war effort.

It is the fifth point above that perhaps best represents British attitudes towards both West Indian recruitment and the balance between national and military identity and the strategic considerations of 1915. While the British Army was keen on maintaining geographical and national ties within new army battalions at the start of the war, as casualties grew, this became increasingly difficult to achieve.<sup>82</sup> Units raised in broader imperial realms such as Canada or Australia could maintain their unique national identity within the British Army with ease. However, the War Office pressured other parts of the empire, such as Newfoundland and Ireland, into abandoning national identity by absorbing their soldiers into other imperial units. It would appear from the inclusion of this point in its acceptance of West Indian contingents that the War Office wished to

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<sup>82</sup> This references the Pals Battalions, often recruited from specific neighbourhoods in larger British cities, as well as nationalities within the United Kingdom, i.e. Irish serving in Irish Regiments or Welsh in Welsh Regiments. As the war continued, new recruits were assigned to whatever unit needed them the most; thus, by 1918, many English regiments were more Irish than Irish ones, and vice-versa.

avoid potential conflict with the colonial governments by mandating from the start that West Indians could be assigned to whatever unit had the greatest requirement for reinforcements.

As occurred in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Newfoundland, soldiers in the first two West Indian Contingents varied greatly in their prewar employment when compared to units formed later in the war. In the West Indian context, this was a result of the stringent medical and social requirements that the army set for potential recruits. Illiterate West Indian recruits could not enlist in 1915, and those with dental defects were not able to join up until 1916.<sup>83</sup> As the war continued and enlistment restrictions on education, physical attributes, and medical conditions eased to permit voluntary recruitment, West Indian demographics changed. Thus, while fifty-five percent of the men of the first two West Indian Contingents were from working-class backgrounds before enlistment, this number spikes to eighty percent for enlistees within the third and fourth contingents, and seventy-three percent for the sixth through eleventh contingents.<sup>84</sup> Similar to the British Army, middle-class recruits — clerks and civil servants, for example — are more prominent amongst the recruits of 1915 and early 1916 compared to those of late 1916 and 1917 (sixteen percent compared with eight percent), while unskilled labour — manual workers or plantation workers — dominate the later war

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<sup>83</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 60–61. Regarding dental hygiene, Howe states that this requirement was relaxed for British recruits prior to the establishment of the first West Indian Contingent.

<sup>84</sup> TNA, WO 364, *British Army WWI Pension Records 1914-1920*. As discussed in the introduction, these statistics were compiled from the BWIR pension records, most of which were destroyed during the 1940 London Blitz, with the surviving documents representing a fraction the total set. Nevertheless, the surviving documents offer good correlation when compared to the Colonial Office's statistics on total West Indian recruitment. The numbers above do not include the unemployed or those whose prewar occupation is illegible due to document damage.

contingents (thirty percent compared with forty-eight percent). These figures align West Indian demographics with those in the British army from 1914 to 1916.<sup>85</sup>

The prevalence of agricultural labourers and the unemployed provide some insight into West Indian motivations for enlistment. Although the British Army offered lower wages than the West Indian agricultural industry — one shilling per day as a private compared to two shillings six pence on a coffee plantation — the former promised steady, year-long employment while agricultural work was seasonal in nature.<sup>86</sup> The onset of war also affected the United Fruit Company, who responded to wartime disruptions to the banana industry with mass layoffs and a reduction of wages.<sup>87</sup> Finally, the Panama Canal's 1914 completion also resulted in mass layoffs for thousands of West Indian labourers who had been employed on the project for years. As Reena Goldthree has argued, for a workforce that was reliant on migratory employment as West Indians were, military service was a logical next step in employment.

*Table Chapter 3.2 - Prewar Occupations in BWIR Pension Files*

Job Category	1st & 2nd Contingents		3rd & 4th Contingents		6th-11th Contingents	
Manual Labour	18%	24	37%	71	48%	89
Skilled Trades	21%	28	20%	39	14%	26
Middle Class	17%	22	15%	28	8%	15
Working Class	15%	20	23%	44	11%	20
Unknown/Unemployed	27%	36	5%	10	9%	17
Total	130		192		167	

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<sup>85</sup> Gary Sheffield, "Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army, 1902-22" (King's College, 1994), 162–63. Sheffield states that "manual workers" and "non-manual workers" accounted for ~30% and ~40% of the 1914-16 British Army respectively.

<sup>86</sup> "How the Labourers Live," *WICC*, Vol. 24, 20 October 1914, 488; Reena Goldthree, "A Greater Enterprise Than the Panama Canal: Migrant Labour and Military Recruitment in the World War I Era Circum-Caribbean," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 13, no. 3 (2016): 65–66.

<sup>87</sup> Goldthree, 'A Greater Enterprise', 65.

Enlistment motivation amongst the skilled labourers, steadily employed working class and the middle class must be examined beyond army pay rates as these individuals would have surely earned a higher wage by remaining with their civilian employers. Yet even here military service offered certain benefits that were competitive with civilian employment. Military regulation permitted a special separation allowance in addition to regular pay for soldiers leaving dependents behind. For privates in 1915, this allowance ranged from five shillings per week for a motherless child to twenty-one shillings per week for a wife and two children.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the army provided pensions for wounded soldiers for which there was no civilian equivalent. In the words of Reena Goldthree, “taken together, the [BWIR] offered a compensation package that rivaled that of rural cultivators — especially given the seasonal nature of agricultural labor — while also promising a consistent paycheck for displaced urban workers.”<sup>89</sup>

West Indian reasons for enlisting were no different than those of other non-white imperial soldiers of the First World War. French imperial soldiers enlisted for “money, status, adventure, or opportunity” as well as a sense of loyalty to the French Empire, although mandatory military service existed in French colonies prior to 1914.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Canada’s Indigenous peoples joined “for money, adventure and employment”.<sup>91</sup> Writing to his wife in January 1916, Paul Gajhadar of 1BWIR assured her that the West Indians would “[stand] our ground with a calmness and callousness worthy of the stories of old,

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<sup>88</sup> IWM, Art.IWM PST 5160, “Soldiers’ Separation Allowance,” Letterpress, Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, August 1915.

<sup>89</sup> Goldthree, “A Greater Enterprise Than the Panama Canal,” 66.

<sup>90</sup> Richard S Fogarty, “The French Empire,” in *Empires at War: 1911-1923*, ed. Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 120.

<sup>91</sup> Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples*, 90.

and that we [will fight] like heroes.”<sup>92</sup> Corporal Clifford Shurland, also of 1BWIR, spoke of becoming a soldier for “King, Home, and Empire.”<sup>93</sup> Finally, Private F.C. Hayle of 2BWIR wrote to his father regarding his own reasons for enlisting, stating, “My reasons for enlisting in this terrible war is [sic] just this: to fight for my King and Country and to try and better my position, and hope I will be successful.”<sup>94</sup>

In addition to representing multiple classes of West Indian society, many members of the first contingent were serving in various local defence forces when active service was permitted. Amongst the British Guineans who represented the most significant national group within the First West Indian Contingent, 76 of the 108 members had been serving with either the British Guiana Police or Police Force, artillery, or infantry militia in 1914.<sup>95</sup> Such recruits would have had an easier path to army recruitment on account of having been examined before joining volunteer militia units. While trained militiamen such as these would have been best suited for maintaining a defence of the West Indies, developments in the naval war allowed such individuals to be released from their local defence responsibilities. The aforementioned destruction of Germany’s East Asia Squadron allowed the Royal Navy to significantly bolster the West Indies Station in early 1915. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1914, the old armoured cruiser *Berwick* finished its refit at

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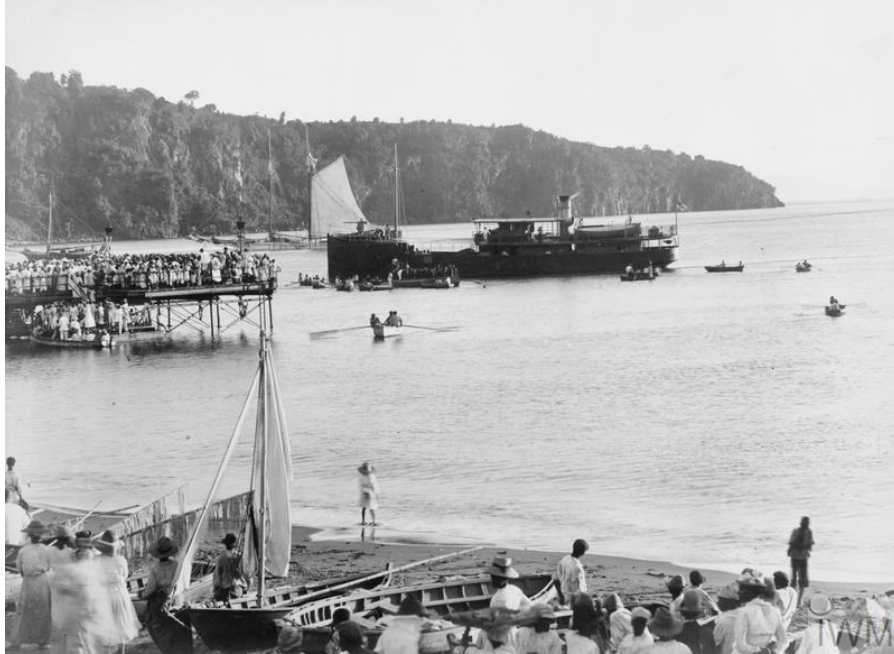
<sup>92</sup> “Letters from some of ‘Our Boys’ on the eve of departure to – they ‘can’t know where’,” *POSG*, 18 February 1916, 6.

<sup>93</sup> “Corporal Clifford Shurland,” *POSG*, 5 July 1916, 3.

<sup>94</sup> “The Jamaica War Contingent,” *Daily Gleaner*, 12 February 1916, 13.

<sup>95</sup> “The West Indian Contingent Committee,” *WICC*, Vol 30, 21 September 1915, 412-3. British Guiana Police and British Guiana Police Force are treated as two separate entities by the WIC, albeit without details on the differences between the two.

Martinique and was able to re-commence its Caribbean patrols.<sup>96</sup> More importantly, the station was bolstered by the arrival of the modern Australian cruisers *Melbourne* and *Sydney*, the latter of which famously sunk the raider *Emden* in November 1914.



*Figure Chapter 3.2 - St. Vincent Contingent, BWIR<sup>97</sup>*

West Indian motivations for recruitment are thus tied to a broad range of factors, ranging from the financial benefits that the army offered as well as a desire to serve one's country or the empire during the war. Most importantly, the establishment of the BWIR was tied to Britain's naval campaign against Germany. As Britain achieved naval supremacy outside of the North Sea, restrictions on West Indian recruitment were gradually lifted until members of the local defence forces and the wider public were

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<sup>96</sup> OWNH & NA, ADM 53/35258/121/1, "HMS BERWICK," 7 November 1914, [http://oldweather.s3.amazonaws.com/ADM53-35258/ADM53-35258-121\\_1.jpg](http://oldweather.s3.amazonaws.com/ADM53-35258/ADM53-35258-121_1.jpg).

<sup>97</sup> IWM, Q15098A, "Departure of the St Vincent contingent of the British West Indies Regiment during the First World War.

allowed and encouraged to form independent contingents. In November 1915, owing to the large number of West Indian recruits in the British Army, the War Office decided to form the contingents into a new regiment: the British West Indies Regiment.

### **Leadership**

Unsurprisingly, race has been central to discussions of BWIR leadership within the existing historiography on account of Britain's First World War policy to restrict Black citizens and persons of colour from gaining officers' commissions. While the British Army did recruit its first Black officers during the Great War, it did so reluctantly and sparingly. Unlike the white rank-and-file, who could secure an officer's commission based on wartime performance and soldierly abilities, the commissioning of Black subjects remained a matter of class and social standing.<sup>98</sup> Such racist policy, coupled with British Army policy that officers assigned to colonial units be familiar with the customs and traditions of their soldiers, meant that Britain recruited the BWIR officer cadre from a limited, exclusive class of planter society.

Indeed, the entire British Army experienced difficulty in generating junior officer leadership in the war's first year. The rapid influx of Kitchener's volunteers caused the British Army to be desperately short of qualified military leaders. Regular Army officers received temporary promotions to occupy positions of higher authority, such as commanders of the new battalions, and the usual method of training new officers at Sandhurst could not meet demand. The British Army responded by mobilizing its special reserve battalions, recalling retired officers, commissioning regular army

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<sup>98</sup> See Costello, *Black Tommies*, 99–106.



non-commissioned officers (sergeants and above), and accepting suitable middle-class citizens for temporary commission throughout the war.<sup>99</sup> This strategy ensured that the newly-raised battalions would have some military experience within their officer cadres as opposed to if the selection of officers was limited to the ranks of the New Armies and so-called 'Pals Battalions' which consisted entirely of wartime volunteers.

Race's position as a monocausal factor in the West Indian Great War historiography has led to an unfairly universal criticism of BWIR and WIR officers by previous historians. C.L.R. James complained of the "Sandhurst failures" of the West India Regiment, who were later assigned to the British West Indies Regiment.<sup>100</sup> Howe referenced an officer corps that was drunk with power and notions of racial superiority who "upbraided [the soldiers under their command] in a manner which was positively sulphuric, and at other times even physically abused [the soldiers]."<sup>101</sup> Howe added a new group of officers to James's 'Sandhurst failures': the Jamaican planter elite, who, Howe argued, constituted the majority of the BWIR's officer cadre on account of the inability of British regiments to supply qualified officers. Richard Smith provides the most damning critique of BWIR leadership:

Many of [the] BWIR officers were members of the West Indian planter class. The most senior commanders were professional soldiers seconded from the WIR, **usually nearing retirement and hardened by their years in a regiment characterized by racial hierarchy**. Other officers were assigned from other British Army regiments or posted from **the**

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<sup>99</sup> Sheffield, "Officer-Man Relations", pp. 97-98.

<sup>100</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 69.

<sup>101</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 132.

**least capable applicants for temporary commissions in the New Army.**<sup>102</sup>

Criticisms of the British Army's officer class are common in First World War historiography. Indeed, the 'lions led by donkeys' narrative is one of, if not the, definitive characteristic of Britain's Great War myth. Historians of the West Indies and the First World War have adopted a similar approach that condemns all regimental officers on account of the racially charged environment in which West Indians served. This is not to absolve BWIR and WIR officers of all criticism; like any other First World War British regiment, the West Indian formations contain good officers and poor, benevolent and dictatorial. An analysis of BWIR officers of 1915 to 1919, however, sheds new light on the quality of leadership within the battalions. While some leadership positions in later BWIR battalions appear to have been awarded based on social status rather than merit or military experience, most BWIR officers were either members of the prewar militia or soldiers who had already distinguished themselves in the Great War.

Former WIR officers dominated the command sections of the various BWIR battalions, accounting for 5 battalion commanders, 3 majors and 1 adjutant by December 1918.<sup>103</sup> The preference for WIR officers satisfied several practical requirements for the army. First, except for one individual (Lt. Col John Poe, commanding 2BWIR), all WIR officers came from 1WIR, which had been on garrison duty in Jamaica since the summer of 1915. Second, all were veterans of military garrison duties in Sierra Leone and Gambia.

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<sup>102</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 126. Emphasis added here.

<sup>103</sup> *The Monthly Army List: December 1918* (London: HMSO, 1918), 1980.

Most importantly, WIR officers were familiar and comfortable in leading the West Indian rank and file. This last point was particularly relevant to the British Army, who had designated the BWIR a ‘native’ regiment upon its formation. Contrary to popular belief amongst historians of the Great War, the British Army did not adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach to the leadership and management of its regiments. British commanders, having witnessed a correlation between the sharp drop in efficiency amongst Indian units and officer casualties, recognized the importance of having regiments commanded by those who ‘knew the men’ — not on a personal level, but rather those with a knowledge of the cultures of the soldiers.<sup>104</sup> Officers of the 1<sup>st</sup> West India Regiment, who would otherwise do little on garrison service in Jamaica, represented a logical pool of manpower from which to draw senior leadership of the BWIR.

As the war progressed and the BWIR expanded, the WIR could no longer provide the required number of senior officers for command positions. Battalion commanders came from other parts of the British Army. Two — Colonels Barchard and Wilson of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> battalions, respectively — were recalled from the army’s retired list, together personifying C.L.R. James’s description of officers who were too old to serve. Both men had fought with the West India Regiment and had experienced combat in Africa before the First World War, Barchard in the Gold Coast in 1896-98 and Wilson with the 1888 Sikkim Expedition, the 1895-96 Ashanti War, and the 1898-99 Hut Tax War in Sierra

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<sup>104</sup> Jeffrey Greenhut, “Sahib and Seopy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army,” *Military Affairs* 48, no. 1 (1984): 15–18.

Leone.<sup>105</sup> While previous historians have criticized the continued employment of these elderly officers, they have failed to contextualize their service within the larger British Army nor with any consideration of the operational tasks of the units they commanded. Wilson's 1888 and Barchard's 1889 commissions made them junior to the 1914 commanding officers of the Regular Army's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Border Regiments, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Leicestershire Regiments, and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Scots.<sup>106</sup> While both men would have been older in comparison to other battalion commanders by 1918, this is less reflective of their age than it is of the promotions of their peers; for the British Army's exponential expansion during the war provided opportunities for rapid promotion. Furthermore, neither man commanded a combat unit for any serious length of time. Barchard commanded 1BWIR until the arrival of the younger and more capable Charles Wood-Hill in 1916. At that point, Barchard assumed command of 3BWIR on labour duties, while Wilson would command the 5<sup>th</sup> (Reserve) Battalion for the duration of the war. Neither was too old for active service in the First World War, and their previous experience with the West India Regiment made them logical choices for activation and assignment to the BWIR.

As personnel from the WIR and the retired lists were exhausted to staff the BWIR, the British Army turned to the local West Indian defence militias. Militia personnel initially reverted to second lieutenant upon transfer to the BWIR, but as the war

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<sup>105</sup> *Hart's Annual Army List, Militia List, And Yeomanry List for 1903*, vol. LXIV (London: John Murray, 1903), 361a.

<sup>106</sup> *Hart's Annual Army List, Special Reserve List, Territorial Force List for 1914*, vol. LXXV (London: John Murray, 1914), 291, 344, 399.

progressed some militia officers were permitted to retain their rank as an incentive for accepting active service. Such officers accounted for two of the battalion commanders by 1918: Colonels Ogilvie of the Jamaican defence forces, and Colonel Arnould de Boissiere of the Trinidad militia, who in 1918 commanded the 11<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> battalions respectively.<sup>107</sup> Ogilvie was a career militia soldier in Jamaica, with *Gleaner* news reports on his career with the Kingston Infantry Volunteers dating back to 1895 when he was already a captain. This places Ogilvie at the upper end of age amongst the battalion commanders, and his retirement in 1918 due to ill-health seems to support this.



*Figure Chapter 3.3 - Colonel A.E. Barchard, 3BWIR<sup>108</sup>*

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<sup>107</sup> *Army List, Dec 1918*, 1980.

<sup>108</sup> IWM, HU113305, "Colonel A E Barchard. Unit: CC British West Indies Regiment."

In addition to these command positions, such officers also made up the bulk of the junior officers (second lieutenants through captains) of the BWIR battalions. This was particularly true of the combat battalions, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> BWIR, which preferred officers with militia experience over citizen officers, who went to subsequent battalions. While the officer cadre of the 1st West Indian Contingent contained a mixture of ex-militia and citizen officers, an analysis of the 1916 monthly army lists shows that, as more militia officers arrived, those without prior military experience were re-assigned to either the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, or 5<sup>th</sup> battalions on labour or reserve duty.<sup>109</sup> That officers were assigned to particular battalions based on previous military experience as early 1916 indicates a certain level of foresight only to utilize the 1st and 2nd battalions in combat operations, and the employment of future battalions behind the lines.

Where possible, officers also came from other British regiments, a practice that was encouraged by the War Office to instill a sense of regular army discipline amongst the rapidly growing ranks of the New Army. When 1BWIR was training in the United Kingdom, some British officers were transferred from their regiments to occupy key positions within the battalion. Three of the company commanders were majors in the New Army: Major V.J.T. Gane of the 15<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, Captain W.J. Bensley of the 7<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> *The Monthly Army List: January 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1935–38; *The Monthly Army List: February 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1935–38; *The Monthly Army List: March 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1938–1938b; *The Monthly Army List: April 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1938–1938b; *The Monthly Army List: May 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1938–1938b; *The Monthly Army List: June 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1938–1938b; *The Monthly Army List: July 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1938–1938b; *The Monthly Army List: August 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1980–1980b; *The Monthly Army List: September 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1980–1980b; *The Monthly Army List: October 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1980–1980b; *The Monthly Army List: November 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1980–1980b; *The Monthly Army List: December 1916* (London: HMSO, 1916), 1980–1980b.

Dorsetshire Regiment, and Major G.W.R. Jenkins of the 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers. All were 1914 volunteers, however, their respective battalions were re-designated as training units for home service. Still, all three experienced a rapid advance in rank before joining the BWIR and were officers that the army deemed to be serviceable rather than what Richard Smith has labelled as failed New Army officers. The battalion adjutant, Captain A.P.J. Hibbart, was a member of the original British Expeditionary Force that deployed to France in August 1914. Finally, three of the original platoon commanders came from British Army units. By 1918, at least 11 regimental officers came from other units, including 2 battalion commanders: Colonel Negus of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry and Arnold of the Royal Garrison Artillery, the former being awarded a Distinguished Service Order for commanding a battalion on the opening day of the Somme Offensive in July 1916.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, when other avenues had been exhausted citizen officers were offered temporary commissions for the duration of the war. Such individuals were representative of the West Indian planter class, and, by 1918, constituted the bulk of the BWIR officer cadre outside of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> battalions. Such individuals were granted their commission by the West Indian colonial government and received rudimentary military training in Jamaica before their deployment overseas.<sup>111</sup> Finally, two citizen-soldiers would command West Indian battalions during the war: Colonels Willis and Shipley, both of Jamaica.

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<sup>110</sup> *Army List, Dec 1918*, 1980.

<sup>111</sup> Stephen Hill, *Who's Who in Jamaica: A Biennial Biographical Record Containing Careers of Principal Public Men and Women of Jamaica* (Kingston, JA: Stephen A. Hill, 1916).

## Conclusion

This chapter has addressed some of the misconceptions that are prevalent within the existing historiography regarding the recruitment of West Indians and the establishment of the British West Indies Regiment. While this chapter does not dismiss the existence of racism directed towards West Indian soldiers from their white officers or the War Office, external defence concerns of the War Office and Admiralty require integration into the broader discussion. While some senior officials in the Colonial Office were opposed to raising West Indian contingents for service, the fact that the War Office permitted West Indian enlistment immediately following the end of the German merchant raiding shows just how concerned the War Office was with the defence of the West Indies during the war. During the winter of 1914, the German raider *Emden* repeatedly demonstrated the destruction that an enemy ship could cause to shore installations. While the local militias lacked the heavy weaponry required to combat a warship, their presence could deter a German attempt to conduct raiding operations on land.<sup>112</sup> Once the German naval threat passed following *Kronprinz Wilhelm*'s internment, the War Office shifted their priorities for the West Indies from local defence to expeditionary troops. Only with the appearance of U-Boats in 1917 were additional naval batteries and shore installations placed throughout the British West Indies.

An examination of the men who joined the BWIR sheds light on the reasons for their enlistment. Like in Britain, West Indian recruitment also began with the middle and working classes in 1915 before becoming almost an exclusively working-class unit by

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<sup>112</sup> *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, for example, had a crew of 420 sailors during its Caribbean raiding career.



1917. The numbers of unemployed and plantation workers indicate that West Indians did not enlist entirely because of a brainwashed and perhaps misplaced loyalty to the empire, but rather for a variety reasons, including especially the offer of a steady income for a workforce that historically relied on migratory and seasonal labour.



*Figure Chapter 3.4 - Naval Gun Emplacement, Grenada, 1917<sup>113</sup>*

Finally, the BWIR's officer cadre was far different than the incompetent failures they are portrayed as by some historians. Officers were typically assigned to particular battalions based on operational requirements. Individuals with prior service in the militia were sent to the two combat battalions, while citizen-soldiers were overwhelmingly placed with the BWIR labour battalions (the 6<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup>). British officers were

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<sup>113</sup> IWM Q17137, "Preparing a 4.7 inch gun for action, Richmond Hill, Grenada."

present throughout the entire regiment, many of whom came from regular army units and had experienced combat on the Western Front before joining the BWIR. In short, the British West Indies Regiment was formed in the same manner as other imperial new army units and was not a dumping ground for the British Army's rejected officer corps.

## Chapter 4: West Indian Infantry in Egypt & Palestine

Writing home to his father in Jamaica in October 1917, Private J. Bramwell likely communicated the sentiments of other West Indians in Egypt with his statement, “we are still alive and kicking”.<sup>1</sup> Bramwell, a soldier with 2BWIR since 1915, spent the majority of his time in uniform on garrison duty in Egypt. Like other members of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> battalions, Bramwell would have enlisted soon after the War Office permitted recruiting in the West Indies in 1915, presumably under the assumption that he would serve in a combat unit. Yet by the time that Bramwell’s letter was published in the *Daily Gleaner*, he and the other members of his battalion had spent eighteen months along the Suez Canal, far from the fighting in Palestine. Following the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the war on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914, Ottoman troops repeatedly attempted to capture the Suez Canal to hinder British trade, supply, and troop transports coming from India and Oceania to Europe, and British imperial soldiers in Egypt were positioned around the Canal to ensure its protection.

West Indian soldiers like Bramwell began arriving in Egypt in February 1916 following a brief period of basic training in England. West Indian soldiers fought on five fronts during the war — the Western Front, Mesopotamia, Egypt, German East Africa, and Cameroon — yet Egyptian service, including the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, was the most important theatre of operations for West Indian soldiers during the war. West Indian soldiers were deployed to Egypt longer than in any other theatre where, unlike the Western Front, they participated in major combat operations from 1917 onwards.

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<sup>1</sup> “A Letter From Egypt,” *Daily Gleaner*, 17 October 1917, 14.

Between their arrival in 1916 and participation in combat operations in 1917, West Indian soldiers trained, toured, and waited.

West Indian soldiering in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) occupies a precarious place in the existing historical discussion. C.L.R. James and Glenford Howe have identified, on the one hand, West Indian participation in combat operations in the campaign's latter stages as evidence that Black West Indian soldiers were equal to their white British counterparts. On the other hand, historians have neglected much of the West Indian experience in Egypt before their frontline deployment. According to the prevailing historical narrative, West Indian soldiers 'rushed to the colours' once recruitment was permitted, only to idle by the Suez Canal for two years while white soldiers fought.

Given the importance of race in existing histories of the West Indian wartime experience, it is unsurprising that many historians have limited discussions of West Indian garrison duties in Egypt to accusations of racism against the British Army. Writing in the interwar period, C.L.R. James argued that there was no good reason for the West Indians to be kept from the frontline in 1916 and that the situation was "the old story of the Black man being first refused an opportunity to be afterwards condemned for incapacity."<sup>2</sup> Just as historians failed to incorporate concerns about imperial defence into debates over West Indian wartime recruitment (as discussed in the previous chapter), so too have they neglected to broaden their scope of examination to incorporate British intent and defence concerns into the West Indian experience in Egypt. Glenford Howe similarly maintained that the War Office relegated West Indian soldiers to labour and

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<sup>2</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 71.

other behind-the-lines duties because of “deep-rooted prejudices” towards Black soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

The assignment of West Indian soldiers behind the lines did not represent a wastage of valuable military resources by the British Army. Instead, West Indian garrison duty of 1916-17 was a crucial moment in the West Indian transformation from civilians to soldiers. Wartime volunteers from the British Empire did not become soldiers overnight but were rather slowly indoctrinated into the British armed forces. The ultimate goal of such indoctrination was the transformation of these ‘civilian volunteers’ into full-fledged soldiers and was facilitated by both material changes and experiences. Citizens shed their civilian clothing for military uniforms; likewise, soldiers received standardized equipment that was common throughout the British imperial armies. Amongst this equipment, none was more critical in the citizen-soldier transformation than the issuing of a weapon, which perhaps marked the most significant difference between a civilian and a soldier.

Experientially, this transformation was facilitated by several pivotal experiences in a soldier’s early career. In basic training, soldiers were drilled to instill “discipline, cohesion, and the habits of absolute and instant obedience to the orders of a superior.”<sup>4</sup>

Through their assignment to a particular regiment or corps, soldiers inherited certain traditions and a history from which an *esprit de corps* was encouraged. Following the completion of their training, citizen-soldiers deployed abroad, often for an active theatre of operations, where they underwent further army indoctrination, which included tactical

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<sup>3</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 100.

<sup>4</sup> GSWO, *Infantry Training (4-Company Organization)* (London: HMSO, 1914), 2.

training, battle drills, and short deployments to the front lines alongside veteran soldiers. Finally, the transformation concluded once soldiers engaged in combat, at which point they completed their journey from civilian volunteer to soldier.

This chapter will examine the West Indian EEF experience through the transformation of West Indians who served with the EEF from civilians to soldiers. This examination will add a third phase, soldier-tourist, to this transformation as a means of discussing West Indian interactions with the Egyptian environment, culture, as well as with civilians and British imperial soldiers alike. By focusing on this identity transformation amongst West Indian soldiers, this chapter will demonstrate that Egyptian service was not a period in which the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) languished behind the frontlines. Rather, it was a crucial period in the indoctrination of West Indian volunteer soldiers into the British armed forces. Furthermore, this chapter will demonstrate that British Army operational requirements are better at explaining the delayed employment of West Indian soldiers as frontline infantry than simply racism, as is argued by C.L.R. James, Glenford Howe, and Richard Smith.

Discussions of soldier identity and the transformation from civilian to soldier are absent from discussions of West Indian wartime experience and the broader discussion of First World War imperial experiences. By incorporating studies from other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and war studies, as well as studies covering different historical periods such as the Second World War, the discussion of soldier and civilian identity during the First World War is more developed.

One work that will inform the discussion in this chapter, as well as subsequent chapters on West Indian experience and wartime identity, is Michael Robillard's "Risk,

War, and the Dangers of Soldier Identity.”<sup>5</sup> Robillard’s article presents what he terms the ‘paradox of soldier identity’: the notion that peacetime soldiers simultaneously desire both war and peace. While on the surface, Robillard’s study does not relate to the West Indian Great War experience as the latter enlisted after the war had begun and only for the war’s duration, aspects of Robillard’s soldier paradox are nonetheless present within the wider West Indian experience. On soldiers’ desires to feel useful, for example, Robillard maintains that the employment of soldiers in roles that differ from their primary task (i.e. the employment of infantry in construction or police tasks, as the West Indians were used in Egypt) created a harmful dichotomy between a soldier’s identity and their reality. The dichotomy between a soldier’s perceived military identity and his actual employment could, Robillard argues, diminish a soldier’s ability to think or act reasonably; in the case of the West Indians on labour duties, this could be reflected in violent outbursts by the trained infantrymen towards their peers, other labourers, and the civilian population.<sup>6</sup>

Several historical studies can be drawn on for comparison to the kind of identity transformation experienced by West Indian soldiers. In *Citizen Soldiers*, Helen McCartney argued that a certain degree of prewar class and social status, and thus a civilian identity, continued to exist in Liverpool Territorial Force battalions even after their deployment beyond England.<sup>7</sup> Yet unlike the West Indian volunteers who are the focus of this study, McCartney’s ‘territorials’ had always been both civilians *and* soldiers,

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Robillard, “Risk, War, and the Dangers of Soldier Identity,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 16, no. 3–4 (2017): 205–19.

<sup>6</sup> Robillard, 208–10.

<sup>7</sup> McCartney, *Liverpool Territorials*.

holding both full-time civilian employment while completing part-time military training before the war began.

A better comparison with the West Indian transformation is found in Emma Newlands' work *Civilians into Soldiers*.<sup>8</sup> Drawing comparisons between representations of the male body and the British Army's expansion during the Second World War, Newlands demonstrates how British civilians gradually became soldiers. This process included a soldier's basic training, his loss of individuality through the issue of uniform and his requirement to adhere to specific regulations regarding appearance (i.e. hair length and the prohibition of facial hair), and through his participation in active service outside of the United Kingdom.

In the case of West Indians who served in Egypt, another phase of identity transformation exists: the 'soldier-tourist' identity. The soldier-tourist — a notion that individuals took advantage of their soldiering duties by touring parts of the world that were mostly inaccessible outside of wartime — is well-rooted within First World War historiography, particularly within studies of Australian soldiers during the war. Richard White argues that Australian and New Zealand soldiers, more than any other British imperial force, best represented the soldier tourists as it was more difficult for them to secure home leave as opposed to British, Irish, or Canadian soldiers, and because an impressive 'tourist tradition' was well-established in Australian civil society in the prewar

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<sup>8</sup> Emma Newlands, *Civilians into Soldiers: War, the Body and British Army Recruits, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).



period.<sup>9</sup> Bart Ziino also identifies tourist attitudes in writings from Australian soldiers during the war. He argues that soldiers described their soldiering experience in the same way that a tourist would describe an upcoming vacation, consisting of an exciting departure, touring, and the inevitable return home.<sup>10</sup> Ziino argues that, like tourists, Australian soldiers wrote home of their soldiering experiences as a means of “relating and negotiating the means of that experience.”<sup>11</sup> Within these studies of the Australian Great War experience, Australia’s all-volunteer citizen-soldier army uses tourist language and a touring mentality (writing home, photographs, etc.) as a means of comprehending their experiences during the war.

Touring was by no means exclusive to Australian or New Zealand soldiers. As Justin Fantauzzo demonstrates in *The Other Wars*, British imperial soldiers posted to Egypt faced the same difficulties in securing home leave as their Anzac counterparts.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, as the British Army became more representative of the British working class, British soldiers developed an appreciation of the opportunities for visiting otherwise inaccessible locations along the lines of their Anzac counterparts. Krista Cowman points out that working-class soldiers posted to the BEF in France also recognized the significance of paid international travel, and that all British soldiers in France availed themselves of tourist trips to French cities and towns as a means of coping

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<sup>9</sup> Richard White, “The Soldier as Tourist: The Australian Experience of the Great War,” *War & Society* 5, no. 1 (1987): 63–77.

<sup>10</sup> Bart Ziino, “A Kind of Round Trip: Australian Soldiers and the Tourist Analogy, 1914-1918,” *War & Society* 25, no. 2 (2006): 39–52.

<sup>11</sup> Ziino, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Justin Fantauzzo, *The Other Wars: The Experience and Memory of the First World War in the Middle East and Macedonia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

with the stark contrast between their prewar civilian lives and the reality of 1914-18 in which they lived.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, West Indian soldiers fit into this category of soldier-tourist. Like their Anzac and working-class British counterparts, most West Indians likely lacked the financial means to tour Egypt in peacetime. Although no socio-economic studies of BWIR soldiers currently exist, we can assume this to be true for two reasons. First, an examination of the surviving pension records from the BWIR contingents in Egypt shows that 84 percent (272 out of 322 surviving records) of the contingent held either working-class jobs or were unemployed before the war.<sup>14</sup> Second, any West Indian with both the financial means to travel and a desire to become a soldier would have likely paid their way to Britain to enlist before the West Indian recruitment campaign, and thus would not have been members of the BWIR.

The soldier-tourist experience was a vital moment for West Indian wartime volunteers. In addition to visiting foreign locations, West Indians also interacted with other British imperial soldiers and labourers during this touring period. Bart Ziino has suggested that, for many Australian-born Great War soldiers, Britain was an unfamiliar realm despite its position as the imperial metropole.<sup>15</sup> Such ‘foreignness’ can be expanded in the West Indian example to include not just Britain, but the entire British Empire. Certainly, the empire was not foreign to West Indian society; a British-style public school

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<sup>13</sup> Krista Cowman, “Touring behind the Lines: British Soldiers in French Towns and Cities during the Great War,” *Urban History* 41, no. 1 (2014): 105–23.

<sup>14</sup> TNA, WO 364, “Soldiers’ Documents from Pension Claims, First World War.”

<sup>15</sup> Ziino, 40–41.

system and European sports existed to foster imperial loyalties, and claims of allegiance to the crown are evident in many soldier testimonies about their recruitment.<sup>16</sup> Yet for the primarily West Indian working-class population, visits to other British imperial realms were not possible. Other than the presence of Canadian banks, British ships, and a trans-Atlantic telegraph cable, the British West Indies was an isolated imperial outpost in the early twentieth century. Even when West Indians travelled for work, they moved to American imperial ventures within the circum-Caribbean rather than to other British territories. Yet in Egypt, West Indian soldier-tourists formed part of arguably the most diverse British military formation of the war, where they interacted with personnel from Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, British India, Egypt, Cyprus, and Hong Kong.

The transformation of West Indian soldiers from civilians to tourists to soldiers was thus an essential episode in the West Indian experience of the war. Through training and preparation for war, to interacting with other imperial subjects and finally entering battle, West Indian soldiers were able to navigate their position within the British imperial hierarchy. For West Indians, the First World War was not just the first time that they visited foreign locations, but in many respects, it was the first time that West Indians truly interacted with the British Empire. Service in Egypt provides the best example through which to examine these interactions and shifting West Indian identities. West Indians posted to Egypt were the only Caribbean volunteers to have experienced the traditional

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<sup>16</sup> On representations of empire in West Indian education and sport, see Aviston Downes, "From Boys to Men: Colonial Education, Cricket and Masculinity in the Caribbean, 1870-C. 1920," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 22, no. 1 (2005): 3–21; Hilary McD. Beckles, "The Origins and Development of West Indies Cricket Culture in the Nineteenth Century: Jamaica and Barbados," in *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 33–43.

transformation from civilian to soldier in the same manner as other British wartime volunteers. The nature of Egyptian service, with lengthy periods of static garrison duty around the Suez Canal, also afforded West Indians adequate time to tour and interact with other imperial soldiers. Finally, unlike West Indians posted to the Western Front, Mesopotamia, or Africa, those sent to Egypt took part in combat operations that became the dominant West Indian memory of the First World War.

This chapter will describe the gradual transition of West Indian soldiers from civilian volunteers to wartime tourists, and finally to ‘proper’ soldiers during their service with the EEF. This discussion will lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive discussion of West Indian wartime identity and British imperial challenges to the importance of their wartime service that will be discussed at greater length in chapter seven.

### **Civilian Volunteers**

Before the West Indian contingents could deploy to an operational theatre, first they had to be trained. This critical period in the transformation of West Indians from civilians to imperial soldiers has been neglected within the historiography. Time spent in the United Kingdom is presented as little more than an opportunity for West Indians to discover “a military apparatus [the British Army] whose traditions and structures existed to maintain order and obedience and perpetuate the social order of Empire.”<sup>17</sup> The existing literature presents the BWIR’s training as no more than a brief detour on the path to Egyptian garrison service and ultimate vindication in the Jordan Valley. Richard Smith

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 81.

defines the period of training in the United Kingdom as a harsh winter and an introduction to a racist military system.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Glenford Howe defines the period of West Indian training in Britain as the site of the BWIR's first resistance against British rule, an October 1915 soldier strike over payment delays.<sup>19</sup>

The initial training of West Indian soldiers was an integral piece of the West Indian war experience, not merely in terms of introducing citizen-soldiers to military life, but because the West Indian experience at Seaford influenced how the combat battalions were initially used in Egypt during 1916 and 1917. It must be remembered that 'training' encompassed much more than previous West Indian histories have discussed. Citizens did not enlist and immediately proceed to the front. Instead, they underwent a lengthy process of learning fighting techniques, military drills, specialist courses of seven months or more, all of which served to integrate the wartime volunteers into the British Army quickly and to transform civilians into soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Following the completion of their training, units went to an operational theatre where further training was conducted, including advanced battle drills. Ultimately, most new British battalions formed during the war would not conduct independent operations until over a year after their initial formation. For example, the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles, 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division existed for one year before landing at Gallipoli in August 1915, while the 9<sup>th</sup> Essex Regiment, 12<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, 80–82; 121.

<sup>19</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 92–94.

<sup>20</sup> This figure is taken from an analysis of New Army divisions that were raised in Britain during 1914–15. 39<sup>th</sup> Division of Kitchener's New Fifth Army spent the least amount of time training in the United Kingdom at 212 days.

(Eastern) Division trained for 306 days before undertaking independent combat operations.

According to the terms that dictated army recruitment in the West Indies, all volunteers would be trained in England instead of in the West Indies, and there is no doubt that the first West Indians to arrive in England were still very much civilians. Other than undergoing a military medical examination and, in the case of Jamaican, Bahamian, and British Honduran recruits, a brief stay in military accommodations, the first four West Indian contingents had no interactions with the British Army before boarding transport vessels for Britain. Even their method of transport was markedly civilian; instead of boarding converted troopships, West Indians travelled in a variety of civilian ships that were contracted by the West India Committee and various islands. Bahamian recruits boarded fishing schooners and sailed to Jamaica before proceeding to England.<sup>21</sup> Recruits from Guiana and the eastern Caribbean colonies travelled aboard contracted cargo and passenger ships such as the *SS Verdala* and *SS Balantia* that were familiar as the peacetime ships responsible for inter-Caribbean travel.<sup>22</sup>

West Indian soldiers took part in the most basic of military training at Seaford Camp, a training facility created in 1916 to house and train the New Army's 22<sup>nd</sup> Division.<sup>23</sup> As the British Army grew, so too did Seaford Camp. Eventually, tens of thousands of British, Irish, Canadian, and West Indian soldiers spent time there. While

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<sup>21</sup> Holmes, *The Bahamas During the Great War*, 34–36.

<sup>22</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1 BWIR."

<sup>23</sup> Robert Skinner, "Kitchener's Camps at Seaford: A First World War Landscape on Aerial Photographs" (Portsmouth, 2011).

New Army units remained around Seaford for months while they underwent training, the first West Indian contingents spent only weeks there; just enough time to be kitted with uniforms and to undertake fundamental, preliminary training.<sup>24</sup> The West Indians remained in camp only long enough to participate in marching drills and the indoctrination program, which aimed to transform the citizen volunteers into capable soldiers. Indeed, the West Indian's Seaford training regimen was so short that it did not include basic musketry training.<sup>25</sup>

The primary purpose of basic military training was and continues to be to transform civilians with little to no knowledge or prior military experience into capable soldiers. Close-order drills taught recruits to work together and follow commands without question, exercise prepared the body for the physical demands of war, and the issue of identical uniform, equipment, and weaponry fostered an abandonment of individuality and the creation of a 'team spirit.' Other methods were used by the British Army to encourage such a transformation. When discussing British recruits during the Second World War, Emma Newlands describes sights that would have been common for West Indians during the First World War just as they would be in contemporary militaries today:

Long before he was armed and sent into conflict, Roy [the British soldier in question] was subjected to a regime of physical interventions by the military authorities. His head was shaved, he was issued with new clothes and he was forced to exercise in time with other men in a dedicated space, the barrack square, selected for the purpose. He was no longer able to

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<sup>24</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1 BWIR."

<sup>25</sup> Julian Saltman, "Odds and Sods: Minorities in the British Empire's Campaign for Palestine, 1916-1919" PhD Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 35–36.

wear his hair as he chose, to choose clothes that he preferred, or to employ or to rest his body as he saw fit.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed the British Army attempted to drill out all individuality amongst the West Indians. Jamaican J.A. Graham, an acting sergeant for the voyage to England, wrote

Since we have been over, we quite see that the soldier life is not a light one, or one to be taken up lightly, but one that is a stern reality. The authorities are doing their best to make us fit in the shortest possible time, and although we can't get in much squad drill, they make up for it in the Swedish drill.<sup>27</sup>

The army's process of transforming civilian volunteers into capable soldiers was a slow one. Trinbagonian Private E. Pierre offered some insight into the West Indian training regimen, stating that the West Indians drilled "from 5 a.m. [until] 4 p.m."<sup>28</sup> At the same time, an anonymous BWIR officer commented that the daily life for West Indian soldiers was a "fixed routine [of] drills, route marches, [and] gymnasium".<sup>29</sup> Yet, despite the difficulties, the transformative process that basic training encouraged was adopted by the West Indians. Jamaican Private Arnold Dalmage wrote to his pastor

with drill and marching the day is soon done and we are so much more tired than when we began. Still I am quite happy and jolly fit. I am glad after all to be doing my bit now... We are out to win and ours won't be to fall out in the march to Berlin. We are keeping the old Union Jack floating free, and when peace comes I hope to be at home again.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Newlands, *Civilians Into Soldiers*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> "From Seaford Camp, and the Firing Lines," *Daily Gleaner*, 29 January 1916, 11. Swedish drill was a system of physical exercise where movements were executed following an instructor's vocal command, like military marching drills.

<sup>28</sup> "Items of News," *POSG*, 13 January 1916, 3.

<sup>29</sup> "From Seaford Camp, and the Firing Lines," *Daily Gleaner*, 29 January 1916, 11.

<sup>30</sup> "Our Soldiers; Letter to Rev. F. Bavin," *Daily Gleaner*, 17 March 1916, 13.



Dalmage rationalizes the hardships of basic training through the desire and goal to defeat Germany in the war. Tropes of military conditioning also appear in Dalmage's letter. The use of 'we' in describing the dedication and purpose for training hints at an emerging *esprit de corps* amongst the West Indians.

In addition to unit drills and physical activity aimed at fostering a certain degree of teamwork and camaraderie amongst soldiers, the British Army also relied on its unique 'regimental system' to promote a sense of family. Unique amongst Western militaries, Britain's regimental system drew on tradition, unit history, and collective identity to give soldiers a sense of belonging.<sup>31</sup> Although Britain's army uniform was, on the surface, identical for all soldiers, subtle differences distinguished regiments from one another. Buttons, shoulder-flashes, and hat brass all differed from regiment to regiment and administrative corps to administrative corps, giving soldiers an identifiable, organizational 'family.' West Indian soldiers were introduced to the regimental system in November 1915, when the first two contingents were officially titled the British West Indies Regiment.

The process of transforming civilians into soldiers was not an immediate one, especially for Britain's New Army — the name given to the 400,000 Britons who enlisted during 1914-15. An analysis of the thirty New Army divisions created from August 1914 to September 1915 shows that, on average, units spent 333 days in the United Kingdom

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<sup>31</sup> David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c. 1800-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10–30.

before embarking for a theatre of operations.<sup>32</sup> However, this number could vary greatly. The 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division, the first New Army division to be formed, spent only 261 days in the United Kingdom before deploying to the Western Front. Conversely, the 35<sup>th</sup> Division spent 414 days in Britain before finally embarking for France in January 1916. Following their arrival in France or Egypt, New Army units would spend a further amount of time behind the front — between 28 and 139 days for formations on record — before finally assuming independent combat operations. Divisions sent to Gallipoli — the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish), 11<sup>th</sup> (Northern), and 12<sup>th</sup> (Eastern) Divisions — spent more time training in Britain than other initial New Army divisions due to there not being a rear line in which to train at Gallipoli. In total, between periods training in Britain and training behind the frontline, New Army formations spent, on average, 397 days between their establishment and becoming operationally functional.

Despite the tried and tested processes that the British Army utilized to transform civilians into soldiers, West Indian volunteers retained much of their civilian identity while training in Seaford. Having arrived at a time when domestic uniform production could not meet army clothing requirements, West Indians trained, drilled, and lived in their civilian attire, as evidenced in photographs of West Indians at Seaford camp in 1915

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<sup>32</sup> See Baker, “The Long, Long Trail: Researching Soldiers of the British Army in the Great War of 1914-1919.” This electronic resource provides immense details on British Army formations during the First World War. Using information provided by the website regarding the dates of formation, embarkation, and the first battles of British New Army divisions I was able to analyze the average amount of time that newly raised units spent training in Britain and behind the front lines before going into battle for the first time. I have fact-checked some of the information provided on the website against official histories, and the website’s creator has published three manuscripts on the First World War; thus, I have no reason to question the legitimacy of the information that is provided.

wearing a motley combination of civilian dress and military-style uniform.<sup>33</sup> This experience was not unique to West Indian soldiers. Most New Army soldiers drilled in civilian attire, receiving piecemeal uniform and equipment parts as their training progressed.<sup>34</sup> The absence of uniform from an otherwise militaristic setting created an odd identity for soldiers undergoing training. Recruits were no longer civilians as the army dictated their daily lives, but essential ‘soldierly’ aspects such as uniforms and weapons were likewise absent in their experiences. Instead, recruits were in a perpetual transformative state between civilians and soldiers.



*FigureChapter 4.1 - BWIR Recruits at Seaford, 1915*

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<sup>33</sup> “The British West Indies Regiment,” *WICC*, Vol 30, 2 November 1915, 472a. Those wearing ‘military’ uniforms were not wearing khaki, but rather ‘Kitchener Blue’ that was issued for training purposes only to instill some sense of military belonging.

<sup>34</sup> Laura Ugolini, “Consumers to Combatants? British Uniforms and Identities, 1914-18,” *Fashion Theory* 14, no. 2 (2010): 159–82.

Given the lack of appropriate uniform and the continued use of tropical climate civilian clothing, the cold climate of southern England's winter dominated soldiers' testimony of the period. West Indians arrived at Seaford during a particularly wet and miserable English autumn. An anonymous Jamaican of the first contingent wrote of Seaford, "If it was not for the rain here the place would be fine, but it rains almost every day and the ground is in a state. [Today] is bitterly cold".<sup>35</sup> Another Jamaican with 2BWIR, Private G.V. Goffe, wrote, "I am quite happy and well and all that troubles me is the cold. A good many of the chaps get sick, as a result of the cold."<sup>36</sup> The most damning and descriptive account of life in Seaford came from Sergeant Cassidy, a white Trinbagonian with 1BWIR, who wrote to his wife:

The weather here (since we landed) has been either frosty or very muddy; some mornings when opening the door of your hut, you would see the hut and house tops appear like a white sheet [due to frost], and the ground as hard as a board. When it is muddy, you can scarcely pull your boot out of the mud. One morning the darkies saw hailstone for the first time in their lives. They seem to take things very cheerfully although the cold is very severe. One man told me, one day, that his hands had stopped working, because he couldn't button up his jacket...The poor darkies (as the people call them) are shivering and shaking with frost and cold...<sup>37</sup>

It is doubtful that the reactions to hail amongst the West Indians who Cassidy observed were universal of all Black West Indians of 1BWIR. Hailstorms frequently occurred in British Honduras between April and October, while Jamaica was prone to experiencing one or two hailstorms per year.<sup>38</sup> Even if Cassidy observed men who had

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<sup>35</sup> "At Seaford Camp," *Daily Gleaner*, 13 January 1916, 13.

<sup>36</sup> "From Seaford Camp," *Daily Gleaner*, 31 January 1916, 13. Letter was penned on 12 December 1915.

<sup>37</sup> "Our Boys at Seaford," *POSG*, 7 January 1916, 3. Letter was penned on 5 December 1915.

<sup>38</sup> On the historical frequency of hailstorms in the Caribbean, see E.M. Frisby and H.W. Sansom, "Hail Incidence in the Tropics," *Journal of Applied Meteorology* 6, no. 2 (1967): 339–54.

worked in Cuba before the war, where hailstorms were virtually non-existent, it was still doubtful that Seaford marked their first experience with hail.

Unaccustomed to the English winter climate and lacking proper clothing, the West Indians suffered accordingly despite British efforts to alleviate their suffering through the provision of heating stoves and three blankets to each soldier.<sup>39</sup> On October 20th, Private Thomas Primo of 1BWIR died from pneumonia; that same day, ten West Indians were discharged from the army as being medically unfit.<sup>40</sup> Between Primo's death and 1BWIR's departure for Egypt, a further 22 West Indians died at Seaford, at least 3 of whom died from pneumonia.<sup>41</sup> In addition to pneumonia, bronchitis was also present within the West Indian ranks.<sup>42</sup> British military authorities had expressed concern for the West Indians' ability to withstand the European winter climate since the beginning of the war, and ultimately the War Office decided to dispatch West Indian forces to Egypt to complete their training.

As a result of the suffering endured by West Indians during the English winter, the BWIR spent a far shorter amount of time in England than their New Army counterparts, with only 107 days separating the establishment of what would become 1BWIR on October 6th, 1915, and their departure on January 21st, 1916.<sup>43</sup> If the initial West Indian contingents followed the same timings as New Army units, 1BWIR should have

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<sup>39</sup> "Items of News," *POSG*, 13 January 1916, 3.

<sup>40</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR"; CWGC, *Find War Graves*, "British West Indies Regiment, First World War," accessed 07 August 2020.

<sup>41</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR"; CWGC, *Find War Graves*, "British West Indies Regiment, First World War."; "The British West Indies Regiment," *The Nassau Guardian*, 8 January 1916, 2.

<sup>42</sup> "Tobago News," *POSG*, 30 January 1916, 8; from a letter penned by Corporal Hugh O'Keeffe on 24 December 1915.

<sup>43</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

continued training in the United Kingdom until the summer of 1916. The harsh Seaford climate experienced by West Indian soldiers, exacerbated by a lack of winter clothing and an unfamiliarity with the winter climate amongst the soldiers, led to the transfer of all West Indians to Egypt to complete their training. Thus, the first West Indian soldiers who arrived in Egypt in February 1916 were not yet trained soldiers; they were, in many respects, still civilians.

The transformative process re-commenced once West Indians landed in Egypt, where tropical uniforms and rifles were finally issued. The issue of firearms to West Indian soldiers was another important step in their transformation into soldiers. Perhaps more than any other piece of equipment or clothing, the rifle most separated soldiers from civilians. Many organizations, such as police forces and public transport workers, wore military-style uniforms in their daily lives, but only a soldier was armed. The Lee-Enfield rifle was just as integral to the image of the British ‘Tommy’ as was his khaki uniform.<sup>44</sup>

While drills and physical training continued, Egypt provided West Indians with the opportunity to broaden their training regimen. From six o’clock in the morning until five o’clock in the afternoon, through a process which Trinbagonian soldier A.G. Williams described as “monotonous and normal,” the West Indian battalions underwent a diverse rotation of basic military training, including musketry, tactical lectures, signalling, and platoon, company, and battalion drills.<sup>45</sup> As the West Indians progressed, their

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<sup>44</sup> Ross J. Wilson, “Memory and Trauma: Narrating the Western Front 1914-1918,” *Rethinking History* 13, no. 2 (2009): 262–63.

<sup>45</sup> “The Situation in Egypt as Viewed by a Trinidad Soldier,” *POSG*, 10 March 1916, 9; Cundall, *Jamaica’s Part in the Great War*, 31.

training became more advanced, including night tactics, outpost defence, and trench fighting.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to regular training, some West Indians underwent specialist training within the battalion. Dolly Bruce of Trinidad recounted having to “read flags, lamps, heliograph and buzzer” as part of his signaller’s course.<sup>47</sup> Sergeant Leonard Browne, a former constable of the Trinidad Constabulary, underwent sixteen examinations at two British Army schools to qualify as a machine gunner.<sup>48</sup> Others, such as Jamaican Sergeant James Russell of 1BWIR, were trained as grenadiers. In a letter written to his father, Russell wrote that being a grenadier was a “very risky and dangerous job...I can assure you that it’s no fun to throw live bombs or grenades.”<sup>49</sup>

*Table Chapter 4.1 - BWIR Training Schedule, Egypt 1915<sup>50</sup>*

<b>Day</b>	<b>0615 – 0745</b>	<b>0900 – 1200</b>	<b>1500 – 1700</b>
Sunday	Free Time	Church Parade (1000)	Free Time
Monday	Physical Training	Company Drill Lecture Musketry	Platoon Drill Musketry
Tuesday	Physical Training	Route March (0830)	Battalion Parade (1500)
Wednesday	Physical Training	Platoon Drill Lecture Extended Order Drill Musketry	Company Drill Extended Order Drill Signals
Thursday	Physical Training	Route March (0830)	Handling of Arms, Piling of Arms, etc.
Friday	Physical Training	Company Drill	Marching Order

<sup>46</sup> Cundall, 31.

<sup>47</sup> “Letter From the Front; A Signaller in Egypt,” *POSG*, 07 July 1916, 2.

<sup>48</sup> “A Trinidad Solider Writes,” *POSG*, 07 July 1916, 3.

<sup>49</sup> “Letter From Egypt,” *Daily Gleaner*, 19 August 1916, 13.

<sup>50</sup> TNA, WO 95/4427/1, “War Diary: EEF; Canal Defence Troops; No 2 Section; 1 BWIR,” September 1915 – November 1916.

		Musketry Lecture	Inspection
Saturday	Physical Training	Platoon Drill Lecture Musketry	Free Time

West Indian deployment to Egypt also hastened the transformation from civilian to soldier. The act of deployment on active service is a crucially formative moment in soldier identity. A 2012 study of United States National Guard personnel identified that these American ‘citizen-soldiers’ did not begin to identify as soldiers until after their active service deployment.<sup>51</sup> The same can be suggested for First World War volunteer and conscripted soldiers, who underwent a progressive routine of indoctrination and preparation before finally deploying to the front lines. Although West Indians did not enter combat until over a year after they arrived in Egypt, the country was still considered active service abroad and remained under threat of Ottoman invasion and attack during 1915-16. As well, Egypt was an important staging army for British imperial forces that were deployed to Gallipoli.

The Egyptian climate provided a sharp contrast to the West Indian experience in England, although conditions remained harsh. Jamaican Lieutenant Allan Dunlop of 4BWIR described conditions as follows:

I can assure you [the heat] would nearly kill you...the temperature is 120 in the shade...It is now two o’clock, and I have on next to nothing and the perspiration is just streaming off me. One of the men said to me this morning “Lard sah, when we get back to Jamaica we shure to get frost bite for de place really cold compared to dis.” We work from 5 a.m. till 9

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<sup>51</sup> Bonnie M. Vest, “Citizen, Soldier, or Citizen-Soldier? Negotiating Identity in the US National Guard,” *Armed Forces & Society* 39, no. 4 (2012): 602–27.



a.m. and then from 4.30 to 6.30 p.m., not [being] allowed to do any work in the day between these hours [due to the heat] ... The heat is bad enough, but the flies, the flies! They are an awful size, and actually stick on to one's face, food and everything else.<sup>52</sup>

The first group of West Indians to arrive in Egypt nearly experienced a much quicker transition from citizen to soldier. Following their landing at Alexandria, 1BWIR was immediately ordered to join the British Army's Western Force along the present-day Egyptian-Libyan border.<sup>53</sup> There, the British waged an asymmetrical war against the Senussi, an Arab tribe who resided in the Egyptian-Italian borderland who had revolted in support of the Ottoman Empire against British and Italian forces in the region. Colonel Barchard, commanding the West Indian forces, protested against this deployment due to the lack of training that the West Indians had received in England — specifically that the BWIR had yet to complete a musketry course — and, ultimately, the order to engage the Senussi was cancelled. Nevertheless, the proposed West Indian deployment to the Western Force demonstrates an early British preference to use the West Indians in a combat role.

Despite the absence of combat operations, West Indian soldiers faced dangers during their training period in Egypt. While on outpost duty in June 1916, Trinbagonian Corporal Sydney Harvey's seven-man section fired on a group of 'Arabian spies' who were approaching Harvey's outpost. During the short firefight, Harvey "[killed] two and wounded another and the sentry [killed] one and wounded two."<sup>54</sup> 3BWIR was attacked

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<sup>52</sup> "Our Fighters," *Daily Gleaner*, 7 September 1916, 13. Letter was penned on 6 August 1916.

<sup>53</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>54</sup> "Corporal Harvey Writes," *POSG*, 15 July 1916, 3.

by an Ottoman aircraft on June 13th, 1916, while undertaking extended order battle drills.

Grenadian Private Percy Dillan wrote

We were visited by a hostile aeroplane, around 7.30 o'clock when we were [training]...Two men were wounded, — one on both knees; and an officer was hit on the shoulder. The wounds were, happily not serious. The officer had a bit of shrapnel extracted from his shoulder and the private was dressed on the spot and set to the Base hospital. I had a very narrow escape as I was only 15 yards away from where the bombs dropped! The explosion was terrible...The aeroplane hovered over us for sometime and then made way for its lair. I must confess I was very frightened.<sup>55</sup>

As their training programme came to a close, West Indian forces in Egypt finally underwent trench familiarization on June 16th, 1916, when 'D' Company 1BWIR was temporarily attached to the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Royal West Kent Regiment (2/4RWKR) in the Suez Canal zone.<sup>56</sup> At the time of the West Indians' arrival, Ottoman forces were still threatening to assault the Canal itself, having attacked British positions on the Sinai side of the Canal as recently as April and twice before in 1915. West Indian forces thus formed part of the Canal defence troops and spent their days patrolling, working on defence constructions, and continuing training.<sup>57</sup> This process of familiarization continued until November 2nd, 1916, when the entirety of 1BWIR assumed defensive positions at Hill 70 and Dueidar on the Sinai side of the Suez Canal.

In total, the period between 1BWIR's creation on October 6th, 1915, to their commencement of trench indoctrination on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1916, was 254 days. Following this,

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<sup>55</sup> "News From the Front," *POSG*, 23 July 1916, 8.

<sup>56</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>57</sup> TNA, WO 95/4427/1, "A Short History of the British West Indies Regiment in Egypt," found in "War Diary: 1BWIR."

there were another 139 days between their trench familiarization and 1BWIR's assumption of defensive duties at Hill 70 and Dueidar, bringing the total number of days between formation and independent operations to 393 days. This transitional period is in line with British New Army units who spent an average of 397 days between their initial formation and the commencement of frontline service. In particular, 1BWIR's training and organization timeline almost perfectly reflects the experiences of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division. Formed on August 21st, 1914, the 9<sup>th</sup> Scottish spent 261 days in the United Kingdom and, like 1BWIR, 139 days completing trench indoctrination before being deemed fully operational for the Battle of Loos.

With their occupation of Dueidar and Hill 70, West Indian soldiers in Egypt ceased to be civilians. During the previous year, they had travelled from the West Indies to England and then to Egypt, where they were slowly equipped, clothed, and trained as any other British imperial recruit. Yet West Indians still could not identify as 'soldiers,' or, at the very least, not as combat infantry. Despite their posting to the Suez Canal defence forces, West Indian soldiers did not move forward with the front line. Instead, they completed a series of garrison, labour, and depot duties as the EEF crossed the Sinai Desert. What followed was a period that I have labelled as a 'wartime-tourist' identity in which West Indian troops interacted with other imperial subjects and negotiated their position within the British Empire, all while performing vital services for the EEF.

### **The West Indian Wartime-Tourist**

The nature of the Sinai and Palestine Campaign — particularly during 1915-16 when the frontline was just opposite the Suez Canal — meant that soldiers had numerous opportunities to take their leave in exotic foreign cities. British imperial soldiers mingled

with the local population and frequented sex workers. They also interacted with imperial and colonial troops through sport, fatigue duties, and while on leave, and British forces visited sites that, although foreign, had a certain degree of familiarity amongst those with a Judeo-Christian religious upbringing. The ability to tour and to interact with other British imperial subjects behind the lines was made possible by how West Indians were employed between the advance into Sinai in the summer of 1916 and the EEF's first failed attack on Gaza in March 1917. During that period, West Indians served at various times as garrison troops guarding the Suez Canal, on active service defending the EEF's lines of communications, as a construction unit building defensive works, and as a depot providing reinforcements and West Indian detachments to German East Africa and Mesopotamia.

Egypt and Palestine provided the greatest opportunity for true wartime-tourism, as most British imperial soldiers were somewhat familiar with the region's most famous attractions. Since the late Victorian era, an increasing interest in Egyptology amongst Britons meant that, by the First World War, many British soldiers possessed an interest in and appreciation of Egypt's ancient sites.<sup>58</sup> Of all the attractions that soldiers could visit, none were more impressive than the pyramids and the sphinx, which Barbadian Sergeant O.H. Mason asserted were visited by most West Indian soldiers in Egypt.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pyramids featured prominently in West Indian letters and photographs sent back to the West Indies. Jamaican Corporal S.W. Morais hinted at a West Indian

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<sup>58</sup> Fantauzzo, *The Other Wars*. PAGE NUMBERS?

<sup>59</sup> "News of 'Our Boys'," *Nassau Guardian*, 11 November 1916, 2. Letter was penned on 9 October 1916.

familiarity with Egypt's ancient history when he mailed a photograph of a group of West Indians in front of the pyramids to Kingston's *Daily Gleaner* in the hope that the newspaper would "have it published as many in Jamaica have never seen a true photograph of the Pyramids and Sphinx."<sup>60</sup> The *Daily Gleaner* printed Morais' photograph beneath a banner that stated: "Jamaican Proud to Serve King & Country."<sup>61</sup>

Photography was a particularly important medium for EEF soldiers to share their experiences with the home front. As Richard White writes in his study of Australian soldier-tourists, "the camera was to tourism what the gun was to war. The words that explained their use — 'aim', 'shoot', and 'capture' — were the same."<sup>62</sup> Soldiers posted to Egypt were rarely able to secure home leave on account of the vast distances between them and home, and also because of the Mediterranean U-Boat threat. Images lessened the divide between the front lines and the home front, as soldiers hoped to bridge the gap between both locations by allowing loved ones to see the same sites as the soldiers.<sup>63</sup> In these respects, West Indian soldiers were no different from their British and imperial comrades within the EEF. West Indians often sent home self-portraits, either individually or in groups, and often such portraits were taken in front of known monuments or alongside local sites. The West India Committee's "Palestine Album" — a collection of photographs taken by members of 1BWIR — contains photographs of familiar sights that

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<sup>60</sup> "An Enthusiastic Volunteer," *Daily Gleaner*, 20 September 1916, 10.

<sup>61</sup> "Enthusiastic Volunteer," *Daily Gleaner*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> White, "Soldier as Tourist," 73.

<sup>63</sup> Justin Fantauzzo, "Picturing War: Soldier Photography, Private Remembrance, and the First World War in Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine," *War & Culture Studies* 10, no. 3 (2017): 224–37.

were experienced by West Indian soldiers. Training, local markets, and unspecified locations all feature prominently in the album.<sup>64</sup>

Sites of religious significance were also frequented by West Indian soldiers, which is unsurprising given the important role that religion played within West Indian society. Christian churches, primarily those of the Baptist denomination, had been firmly cemented in West Indian society since the abolition of slavery. Churches were amongst the first groups to aid and ally with the recently emancipated slaves from the 1840s onwards, and by the First World War had become a pillar of Black West Indian society.<sup>65</sup> One need not look further than a 1916 recruiting advertisement in the *Port of Spain Gazette* that rhetorically asked if Kaiser Wilhelm was Satan, before stating, “This war is not really a war between nations. It is the prophesised war between God and Satan Incarnate.”<sup>66</sup> These religious undertones were reflected in the soldiers’ letters as well. New Jamaican recruits attending a service in December 1916 were told that “a soldier is to be God’s friend, he must be a brother of Jesus Christ, fighting for lasting peace.”<sup>67</sup> When describing their march across the Sinai Peninsula, most West Indians referred to Palestine as ‘the Holy Land’ in their writing. Likewise, sites of Christian religious importance were popular destinations for travelling soldiers. While completing a Stokes gun course in Cairo in 1917, Bahamian Corporal Jack Smith of 4BWIR wrote that he had

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<sup>64</sup> WIC, “The Palestine Album,” n.d., <https://westindiacommittee.org/historyheritageculture/gallery/palestine-album/>

<sup>65</sup> Shirley Gordon, *God Almighty Make Me Free: Christianity in Preemancipation Jamaica*, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 123–38.

<sup>66</sup> “Is the Kaiser Satan?” *POSG*, 20 February 1916, 3.

<sup>67</sup> “Duty Before Fighters,” *Daily Gleaner*, 30 December 1916, 13.

“been to the place where they say Mary was supposed to stop and nurse Jesus,” in addition to the pyramids, the sphinx, and Heliopolis.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, links between Christianity and the war were not unique to West Indians. Despite steadily declining congregations in the years before 1914, Christianity still held a prominent position within British society during the war, and Britons’ interaction with religious institutions increased upon entering the army through mandated church parades and regimental chaplains.<sup>69</sup> Other imperial soldiers in the EEF also demonstrated an appreciation of religiously historical sites they encountered throughout the campaign, which was influenced by Sunday schooling and religious education. Religious connotations were not just expressed by the rank and file, but also by the EEF’s senior officers, including commanders Archibald Murray and Edmund Allenby.<sup>70</sup> A strong connection with religion amongst EEF soldiers was most often demonstrated through ‘crusader narratives’ in which the EEF took on the role of a modern-day crusading army tasked with liberating the holy lands from Ottoman rule.

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<sup>68</sup> “News From the Front,” *Nassau Guardian*, 24 March 1917, 2. Letter was penned on 11 February 1917, however, Smith states that the events described in the letter occurred sometime before that.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 19–58.

<sup>70</sup> James Kitchen, *The British Imperial Army in the Middle East: Morale and Military Identity in the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, 1916-18*, War, Culture, and Society (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 164–80.



*Figure Chapter 4.2 - BWIR Soldiers with Chaplains, 1917<sup>71</sup>*

Yet despite a familiarity amongst West Indian soldiers with some Egyptian sites, the tourist experience in Egypt was often underwhelming. Much like their British imperial counterparts, many West Indian soldiers excitedly arrived in Egypt only to discover flies, a ‘hostile’ location population, and disappointingly modern infrastructure. Jamaican Private F.A. Numa addressed the dichotomy between the soldiers’ expectations of Egyptian service and their reality in a letter on August 11th, 1916:

I suppose you are all aware of the fact that fair Jamaica’s fighting sons are now in Egypt where we occupy quarters in the desert — though it appears to me that the land of Ancient History is nothing else but deserts, where we hardly see anything else but sand. We live in sand, eat in sand, drink in sand, bed in sand, [our] equipment is in sand; in short, it is sand in every direction.<sup>72</sup>

Religious language was often used by West Indian soldiers to express their disappointment with their Egyptian experience. Trinbagonian Private Aubrey Williams

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<sup>71</sup> IWM, HU96949, “A Chaplain with British Forces in Egypt and Palestine 1917-1918.”

<sup>72</sup> “Letters From Egypt,” *Daily Gleaner*, 12 August 1916, 14.



expressed his disgust at the prostitutes who occupied Alexandria's *Rue de Soeur*, stating that "Potiphar's wife" could be found amongst the girls who gathered there for "demoralizing purposes."<sup>73</sup> According to the Book of Genesis, Potiphar's wife made repeated attempts to seduce an unwilling Joseph, and Williams' use of this analogy perhaps provides some insight into his responses to being propositioned by prostitutes. Commenting on the men who frequented *Rue de Soeur*, Williams added, "there was a marked absence of Joseph".<sup>74</sup>

The most damning description of Egypt came from another Trinbagonian soldier, Sergeant Leonard Brown. "This place is a fine and practical illustration of what Hell must be," Brown wrote,

it is all sand, the blazing sun, and hot winds, with Pharaoh's plague, to boot...No wonder the children of Israel wandered there. If one couldn't get the water in the "dear old Suez," there would be deaths for the want of a bath. We bathe, sun, brush and put on our toggs! I never saw, nor felt, so many flies! You never see a bird of any kind. We are now cut off from the world of civilization...I, hopefully, say the time will come when this, like everything else, will be over; but I will never, never forget this place, miles and miles away in the heart of what I must designate as the fittest place which should be chosen by the Entente Powers as the future dwelling (while he lives on this earth) of the Kaiser, the Arch Murderer and present-day Satan.<sup>75</sup>

For both Brown and Williams, religious language was used to convey their disappointments with their Egyptian experience. Within the existing historiography, soldier touring has been mainly presented as a positive experience which the soldiers — particularly Australians — enjoyed. Yet, for some West Indians, Egypt's wonders were

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<sup>73</sup> "Private Aubrey Williams Writes From Egypt" "The Great Romance," *POSG*, 16 February 1916, 6.

<sup>74</sup> "Private Aubrey Williams," 6.

<sup>75</sup> "Egypt Likened to the 'Evil Place'," *POSG*, 18 August 1916, 2.

dwarfed by its inhospitable climate, flies, and the soldiers' living conditions. Such disappointing sentiments were not exclusive to British West Indians. Many imperial troops in Egypt and Palestine expressed disappointment with local sights and peoples in their personal letters, as did British and dominion troops serving in France.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the important position that physical sites occupied in the touring experiences of British imperial soldiers, the West Indian touring experience in Egypt was more important as an avenue for inter-imperial mingling. In addition to the multi-cultural EEF, small detachments of troops from Italy and France were also present in Egypt, while the country itself was also a British protectorate. For West Indian soldiers with little direct contact with the wider British Empire during peacetime, being posted to Egypt was an opportunity to interact with empire and to navigate the British Empire's social hierarchy.

West Indians were, overwhelmingly, not fond of the Egyptian civilian population who were often portrayed as backwards and untrustworthy. "We are not all fond of the Arab," wrote Jamaican Sergeant Charles Rickard of 4BWIR, "We hear of his mischievous and treacherous behaviour, and the best way to avoid their stares is to keep aloof of all these people around."<sup>77</sup> Such 'treacherous behaviour' is evident in the case of Bahamian Private John Bermitte, who was shot by an armed Egyptian attempting to access the West Indian camp.<sup>78</sup> Theft was a common occurrence around West Indian camps in Egypt; during the 1919 Egyptian Revolution, for example, Egyptian

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<sup>76</sup> See Fantauzzo, *The Other Wars*, 72–77; Cowman, "Touring Behind the Lines," 109–11.

<sup>77</sup> "West Indian Fighters in Egypt," *Daily Gleaner*, 21 September 1916, 13.

<sup>78</sup> "Our Boys at the Front," *Nassau Guardian*, 26 July 1916, 2.

revolutionaries routinely snuck into the West Indian camps and stole soldiers' rifles.<sup>79</sup>

"They would rob you without thinking of it," wrote Jamaican Private H.V. Lewis regarding the Egyptians, "[they] were very cunning and thieving."<sup>80</sup>

Such distrust and dislike of the local population were not unique to the West Indian wartime experience. Many soldiers of the EEF, regardless of nationality, viewed Arabs as being backwards and uneducated.<sup>81</sup> An account in the trench journal *The Seventh Manchester Sentry* portrayed an Arab messenger as simplistic on account of his inability to take an English message without it being read letter-for-letter by the regimental telephone operator.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, an account of a night in Cairo within the Australian Camel Field Ambulance's trench journal described Arabs as 'cunning imps' and 'bootblacks,' and "the motley crew that pluck the tourist pigeon" on account of their begging and badgering of imperial soldiers to purchase goods.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the prevalence of derogatory remarks towards Egyptians within West Indian accounts of garrison service, one particular group is curiously absent from West Indian testimony: sex workers. West Indians, like other imperial soldiers within the EEF, certainly experienced encounters with Egyptian sex workers, mainly when stationed around Egypt's cities before the march across Sinai. In the words of historian Mark Harrison, "Egypt had a reputation not only as a land of plague and pestilence, but of vice

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<sup>79</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 72–74.

<sup>80</sup> "Another Letter," *Daily Gleaner*, 21 March 1917, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Fantauzzo, *The Other Wars*.

<sup>82</sup> "Tales of the Telephone Office," *The Seventh Manchester Sentry*, 9 January 1915, 4.

<sup>83</sup> "A Night in Cairo," *The Cacolet: Journal of the Australian Camel Field Ambulance*, 1 September 1917, 27.

and sensuality.”<sup>84</sup> As such, British military authorities took extreme measures to limit soldiers’ interactions with sex workers, including the prohibition of public sex work solicitation and establishments which housed more than one sex worker.

How often West Indians frequented brothels and sex work establishments during their time in Egypt is unknown. In his study of West Indian soldiers and venereal disease, Glenford Howe hypothesized that venereal disease was problematic for Black West Indian soldiers on all fronts, pointing to VD’s prevalence amongst BWIR troops in England, Italy, and in Jamaica as proof.<sup>85</sup> Howe argued that VD was problematic amongst West Indian men before their enlistment, as evidenced by the thousands of West Indian recruits rejected by army recruiters because of VD. Likewise, VD was a major problem for West Indian soldiers posted to Italy and, to a lesser degree, the Western Front. In a 1991 interview, Charles Rice, a BWIR veteran, recounted to Howe that West Indian soldiers would often sneak out of barracks in Egypt in search of ‘dirty sex.’<sup>86</sup> Rice’s testimony is one of the only West Indian accounts that discusses sex workers.<sup>87</sup> However, given the prevalence of venereal disease and the hiring of sex workers in prewar Jamaica, one can assume the hiring of sex workers by West Indian troops to have continued during their time in uniform.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Mark Harrison, “The British Army and the Problem of Venereal Disease in France and Egypt during the First World War,” *Medical History* 39 (1995): 149.

<sup>85</sup> Glenford Howe, “Military-Civilian Intercourse, Prostitution and Venereal Disease Among Black West Indian Soldiers During World War I,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 31, no. 1 (1997): 88–102.

<sup>86</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 147.

<sup>87</sup> See “Private Aubrey Williams Writes From Egypt; ‘The Great Romance,’” *POSG*, 16 February 1916, 6.

<sup>88</sup> TNA, CO 137/720, “BWIR Venereal Disease,” 7 March 1917; Glenford Howe, “Military-Civilian Intercourse, Prostitution and Venereal Disease Among Black West Indian Soldiers During World War I,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 31, no. 1 (1997): 88–102.

That West Indian soldiers might solicit Egyptian prostitutes during their garrison service was identified as a significant problem amongst the British West Indies' civilian population. In July 1916, Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* published an account of the situation for West Indian soldiers in Egypt:

Egypt is a hotbed of vice and disease; the abomination of the worst days of Carthage flourish in Egypt to-day [sic]. Being British, [sex] is of course free; the women are perfectly free to disseminate disease, perfectly free to do what they please — and they do it. It had been announced that six hundred Contingent men are being sent back to the West Indies suffering from blood diseases contracted in England and Egypt...are they to be let loose on the community to add to the poison that is already working such havoc in our midst?<sup>89</sup>

Finally, the BWIR's posting to the EEF provided West Indian soldiers with the opportunity to interact with other British imperial soldiers. Except for the British Salonika Force in Macedonia, the EEF was the most diverse British field formation of its expeditionary forces, containing at various times soldiers from Britain, British India, Australia, New Zealand, and the West Indies. West Indian interactions with other imperial soldiers came primarily through sport — mainly cricket — and through encounters while on leave throughout Egypt.

Sport offered the best opportunity for West Indians to mingle with other imperial soldiers, principally soldiers from 5BWIR — the reserve unit that never went to the front. Sport bridged the British Empire's racial divide, allowing Black West Indians to liaise and compete with their white imperial counterparts. Indeed, within the British imperial armies, organized sports could temporarily suspend the chain of command, allowing an

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<sup>89</sup> "What is to be Done?" *Daily Gleaner*, 24 July 1916, 8.

environment for officers, non-commissioned officers, and the rank-and-file to compete together and against each other.<sup>90</sup> By 1915, the British Army recognized the important role that sport played in fostering an *esprit de corps*, maintaining morale, and, most importantly, in relieving soldiers' boredom. As a result, the army organized matches between units in Britain's expeditionary forces, including within the EEF.

Football was the most popular sport played amongst British troops, but while West Indians participated in various sports, including football and a tug-of-war match, cricket was by far the most common.<sup>91</sup> Cricket forms an integral part of contemporary West Indian identity. Imported to the Caribbean by white settlers in the nineteenth century, the region's lower classes quickly embraced the sport.<sup>92</sup> In 1917, the Alexandria Cricket Club organized a cricket league comprised of teams of both military and civilian participants.<sup>93</sup> The West Indian squad, titled the BWIRCC for 'British West Indies Regiment Cricket Club,' proved highly effective; of the 31 games played in 1917, the West Indians won 28, lost 2, and drew 1.<sup>94</sup> Trinbagonian Private Archie Goddard proudly wrote to his father that "no Regiment in Egypt can beat the West Indians in sports."<sup>95</sup>

An examination of the 1917 'cricket season' demonstrates the breadth of imperial interaction which sport afforded the West Indians. In addition to the three local teams

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<sup>90</sup> J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 90–91.

<sup>91</sup> On sport and the British soldier, see Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 85–94.

<sup>92</sup> Douglas Midgett, "Cricket and Calypso: Cultural Representations and Social History in the West Indies," in *Ethnicity, Sport, Identity: Struggles for Status*, ed. J.A. Managan and Andrew Ritchie, 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 2004), 193–215; Downes, "From Boys to Men."

<sup>93</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 107.

<sup>94</sup> "On the Cricket Field in Egypt," *Daily Gleaner*, 17 June 1918, 11.

<sup>95</sup> "Pte. Archie Goddard Writes from Egypt," *POSG*, 24 July 1917, 10. Letter was penned on 8 May 1917.

entered into the competition, West Indians played against teams from the Sanitary Section, 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon Troops, 26<sup>th</sup> Veterinarian Hospital, 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> General Hospitals, Royal Artillery Records section, Army Ordnance Corps, 35<sup>th</sup> Motor Transport Company, an Australian team, and the Egyptian Camel Corps. Except for the Egyptian Camel Corps and perhaps elements of the Motor Transport Company (although unlikely), the West Indians were the only non-white participants in the tournament. Cricket matches were often the first means of interaction between West Indians and their white counterparts in Egypt. West Indian soldiers engaged in cricket matches in a series of two athletic meetings between them and soldiers from Australia and New Zealand shortly after the BWIR arrived in Egypt in 1916.<sup>96</sup>

Of all the imperial soldiers represented in the EEF, West Indians formed the strongest bond with Australians. West Indian soldiers frequented Cairo's 'Anzac Hotel,' an Australian Imperial Force establishment to house soldiers on their leave. Jamaican Sergeant R.C. Manton and three other West Indians shared a room at the Anzac Hotel in August 1916 during their leave and dined at the hotel amongst other British imperial soldiers.<sup>97</sup> Grenadian soldiers wrote home commenting that the Australians and New Zealanders were the more 'friendly' of the imperial troops encountered, while others recounted after the war that the Australians were responsible for finally getting the BWIR deployed to the front.<sup>98</sup> While this latter point is rather doubtful given that the Australian

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<sup>96</sup> "A Short History of the British West Indies Regiment in Egypt," *Nassau Guardian*, 26 September 1917, 3.

<sup>97</sup> "Letter From Egypt," *Daily Gleaner*, 31 August 1916, 13.

<sup>98</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 127.

rank-and-file whom the West Indians encountered would have had no influence whatsoever on troop deployments, the mere suggestion that the Australians liberated the BWIR from garrison duty demonstrates a deep connection between the two groups of soldiers.

A healthy relationship was demonstrated by Australian soldiers as well. Verner Knuckey of the 8<sup>th</sup> Australian Light Horse (8ALH) praised the West Indians for their physical prowess and, more importantly, their 'Britishness.' Knuckey wrote, "they talk no language but English, write home in English and seem to be Englishmen as much as we are, only Black. They never speak first but once you break through their reserve, you find yourself talking to an intelligent [and] thoughtful man who knows as much if not more than yourself."<sup>99</sup> For Knuckey, the Black West Indian soldiers exhibited a certain degree of Britishness, which legitimized the social relationship between Australian and West Indian. BWIR soldiers were, in Knuckey's opinion, different from other individuals of colour he encountered in Egypt. "Although the nigger here seems to think that colour means relationship," Knuckey recorded in his diary, "[the Egyptian] soon wakes up to his error."<sup>100</sup> Knuckey was particularly impressed by a scuffle between an Egyptian labourer and West Indian:

One day last week a dispute arose between two of the [West Indians] and [an Egyptian] and the [Egyptian] struck the West Indian with a stick. If [the Egyptian] has any brains he will not attempt it again, for I don't doubt but what he thought the butt end of a rifle was an earthquake which had struck him when the [West] Indian had finished with him.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> AWM, PRO3193/RCDIG0000468, "Transcript of Diary of Verner Gladders Knuckey, 1916," 4

<sup>100</sup> AWM, PRO3193/RCDIG0000468, 4.

<sup>101</sup> AWM, PRO3193/RCDIG0000468, 4.



Like other British imperial soldiers in the EEF, Knuckey's experiences influenced his interaction with the British Empire. In creating his hierarchy of imperial subjects, Knuckley unsurprisingly affords Australians the highest position, yet he views West Indians as more or less equal to the Australian soldiers. Conversely, British troops are represented as incapable soldiers who do not live up to Knuckey's expectations of how a soldier behaves in comparison to the Australian digger. For Knuckey, the ability of West Indian soldiers to converse in English, their education, and their status as uniformed soldiers were enough to separate the West Indians from other individuals of colour in Egypt. Knuckey also admired the West Indian soldiers' fighting abilities. During a scuffle between a West Indian soldier and an Egyptian labourer, Knuckey commented

Put [an Egyptian] beside these West Indians and one soon sees the difference. The latter are the well built race, some giants, very neat in their uniforms and seem to carry themselves with a dignity all their own, superior in many cases to the white man and yet they do not push themselves into our company, probably because they have received a snub from the cads and ignorant ones of our race.<sup>102</sup>

It should be noted that many of the qualities that Knuckey values in the West Indian soldiers are definitive traits of Australian soldiers, according to Australia's 'digger myth.' Masculinity, fighting prowess, and egalitarianism all appear in Knuckey's description of the West Indian soldiers in Sinai.<sup>103</sup> Despite the racial divide between Knuckey and the West Indian soldiers he encountered, Knuckey's language indicates that he saw much of himself (or, at least, much of a typical 'digger') in the West Indians; and,

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<sup>102</sup> AWM, PRO3193/RCDIG0000468, 4.

<sup>103</sup> Phillip SA Cummins, "The Digger Myth and Australian Society: Genesis, Operation and Review," PhD Dissertation (University of New South Wales, 2004), 13–15; Beaumont, 59; 138.

interestingly, that he did not see the same positive traits in the British soldiers he encountered. If other Australian soldiers identified these characteristics within the West Indians, it is unsurprising that the two groups got along favourably.

Another Australian, William Barry of the 29<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion, shared Knuckey's appreciation of the West Indians. Describing an encounter with BWIR soldiers while bathing in the Suez Canal, Barry wrote

One day when having a swim, two companies of troops from Jamaica came down and it looked funny to see these fine bodied coloured men, for they were as Black as coal, in the water with us chaps, and it wasn't very long before we were the best of friends. Other days we would have a picnic as they called it. We would go over to one of the sweet water canals and lay under the shade of the trees, telling yarns or playing cards till evening time and then we would come back to camp.<sup>104</sup>

Not all accounts were as favourable as Knuckey's or Barry's. Racism is certainly evident in the testimony of Martin Briggs, an Englishman in command of a Sanitary Section in Egypt, who referred to the West Indians as "coal-Black, woolly-haired, banjo-strumming coons, looking as though they had come by the last boat from the Swanee River".<sup>105</sup> Briggs took particular offence to Black West Indian non-commissioned officers drilling white privates, commenting that "apparently all Jamaicans have equal rights in the Army, the colour question not being allowed to arise."<sup>106</sup> Unlike Knuckey, who afforded the West Indians a higher social position than the Egyptians, Briggs favoured the workers of the Egyptian Labour Corps who 'surpassed' the West Indians in whatever they

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<sup>104</sup> IWM, Documents 15006, "Private Papers of W Barry," 27; quoted in Anna Maguire, "Colonial Encounters during the First World War: The Experience of Troops from New Zealand, South African and the West Indies," PhD Dissertation (Kings College London, 2017), 102.

<sup>105</sup> Martin Briggs, *Through Egypt in War-Time* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), 76.

<sup>106</sup> Briggs, 76.

were doing — although it is fair to assume that a lack of work ethic amongst West Indians was a result of Briggs’ racism or their assignment to sanitary section work rather than soldiering.

Others took a curious interest in the West Indian soldiers. British Major E.B. Hinde of 1/2<sup>nd</sup> East Anglian Field Ambulance referred to a group of West Indians who participated in an army sports competition as “negroes or ‘nearly’ negroes” who had “distinguished themselves in the running [competition].”<sup>107</sup> Captain A.M. McGrigor of the Gloucestershire Yeomanry observed the same competition, yet described it differently. According to McGrigor, “a [West Indian] (Black man) carried off everything in the running line winning the 100 by about 10 lengths...no one could approach him of course.”<sup>108</sup> As Richard Smith has argued, sports were a “metaphor for white racial dominance within the [British] empire” and West Indian dominance of the running competition can thus be seen as an affront to white racial supremacy.<sup>109</sup> That Black West Indians successfully challenged white racial superiority in sport may have influenced Hinde to describe the runners as “nearly negro” to cope with West Indian athletic superiority. That said, it is just as reasonable to assume that he was referring to Creole members of the BWIR who possessed a lighter complexion than Black West Indians.

West Indian participation in inter-army sports competitions was a source of discontent amongst a portion of the EEF. South African troops, in particular, objected to playing against Black soldiers, culminating in South African boycotts of the

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<sup>107</sup> IWM, Documents 11178, “Private Papers of Major EB Hinde.”

<sup>108</sup> IWM, Documents 9984, “Private Papers of Captain AM McGrigor.”

<sup>109</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 105.

competitions.<sup>110</sup> Confrontations between South Africans and West Indians around Ismailia became so common that ultimately the EEF staggered leaves for both contingents so they would never be out of barracks at the same time.<sup>111</sup>

The period of garrison service around the Suez Canal afforded West Indian soldiers the opportunity to tour a region that they otherwise would not have had access to, and to interact with other British subjects from all corners of the British Empire, including metropolitan, dominion, imperial, and colonial troops and civilians. As West Indian soldiers slowly advanced from the Suez Canal towards the firing line, they underwent a final transformation from ‘wartime tourists’ to ‘service’ soldiers. Through their interactions with other British troops and the Egyptian population, West Indians developed an understanding of their place within the empire, which mostly aligned with dominion troops. Within the EEF, however, they remained garrison troops for the time being and could not transition to frontline infantry until the summer of 1917.

### **West Indian Soldiers**

We’ve marched nigh on high an ‘undred miles  
Across the bloomin’ sand  
We’re jest about as thirsty as  
A Regimental band.  
(I wish I’d never seen this ‘ell-  
Ish Heaven-forsaken land).

The flies is gnorin’ orf our ‘eads  
An ‘chewin up our feet  
The Colonel’s face is red an’ blue  
An’ bustin with the ‘eat  
(‘Is language is enough to make

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<sup>110</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 72–73; Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 127–28.

<sup>111</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 128.

The blinking Turks retrea).

An' this is where old Adam lived  
Along o' Mother Eve;  
Well, I'm no doubting Thomas — but  
I'm darned if I believe  
(That they were really 'orrified  
When told to pack an' leave.<sup>112</sup>

Complicating the West Indian identity transition from wartime-tourists to soldiers was their employment within the EEF. Despite having been initially ordered to the Western Frontier Force in 1916 to combat the Senussi, West Indians spent the entirety of 1916 and half of 1917 employed in various non-combat capacities behind the EEF's front line. At multiple times, West Indian employment took on the roles of garrison troops, service infantry, a construction battalion, and a regimental depot. Furthermore, West Indian troops did not 'resemble' other EEF soldiers. Photographs of BWIR soldiers show them carrying obsolete weapons when their EEF compatriots were using SMLE rifles, and another photograph shows West Indian machine gunners operating an antiquated Maxim machine gun when the rest of the EEF had transitioned to the modern Vickers gun in 1916.<sup>113</sup>

From 1916 to mid-1917, the BWIR was, first and foremost, a garrison force. West Indian soldiers did not occupy the front lines until November 1917, nearly two years after they arrived in Egypt. Instead, they formed part of the Suez Canal's defence force: a division-sized formation tasked with guarding a possible attack of up to 250,000 Ottoman

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<sup>112</sup> Richard Turpin, *A Poem From Egypt*, n.d., Poem, found in "A Poem from Egypt," *POSG*, 15 October 1916.

<sup>113</sup> J.H. Luxford, *With the Machine Gunners in France and Palestine: The History of the New Zealand Machine Gun Corps* (Auckland, NZ: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1923), 22–24.

soldiers in early 1916.<sup>114</sup> The BWIR occupied fortifications and trenches, albeit nowhere near the frontlines. West Indians slept under canvas, trained when possible, and conducted patrols within the canal zone. West Indian troops also came under fire. “We live in dug-outs as deep down in the earth as we can possibly can, to be out of reach of the enemy’s aircraft,” wrote Trinbagonian Corporal Julien Waith, who then commented that the appearance of Ottoman aircraft “is the only excitement we get”.<sup>115</sup>

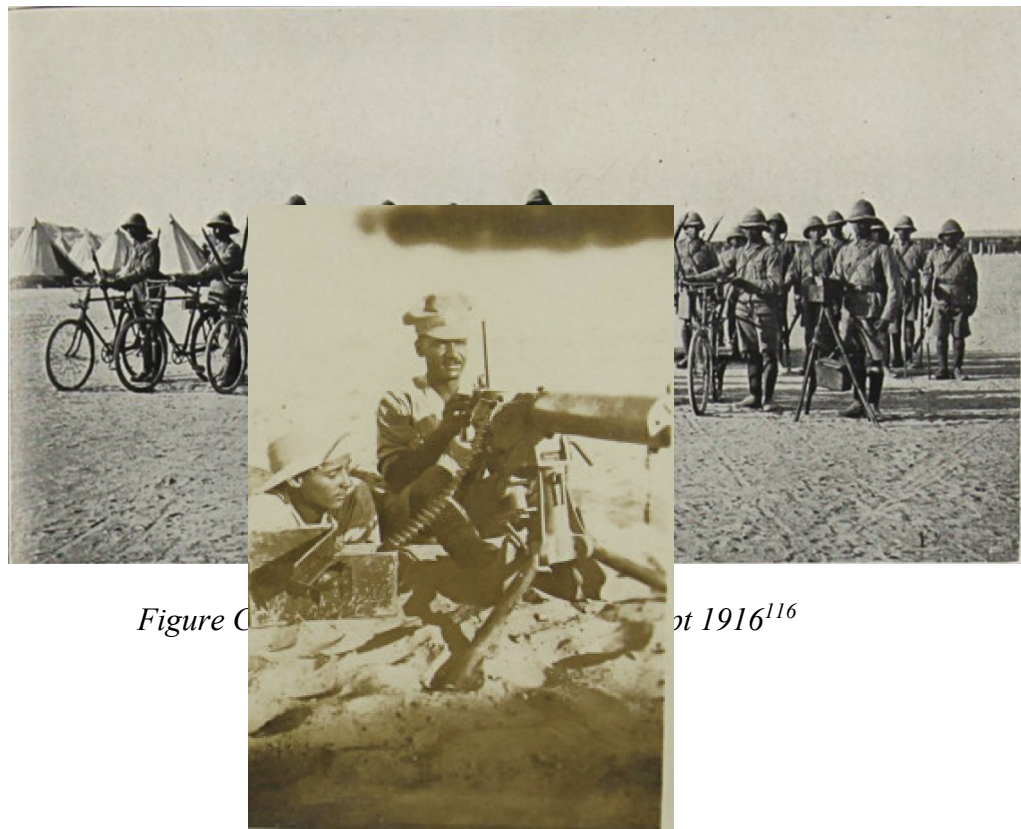


Figure C  
t 1916<sup>116</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Cyril Falls, *Military Operations: Egypt and Palestine. From the Outbreak of War with Germany to June 1917* (London: HMSO, 1928).

<sup>115</sup> “Current Events,” *POSG*, 15 July 1917, 4.

<sup>116</sup> “Cyclists and Signallers,” *WICC*, Volume 31, 27 July 1916, 488a. Note how the rifle barrels extend beyond the wooden stock, indicating that these weapons are CLEs and not the modern SMLEs.

*Figure Chapter 4.4 - BWIR Maxim Gunners, 1917*<sup>117</sup>

During their time defending the Suez Canal, the three BWIR battalions served as a collective depot for imperial units both within and outside the EEF. Between July 25th, 1916, and May 8th, 1917, at least 1,211 West Indian soldiers left their units for employment in East Africa, Mesopotamia, or within another EEF unit.<sup>118</sup> Altogether, these soldiers represented the equivalent of a twelfth BWIR battalion, and the reassignment of so many West Indians indicates a certain degree of respect for their capabilities amongst British military planners.

The largest group of West Indians departed the EEF on July 25th, 1916, when 501 West Indian soldiers from the first three BWIR battalions embarked for the East African Campaign. 2WIR, which had just finished campaigning in Cameroon, was deployed to East Africa at only half strength in the summer of 1916. Further reinforcements for the unit could not be obtained from their sister battalion (1WIR) in Jamaica, as that unit was still preoccupied with imperial defence and the maintenance of internal order. To quickly bring 2WIR up to full strength, the War Office decided to send a volunteer detachment

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<sup>117</sup> WIC, "The Palestine Albumn," (n.p: n.p, circa 1917). The smooth barrel and visible screw holes on the weapon's muzzle identify the weapon as a Maxim gun and not the standard and more modern Vickers.

<sup>118</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR,,"; TNA, WO 95/5370/7, "War Diary: Lines of Communications; British West Indies Regiment," December 1916 – February 1918.

from the existing BWIR units then in Egypt who would be attached to 2WIR. Although the proposed merger never came to fruition, BWIR soldiers served as an independent unit during the East African Campaign, and, throughout 1916-17, 651 soldiers left Egypt for East Africa, with several hundred more coming from the re-created depot in England.<sup>119</sup> These soldiers, their experiences in East Africa and details regarding the failed merger with 2WIR, will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

The next largest detachment of West Indians to leave the EEF deployed to Mesopotamia with the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force's (MEF) Inland Water Transport (IWT). Like the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, offensive operations in Mesopotamia posed many logistical issues for the British Army. Still, while the EEF responded with the construction of a water pipeline and railway, the MEF relied on transporting supplies on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. When the British Army created the IWT at the end of September 1916, the MEF's original intent was to crew the various river vessels with members of the British Army with maritime experience and civilians from the Royal Indian Marine.<sup>120</sup> The MEF quickly discovered that these sources alone could not fulfill personnel requirements, and requested volunteers from Britain's various colonial units, including members of the BWIR on garrison service in Egypt. Initially, the IWT preferred West Indians with prior seafaring experience, but by November 1916, West Indians with specific technical skills such as blacksmiths and carpenters were also recruited.<sup>121</sup> Ultimately, 433 West Indians transferred from Egypt to the IWT. Chapter six

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<sup>119</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>120</sup> L.J. Hall, *The Inland Water Transport in Mesopotamia* (London: Constable and Company, 1921), 13.

<sup>121</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 32-33; Hall, *Inland Water Transport*, 185.



will discuss these experiences at greater length. Presumably, these soldiers represented the best that the BWIR had to offer — 501 volunteers for East African combat service and 433 educated soldiers with technical skills in particular — and it is possible that their departure from the EEF delayed the BWIR's frontline deployment in Palestine even further.

West Indians finally began the transition into soldiers starting in late 1916 as the EEF began advancing across the Sinai Desert and into Palestine. To force the Ottomans out of Sinai and into Palestine, the EEF first had to develop a way to provide adequate stocks of water to its soldiers. Water supply was not an issue around Suez, where water could be quickly brought in from the Nile. Water was not anticipated to be a problem once the EEF captured Gaza, Beersheba, and Jerusalem due to wells in the vicinity of these cities. Yet in between Suez and the first significant settlements in southern Palestine was over 200 kilometres of desert. The solution was to construct a water pipeline and adjacent railway track from Suez, which was built as the EEF advanced. Water was pumped from the Nile to Suez, under the Suez Canal for filtering at Kantara, then discharged into the pipeline along the coast behind the British imperial armies.<sup>122</sup>

Supply was also of concern to the EEF. No major ports existed between Suez and Gaza, meaning that all military supplies had to be transported overland. The Sinai Peninsula was, in 1916, underdeveloped; there was no modern infrastructure, and transportation was reliant on the use of camels. Food and ammunition travelled from Suez

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<sup>122</sup> W.T. Massey, *How Jerusalem Was Won: Being the Record of Allenby's Campaign in Palestine* (New York: Scribner, 1920), 38–39.

to the frontlines via camels, and the wounded were brought back in the same way.

Although this suited the EEF's logistical requirements during the pursuit of the Ottoman Army across Sinai, resources that would satisfy the needs of a major offensive such as the assault on Gaza could not be provided by camel alone. Thus, to ensure that the EEF's logistical requirements in the forthcoming Palestine Campaign were met, the decision was made to construct a railway track adjacent to the pipeline from Kantara through to Sheikh Zowaid in Palestine.

Naturally, the defence of the pipeline and railway was of immense importance to the EEF's commanders, Murray, and, later, Allenby. The military resources committed to the pipeline's defence demonstrates water's importance to the EEF. In addition to the BWIR, whose steady advance across Sinai corresponds to the pipeline's construction, the EEF committed two combat-experienced brigades to pipeline defence. These units were the 20<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, which had previously fought on the Western Front, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dismounted Brigade, which fought at Gallipoli and in Egypt's Western Desert during the Senussi Campaign.

1BWIR and 2BWIR served as the 'advanced defence troops' for the EEF's lines of communications, steadily advancing as the pipeline and railway were constructed.<sup>123</sup> While General Murray, commanding the EEF, was concerned about Ottoman forces attacking the railway en masse, the more pertinent threat to its operation came from aircraft. West Indian Maxim guns were grouped into an anti-aircraft section and engaged aircraft that were attempting to bomb the railway. These raids intensified as the EEF

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<sup>123</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 36.

neared Palestine; the West Indians were attacked daily between April 7<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917, following their arrival at Sheikh Zowaid, and were bombed a further three times in May 1917.<sup>124</sup> In addition to bombing the railway from the air, Ottoman aircraft would occasionally attempt to land behind the British lines so that the crew might demolish a section of either railway or pipeline. During one Ottoman attempt to land saboteurs, a West Indian patrol fired on the landed aircraft, although the pilot and crew were able to escape.<sup>125</sup>

West Indian soldiers expressed elements of a soldier identity as they neared the frontlines opposite Gaza in spring 1917. The EEF made two failed attempts to capture Gaza in March and April 1917, and, in the aftermath, the opposing forces temporarily settled into a period of static, trench warfare. During this period, West Indians routinely performed the tasks of a construction battalion. These tasks varied from laying communications cable for Royal Garrison Artillery batteries, serving as grounds crew to the Royal Flying Corps, and constructing dugouts and infrastructure in Eastern Force's headquarters at Deir el Belah.<sup>126</sup> Despite performing labour rather than combat tasks, West Indians seemed to have responded well to duties immediately behind the front as these were deemed relevant to the EEF's objective of capturing Gaza. An anonymous former member of the Trinidad Volunteer Artillery writing to his previous commanding officer from Egypt stated, "you will be glad to know [that] we are higher up in the line

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<sup>124</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>125</sup> WO 95/4732, Charles Wood-Hill, "A Short History of the British West Indies Regiment in Egypt," in "War Diary: EEF Palestine L of C; 2BWIR," June 1917 – April 1919, 3. This document was produced in 1917 at the request of the EEF's Eastern Force Headquarters prior to the BWIR's deployment as frontline infantry.

<sup>126</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

now. We can hear the booming of the guns and often see the flashes; but we have done no fighting yet. Our work is more real now, and we do not feel that we are doing absolutely nothing.”<sup>127</sup>

During this period of construction duties, 127 members of 1BWIR transferred to Number 3 Armoured Train in May 1917. Armoured trains were one of the methods used by the EEF to protect both the railway and bordering water pipeline, with each train containing anti-aircraft weapons, light artillery pieces, and infantry detachments. Number 3 Armoured Train was formed in May 1917, and soldiers employed on the lines of communications were detailed to crew these machines. Naturally, as trained infantry, West Indians were a logical choice to garrison the train, and 1BWIR eventually provided 2 officers, 24 anti-aircraft gunners, 24 machine gunners, and 77 infantry for this train, constituting the majority of the train’s complement.<sup>128</sup> These men remained on lines of communications duties patrolling the railway for the remainder of the war.

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<sup>127</sup> “News From Some of Our Boys,” *POSG*, 16 August 1917, 9.

<sup>128</sup> WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR,”; Cundall, *Jamaica’s Part in the Great War*, 36–37.



*Figure Chapter 4.5 - BWIR and ELC Constructing Dugouts, 1917<sup>129</sup>*

Changes to the EEF's command structure in the wake of the Second Battle of Gaza finally allowed West Indian soldiers to fight in the frontlines. Following Allenby's appointment as the EEF's commander in June 1917, Lieutenant Colonel Wood-Hill of 1BWIR petitioned the new commander for the West Indians to be transferred from the lines of communications to an infantry brigade. Ultimately, it was decided that 1BWIR's machine gun section would be attached to the 162<sup>nd</sup> Machine Gun Company of the 54<sup>th</sup> (East Anglian) Division, which was occupying the front lines opposite Gaza.

On the night of July 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>, 1917, soldiers of the 1/5<sup>th</sup> Bedford Regiment (1/5BR), accompanied by combat engineers and stretcher-bearers, conducted a raid on Turkish positions at Umbrella Hill southwest of Gaza.<sup>130</sup> 1/5BR were covered on their

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<sup>129</sup> IWM, Q51348, "Photograph."

<sup>130</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 38–39.

flanks and front by a barrage of machine-gun bullets that created a wall of lead around the force to prevent Ottoman troops from attacking the raiders.<sup>131</sup> Participating in the machine-gun barrage was the four-gun section of 1BWIR, having been equipped with the new Vickers machine gun earlier that day and entering the firing line for the first time. For fifty minutes, the BWIR gunners provided covering fire for 1/5BR, who returned from their trench raid with over 100 casualties inflicted and some Ottoman prisoners, machine guns, mortars, and rifles brought back to British lines.<sup>132</sup>

Within West Indian nationalist war narratives, the Umbrella Hill machine-gun barrage was the most important West Indian action of the war, despite this action being insignificant in the broader context of the Sinai and Palestine Campaign. The West Indians, who manned four of the twenty machine guns, did not assault the Turkish trenches themselves, nor were any of them killed or wounded during the ensuing Turkish retaliatory artillery bombardment of the British lines. Yet the action maintains a prominent place within West Indian memory of the Great War, with Glenford Howe commenting that the “courageous performance [of the BWIR machine gunners]...led to the rest of the first and second battalions getting an opportunity to be engaged in combat in the months following [the action].”<sup>133</sup> Many works within West Indian historiography point to the action at Umbrella Hill as a vindication of Black West Indians who were finally permitted to demonstrate their fighting capabilities to the British Army. Within the

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<sup>131</sup> TNA, WO 95/4410, “War Diary: EEF, GHQ Troops; 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion British West Indies Regiment,” June 1917 – March 1918.

<sup>132</sup> TNA, WO 95/4410.

<sup>133</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 110.

existing literature, West Indians with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) rotate in and out of the front lines throughout 1917 and 1918 before finally participating in combat operations in the Jordan Valley in the final phases of the Palestine Campaign.

The common West Indian combat experience were trench raids and patrols that involved small groups of West Indian soldiers. Indeed, the first West Indian offensive actions following Umbrella Hill came in September 1917 when 1BWIR's companies were attached to veteran British units of the 20<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade. These British units included the 1/6<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry, the 1/4<sup>th</sup> King's Own Scottish Borders, and the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Gurkha Regiment.<sup>134</sup> When 1BWIR finally deployed to the front as a complete unit in October 1917, West Indians mounted nightly defensive patrols to guard against Ottoman raids or full-scale attacks. The excitement amongst West Indian soldiers as well as their inexperience were commented on by Major Henry Osmond Lock of the Dorsetshire Regiment who encountered the BWIR at Ludd before the capture of Jerusalem:

A battalion of West Indians that arrived, [sic] aroused both sympathy and amusement. They had marched through torrential rain and arrived soaked to the skin. In spite of a warning as to what they might expect, they rushed for shelter into some of the buildings which had not yet been disinfected; but their exit was even faster than their entrance, and they preferred the wet and cheerless exterior to being eaten alive [by insects] within.<sup>135</sup>

As was standard practice within the British imperial armies from 1914 to 1918, both West Indian battalions in Egypt underwent an extensive re-arming and re-equipping

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<sup>134</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>135</sup> H.O. Lock, *With the British Army in the Holy Land* (London: Robert Scott, 1919), 104–5.

once the units moved to the front. On October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917, 1BWIR was finally issued SMLE rifles, turning in the CLEs they were first issued at Seaford in 1915.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, on October 26<sup>th</sup>, the West Indians received new boxed gas respirators, turning in their Macpherson hoods that were also of 1915 vintage.

Due to the high daytime temperatures during the Palestine Campaign, almost all military actions occurred at night.<sup>137</sup> An excerpt from 1BWIR's war diary demonstrates the extent to which the battalion avoided operations during daylight hours:

At nights the [various battalions] man the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> lines of trenches, but by day only sentry posts are in position. The trenches are manned [half an] hour after sundown and [the] men march back to their bivouac areas at dawn. [Fifty percent] of the garrison are awake during at night while the remainder rest in the trenches [and] in dugouts...<sup>138</sup>

Most BWIR patrols in Palestine ended without any contact with opposing forces, although there were exceptions. On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1917, a West Indian patrol captured a soldier of the Ottoman 59<sup>th</sup> Regiment at 'Two Tree Farm'; likewise, on October 9<sup>th</sup>, a West Indian patrol attempted a reconnaissance of the Ottoman lines, but an encounter with a mounted Ottoman patrol forced the West Indians to retreat.<sup>139</sup> Finally, on November 6<sup>th</sup>, two platoons of 1BWIR were tasked with capturing 'Two Tree Farm' while a squadron of Imperial Service Cavalry conducted a reconnaissance of Ottoman lines in the area. The cavalry squadron came under artillery and machine-gun fire and retreated to Two Tree Farm while being pursued by an Ottoman cavalry unit. A short

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<sup>136</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>137</sup> Kitchen, *The British Imperial Army in the Middle East*, 72–73.

<sup>138</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>139</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."



battle ensued in which the Ottomans shelled the farm, forcing the West Indians to withdraw without suffering casualties.<sup>140</sup>

The presence of modern, heavy artillery in Palestine was the main difference between the West Indian EEF experience in comparison to the experiences of Cameroon and East Africa. Artillery, machine-gun fire, and barbed wire were all associated with modern, industrial war by the British public, but artillery stood out amongst soldiers as a modern horror of war.<sup>141</sup> Writing on the experience of the Liverpool Territorial Army battalions on the Western Front, Helen McCartney stated that shellfire was “the primary preoccupation of the new soldier.”<sup>142</sup> Artillery maintained a prominent position in the Palestine Campaign as it did on the Western Front, particularly around Gaza, as static warfare set in during 1917.<sup>143</sup> West Indians first came under Ottoman shellfire on October 28<sup>th</sup>, losing one mule of the battalion’s transport section. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, their positions around Dumbell Hill were “heavily shelled by the [Ottomans],” resulting in two deaths and two soldiers wounded.<sup>144</sup>

Ottoman shelling of the front lines was a definitive experience for the West Indians who were experiencing the frontline for the first time. Writing home to Jamaica, Lt C.S. Cousins of 1BWIR said, “all the time we were there we were subjected to shelling from the Turks, morning and evening. One direct hit smashed two men into eternity. Sometimes it was very heavy and we had to remain under cover...and [although] very

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<sup>140</sup> WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR.”

<sup>141</sup> Fantauzzo, *The Other Wars*; McCartney, *Liverpool Territorials*.

<sup>142</sup> McCartney, *Liverpool Territorials*, 200.

<sup>143</sup> Kitchen, *The British Imperial Army in the Middle East*, 66–68.

<sup>144</sup> WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR.”

little or no damage was done the effect of the whole thing [was] demoralizing in a slight degree.”<sup>145</sup>

Despite spending the better part of autumn 1917 conducting offensive patrols in the EEF’s front lines, 1BWIR was withdrawn from the firing line on December 26<sup>th</sup>, reverting to lines of communication tasks. Within the historiography, only C.L.R. James discussed this withdrawal from the front lines and unsurprisingly labelled the reversion to lines of communications duties as a racially motivated decision by the British Army.<sup>146</sup>

Yet the departure of West Indians from the front lines is better explained by concerns over their fighting capabilities. Despite having gained experience patrolling for several months, 1BWIR was still ill-equipped and ill-prepared to conduct major offensive operations. While the battalion was re-armed with SMLE rifles during their time in the front lines, the battalion still lacked other standard British weapons systems such as the Lewis light machine gun or rifle grenades.<sup>147</sup> Despite having spent the better part of 1916 and 1917 training behind the lines, West Indian soldiers were unfamiliar with new British offensive tactics, which were adopted following the 1916 Somme Offensive.

Furthermore, due to a shortage of “winter clothing, bivouac sheets, [and] second blankets” — items which were in short supply throughout the EEF — amidst the heavy rains of December 1917, the battalion suffered greatly with ninety-two West Indians sent to hospitals with pneumonia and bronchial infections as a result.<sup>148</sup> West Indian troops in

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<sup>145</sup> “In Holy Land; Letter from Jamaican who is Doing His Little Bit There; March to Jerusalem; See Places which are Celebrated in History of the Hebrews,” *Daily Gleaner*, 30 March 1918, 22.

<sup>146</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 72.

<sup>147</sup> GSWO, SS 143, *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Actions* (London: HMSO, 1917); WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR.”

<sup>148</sup> WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR.”

Egypt required a period of rest, recovery, and, most importantly, training to be capable units in the ensuing offensive of 1918.

Training and reorganization occurred over the early months of 1918, with significant efforts made in these regards from March 1918 onwards following the German Spring Offensive on the Western Front. Although allied forces were ultimately successful in halting the German advance, the cost to the BEF was immense, including the destruction of the British Fifth Army.<sup>149</sup> As the BEF was desperately short of soldiers, the majority of British units from the EEF transferred to the BEF, and Indian Army units replaced the departed British units. Facing a sudden shortage of trained soldiers within the EEF, the two West Indian battalions — experienced soldiers who were now fully-trained — were an attractive group of reinforcements. The EEF experienced such a personnel crisis that Allenby even went so far as to request Japanese troops be sent to the EEF.<sup>150</sup> As Julian Saltman states, “the availability of unused, disciplined, and well-trained troops, even if they were Black, would have been attractive to Allenby [commander of the EEF].”<sup>151</sup>

As part of the push to prepare 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> BWIR for combat operations, the units received Lewis guns and rifle grenades in May 1918. They undertook training in gas

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<sup>149</sup> James Kitchen, “The Indianization of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force: Palestine 1918,” in *The Indian Army in Two World Wars*, ed. Roy Kaushik (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011), 165–90; Dennis Showalter, “The Indianization of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, 1917-18: An Imperial Turning Point,” in *The Indian Army in Two World Wars*, ed. Roy Kaushik (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011), 145–64.

<sup>150</sup> Edmund Allenby, *Edmund Allenby to Henry Wilson, 5 June 1918*, Letter, in Matthew Hughes, ed., *Allenby in Palestine: The Middle East Correspondence of Field Marshal Viscount Allenby June 1917-October 1919* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2004), 161.

<sup>151</sup> Julian Saltman, “Odds and Sods: Minorities in the British Empire’s Campaign for Palestine, 1916-1919,” PhD Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 46.

warfare, infantry-artillery cooperation, musketry, bombing, the use of rifle grenades, bayonet fighting, and patrol training from 5:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. daily.<sup>152</sup> Three years after the War Office approved West Indian recruitment, the BWIR finally fielded a proper British infantry battalion.<sup>153</sup>

A sudden outbreak of influenza in July 1918 delayed the West Indians' initial deployment to the front line. Both West Indian battalions finally returned to the Palestinian front in September as part of the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade, ANZAC Mounted Division, stationed in the Jordan Valley.<sup>154</sup> West Indian combat experience in the Jordan Valley, although brief, was markedly different from their earlier experiences patrolling outside Gaza. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, the full complement of 2BWIR was called on to attack Ottoman positions at Wadi Bakr by advancing over 6,000 yards of open ground. During that time, Ottoman artillery, machine gun, and rifle fire frequently targeted the West Indians.<sup>155</sup> For the remainder of the day, 2BWIR occupied the right bank of Wadi Bakr, suppressing the Ottoman defenders while mounted New Zealand troopers attempted to drive Ottoman forces from nearby Bakr Ridge. The West Indians abandoned their positions at 6:00 p.m., suffering nine killed and forty-three wounded.<sup>156</sup>

The largest battle fought by West Indians during the First World War occurred on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1918, when the majority of both West Indian battalions attacked Ottoman positions around the Jisr ed Damieh bridge that spanned the Jordan River. The

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<sup>152</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR"; Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 47.

<sup>153</sup> See GWSO, *SS 143*. Due to the nature of combat in Cameroon and East Africa, forces there did not reorganize as per the rest of the British imperial forces during the war.

<sup>154</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>155</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."; Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 49–50.

<sup>156</sup> Cundall, 50.

Ottoman Army was retreating amidst the EEF's Megiddo Offensive, and the Damieh bridge was an essential route for the retreating Fourth Ottoman Army.<sup>157</sup> On the morning of September 22<sup>nd</sup>, both West Indian battalions engaged Ottoman forces around Jisr ed Damieh. From 6:00 a.m. until 10:50 a.m., West Indians with 1BWIR harassed Ottoman forces who were retreating over the Damieh bridge with Lewis Gun fire. At 10:50, behind the cover of artillery fire from a battery of horse artillery that had been brought forward, a force of West Indian and New Zealand soldiers performed a bayonet charge on Ottoman forces defending the bridge.<sup>158</sup> Later that morning, West Indians with 2BWIR engaged a group of 300 Ottoman soldiers who were attempting to retreat at another point across the Jordan River. Amidst machine gun and artillery fire, the West Indians secured the crossing and captured thirty-seven prisoners. The capture of the bridge at Jisr ed Damieh resulted in the surrender of 786 Ottoman soldiers. The bridge's capture ultimately prevented the retreat of half of the Fourth Ottoman Army, which eventually surrendered to advancing British forces.<sup>159</sup>

The action at Damieh was the last West Indian offensive action of the war. Although both battalions hoped to participate in the attack on Amman, Australian forces had already captured the town by the time they arrived.<sup>160</sup> As was often the case with the West Indian war experience, after weeks of fighting, both units were severely understrength on account of disease-related casualties, most likely malaria. The battalions

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<sup>157</sup> A. Briscoe Moore, *The Mounted Riflemen in Sinai and Palestine: The Story of New Zealand's Crusaders* (Auckland, NZ: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1920), 150.

<sup>158</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR.," AWM4 35/1/41, "War Diary: NZMR, September 1918."

<sup>159</sup> Moore, *Mounted Riflemen*, 150.

<sup>160</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 75.

moved back to lines of communications duties before being ordered to Jerusalem on October 8<sup>th</sup> before proceeding to Ramallah, where they were at the time of the Ottoman Empire's surrender on October 30<sup>th</sup>.

The deployment of West Indian soldiers as combat infantry was the final step in their transition from civilians into soldiers. In their prewar lives, citizen-soldiers did not appreciate the level of violence and killing that existed in war, and certainly not an industrial war on the scale of 1914-18. Furthermore, as Eric Leed has argued, soldiers who had experienced combat, either veterans of earlier wars or experienced soldiers of the Great War, lacked the language with which to convey the experience of warfare to the unfamiliar.<sup>161</sup> First World War battle and the reality of war were not concepts which could be explained; rather, troops could only understand battle after they had experienced it. Thus, as West Indian soldiers attacked through artillery and machine-gun fire and directly engaged Ottoman soldiers, they finally became soldiers — in the truest sense of the word — themselves.

Like other theatres of operation where West Indians participated, sickness caused a larger number of casualties than battle. Pneumonia was particularly problematic amongst West Indian soldiers with the EEF, accounting for 5 of the 6 recorded deaths and 92 hospitalizations around Gaza.<sup>162</sup> Operations in the Jordan Valley were also costly due to disease; operating for “six weeks [in] a fever infested part of the front line,” 1BWIR

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<sup>161</sup> Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 73–80.

<sup>162</sup> WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR.”

had 301 officers and men evacuated as sick during their time in the Jordan Valley.<sup>163</sup> In both cases, exposure was made worse by a lack of proper bedding and cold weather gear. Outside Gaza, West Indian soldiers were without winter clothing. At the same time, in the Jordan Valley, Wood-Hill ordered his men to abandon all bedding and personal kit during the march on Damieh.<sup>164</sup>

Elements of modern warfare and definitive characteristics of EEF combat strategies are present in the West Indian testimonies. The use of 1BWIR's machine gun section to cover 1/5BR during the trench raid of July 20<sup>th</sup> was a tactic born out of stalemate on the Western Front. The British Army employed machine guns as direct-fire weapons before the war, but by 1915 were adopting these weapons to provide indirect fire — i.e. like heavier artillery pieces.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, 1BWIR's machine gunners executed a textbook use of their machine guns as supporting arms for that stage in the war, employing a standing barrage "to assist the infantry during an advance and to protect them during the organization of the captured position."<sup>166</sup> The machine gunners fired standing barrages in front of and on the flanks of the trench raiders, effectively preventing them from being attack by Ottoman forces, and covering their eventual withdrawal back to the British lines.

Following their reorganization in May 1918 to reflect a British Army infantry battalion, West Indian soldiers also employed newer tactics that the British Army had

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<sup>163</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>164</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

<sup>165</sup> Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-18* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 122–25.

<sup>166</sup> GSWO, *SS 192: The Employment of Machine Guns; Part I, Tactical* (London: HMSO, 1918), 14.

developed during the war. Despite involving the majority of 1BWIR and 2BWIR, the actions at the Jisr ed Damieh bridgehead were primarily platoon and company-level engagements. Lance-Corporal Leekham received the Military Medal for “taking up a forward position...and bringing a heavy fire to bear on the enemy” with a detachment of four Lewis Guns while the remainder of his company assaulted the bridgehead.<sup>167</sup> During the same attack, Private Albert Marques also received the Military Medal for his role as a bomber. When Ottoman defenders held up his platoon during the rush to the bridgehead, Marques “worked round [the Ottomans’] flank and bombed them out, killing 6...wounding two and taking two as prisoners” and allowing his platoon to continue their advance.<sup>168</sup> In both instances, West Indian soldiers operated in the same manner as the rest of the British Army outside of East Africa through their use of platoon-level tactics that would not have been possible before their reorganization of May 1918.<sup>169</sup>

West Indian soldiers in the Jordan Valley also had to contend with elements that were unique to fighting with the EEF. All of the marches were conducted at night or immediately following sunrise because of the high temperatures that led to soldier exhaustion during the daylight hours. West Indian soldiers also experienced a sample of the vast, mobile warfare that had been unique to the EEF for most of the war. BWIR marches of fifteen and twelve miles during their time attached to NZMR demonstrate the mobile nature of combat that was experienced by the mounted units of the EEF. All the while, West Indians were targeted by groups of machine guns, Ottoman artillery batteries,

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<sup>167</sup> WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR.”

<sup>168</sup> WIC, “War Diary: 1BWIR.”

<sup>169</sup> For further reading, see GSWO, *SS 143*; Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, 112–19.



and bombed and strafed by aircraft. While West Indian experience in Cameroon represented the British Empire's wars before 1914, West Indian involvement in the Jordan Valley was indicative of a new, modern style of warfare. Yet it must be noted that these experiences may have differed had West Indians been assigned to the 75<sup>th</sup> Division of infantry as was initially planned.

## **Conclusion**

By the time of the Jordan Valley operations, West Indian troops had completed their wartime transition from civilians to soldiers. Throughout 1915-18, West Indians who remained with the EEF had completed certain rites of passage that were universal to contemporary soldier identity. They had deployed overseas to a new territory, were placed on active service, and had come under fire from enemy forces. Furthermore, unlike most other West Indian volunteers during the war, except for West Indians in Cameroon and East Africa, those who fought in the Jordan Valley participated in active combat operations against an enemy force; in short, they killed.

Even during the Great War, soldiers represented a minority of the British imperial population; indeed, even in the West Indies, where citizens actively campaigned for enlistment in 1914-15, less than 10% of the eligible male population enlisted in Britain's armed forces.<sup>170</sup> Within the British imperial armies, combat troops — infantry, cavalry, and artillery — were themselves only a fraction of the larger army. Soldiers who participated in active combat operations — 'real' soldiers — thus represented a minority of the overall British imperial population. Indeed, the West Indians of the EEF were

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<sup>170</sup> Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment"; Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 72-90.

themselves a minority within their regiment where, except for those sent to East Africa, approximately 12,000 did not fire their rifles in battle.

The West Indian transition from civilian to soldier was a lengthy process, even in comparison to other citizen-soldiers from the metropole and the dominions. Yet this process was delayed by external factors rather than West Indian capabilities or British desires to keep the BWIR far from the fighting, as other historians have argued. Indeed, some West Indian volunteers who have not been discussed in this chapter underwent a similar, albeit much quicker, transformation. The 501 BWIR members who deployed to German East Africa in the summer of 1916 were engaged in combat operations by the end of the year, and volunteers with the Regular Army's 2WIR fought German forces in Cameroon even earlier. British authorities in Egypt had used the West Indians in combat as early as 1916 against the Senussi. Still, the West Indian commanding officers (thankfully) intervened to prevent the yet untrained soldiers from entering battle.

## Chapter 5: Africa and the Middle East

In October 1918, a short fictional story began appearing in British newspapers. Titled “The Darkey,” the serial described an interaction between two newly enlisted British soldiers and a Black veteran of the West India Regiment at a YMCA hut. The British soldiers, Fred and Walter, attempt to humiliate the West Indian soldier, who, in turn, recounts his time in Cameroon at the start of the war. The short tale ends with a nearby non-commissioned officer telling Fred and Walter, “the [WIR is] one of the finest regiments going...some fighters, I give you my word.”<sup>1</sup> The story refers to a neglected aspect of the West Indian First World War experience, and to a neglected narrative of the existing historiography: that West Indians, as part of WIR, were involved in combat operations long before the events discussed in the previous chapter.

Historians of West Indians in the Great War have long struggled to adequately address combat’s position within the wider war experience of West Indian soldiers. Beginning with C.L.R. James’s writings in the 1940s, battle has been regularly omitted from West Indian war narratives. The War Office’s decision to utilize most West Indian soldiers as labourers and shell carriers has been both explained and lamented as a racial slight against Black West Indians. Historians have argued that the War Office viewed Blacks as inferior to other nationalities within the British Empire’s fighting forces. C.L.R. James commented that “it was the old story of the Black man being first refused an opportunity to be afterwards condemned for incapacity.”<sup>2</sup> The two BWIR battalions that

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<sup>1</sup> “The Darkey,” *Mid Sussex Times*, 15 October 1918, 10. The story also appeared in at least twelve other British newspapers in October 1918.

<sup>2</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 71.

did not become labour units toiled as rear-line soldiers in Egypt, often further from the front lines than their labour counterparts along the Western Front as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Beyond discussions of the West Indian experience in the Jordan Valley, combat narratives are mainly absent from the historiography. Yet, between 1915 and 1918, West Indian soldiers experienced combat in several theatres beyond Palestine or the Western Front. West Indians fired their first shots of the war during the Anglo-French invasion of Cameroon, and West Indians would spend nearly two years conducting offensive patrols against German colonial guerilla forces in German East Africa between 1916 and 1918. However, when historians discuss West Indian combat experience, this discussion focuses on the actions of 1 and 2BWIR in the Jordan Valley. The more prolonged and deadlier East African Campaign is relegated to footnotes or casual mentions, while the Cameroon Campaign has been all but erased from West Indian memory of the Great War, outside of Brian Dyde's work on the West India Regiments.<sup>3</sup> Discussions of West Indians in East Africa that do exist either diminish or ignore these experiences altogether. Richard Smith reduces two years of bush warfare conducted by 2WIR to "[2WIR] was deployed chiefly on lines of communications in West and East Africa."<sup>4</sup> Anna Maguire limits the West Indian experience in East Africa to "[garrisoning] territories seized from the Germans".<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Glenford Howe maintains that West Indians in East Africa were used only for

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<sup>3</sup> See Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 253–54.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Maguire, "'I Felt like a Man': West Indian Troops under Fire during the First World War," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 605.

“non-combatant duties”.<sup>6</sup> Given the omission of three years of fighting from West Indian histories of the First World War, it is unsurprising that the definitive narrative is that West Indians were kept far from the front lines for most of the war.

Combat represents the paramount experience of the First World War. The war’s prevelant image is not that of the industrial worker at home or the labourer abroad, but rather the British ‘Tommy,’ the French ‘*Poilu*’ and the American ‘Doughboy,’ each bound with the shared experiences of life, death, and combat in the trenches of France and Belgium. As war memory has faded into history, the First World War has primarily become a European episode. First World War combat experience is judged against soldiers’ experiences on the Western Front, where war waged on an industrial scale and many of the war’s dominant attributes — gas, artillery, and trench warfare — existed. In light of the importance afforded to Western Front experiences within popular memory of the war, service outside of Europe has become secondary to fighting in France and Belgium.<sup>7</sup>

In examining the West Indian Great War experience, historians have viewed this history using a lens that is both Euro-centric and combat-oriented. In the century that has followed the Great War’s conclusion, the British Empire’s international experience of 1914 to 1918 has been reduced mainly to the service of the BEF on the Western Front. Furthermore, the Western Front itself is defined by the disastrous first day of the 1916 Somme Offensive or the muddied and water-logged trenches of the Ypres sector,

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<sup>6</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 108.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Jane McGaughey, “The Language of Sacrifice: Masculinities in Northern Ireland and the Consequences of the Great War,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, no. 3–4 (2012): 299–317.

primarily in 1917.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on Western Front experience over other theatres of war is not a new phenomenon, with Britain's war narrative excluding 'extra-European' wartime experiences from the 1920s onwards.<sup>9</sup> Where a British subject 'soldiered' during the Great War had a profound impact on his representation in interwar society. As Justin Fantauzzo and Robert Nelson stated in their study on the relationship between soldiering and British standards of martial masculinity, "simple soldiering was no longer good enough to meet the standards of British military masculinity. One had, instead, to be soldiering in the *right* place, the manliest place: the Western Front."<sup>10</sup> West Indians did not fight along the Western Front; instead, the battalions in France — over eighty percent of the West Indies contingents — served in non-combatant roles. While other former British possessions boast rich histories of combat, British West Indians cannot do the same. Thus, what combat experiences do exist have been neglected within the existing historiography.

However vast the differences were between Africa and Europe should not detract from the difficulties of combat experienced in those regions. Although neither the BWIR nor WIR participated in any battalion-level attacks in Africa, both units mounted small, daily patrols into the African bush to combat Germany's guerilla army. For the WIR in particular, combat in Cameroon and German East Africa was similar to the small-scale

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<sup>8</sup> Brian Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars Against Germany: Myth, Memory and the Distortion of Hindsight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Justin Fantauzzo, "'Buried Alive': Experience, Memory, and the Interwar Publishing of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Postwar Britain, 1915-1939," *The Canadian Historical Association* 23, no. 2 (2012): 195-96.

<sup>10</sup> Justin Fantauzzo and Robert L. Nelson, "A Most Unmanly War: British Military Masculinity in Macedonia, Mesopotamia and Palestine, 1914-18," *Gender & History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 599.

colonial wars that the regiment had participated during the previous seventy years. In comparing these enterprises to the Western Front, many historians have cast away fighting in Africa as a minor sideshow, yet, using today's language, British operations in Africa between 1916 and 1918 was a lengthy bush war akin to Britain's colonial small wars of the prewar period.

Examining the West Indian First World War combat experience is itself a challenging task due to the lack of West Indian testimony regarding combat operations. Regarding West Indian experiences in German East Africa and the Jordan Valley, descriptions of combat are primarily limited to the battalion war diaries. In the case of the British West Indies Regiment's East African (BWIR(EA)) detachment, the unit's war diary is colourfully written and is more descriptive than many surviving British imperial war diaries. In the absence of firsthand soldier testimonies, the war diaries can be supplemented by memoirs and letters written by other British imperial soldiers who were posted alongside West Indian units and experienced the war in East Africa in the same way. The best example is Angus Buchanan's memoir, *Three Years of War in East Africa*.<sup>11</sup> Buchanan, a British soldier in the 25<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers, served in the East African Expeditionary Force's (EAEF) Lindi Force alongside 2WIR for most of the war. Analysis of the West Indian experience in Cameroon is more problematic, where the war diary contains sparse references, and almost no memoirs or letters from British forces exist. This chapter will address this gap by drawing on official histories of the campaign and

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<sup>11</sup> Angus Buchanan, *Three Years of War in East Africa* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969).

British Army doctrine publications to hypothesize what combat was like for West Indians in Cameroon.

This chapter argues that West Indian soldiers experienced significantly more combat during the First World War than has been addressed to date within the historiography and that these combat experiences were quite varied in comparison to most imperial soldiers of the war. From 1914 to 1918, West Indian soldiers fought in three distinct campaigns, each with a unique combat style. In addition to combat experiences in Palestine that were discussed in the previous chapter, West Indian soldiers fought a small war in Cameroon — with experiences similar to typical nineteenth century colonial conflicts — and a modern guerrilla campaign in German East Africa. In highlighting the conditions experienced by West Indians during and outside combat operations in Cameroon and German East Africa, this chapter demonstrates that West Indian forces were not relegated to the First World War's rear lines as previous historians have argued. Instead, West Indian citizen volunteers and regular soldiers alike experienced a varied combat experience that long predated the machine gun barrage at Umbrella Hill — albeit experiences that differ significantly from popular images of First World War battle conditions.

### **Old Wars: Cameroon, 1915-16**

In the war's first month, the War Office dispatched General C.M. Dobell to West Africa to form an expeditionary force to attack the German colony of Cameroon. Between August 31<sup>st</sup> and September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1914, Dobell sailed the coast of British West Africa, taking sections of West African garrison forces aboard his ship to form an ad-hoc invasion force. Detachments of the prewar West African garrisons embarked from



Gambia and Sierra Leone, while European settlers in Nigeria were given temporary wartime commissions in the West African Frontier Force (WAFF).<sup>12</sup> Joining this hastily-assembled detachment was a detachment of signallers from 1WIR who, although not employed as infantry, were the first West Indians to deploy to a combat theatre.

Following the transfer of 1WIR back to Jamaica and the deployment of 2WIR to Sierra Leone, West Indian representation in the Cameroon Expeditionary Force increased when 246 soldiers and officers landed at Duala in the summer of 1915.<sup>13</sup> Most West Indians garrisoned the port city of Duala until November 1915, although 2WIR's machine-gun section was attached to one of the three British columns advancing on the city of Yaoundé.<sup>14</sup>

When 2WIR arrived in Cameroon in 1915, they were equipped and kitted out like any other regular army unit. The West India Regiment's position within the regular line of battle afforded the unit certain tactical luxuries that were not available to other 'native' units of Britain's imperial forces. Unlike BWIR troops on garrison duty or British Indian Army units sent to France or East Africa, 2WIR arrived in Cameroon already equipped with the contemporary SMLE rifle and Mk VII ammunition, having switched to these weapon systems sometime before the war. Likewise, years of garrison service in Sierra Leone and Gambia meant that the West Indians arrived adequately clothed for the

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<sup>12</sup> W.G. MacPherson, *History of the Great War; Medical Services General History*, Vol I: Medical Services in the United Kingdom; in British Garrisons Overseas; and During Operations Against Tsingtao, in Togoland, the Cameroons, and South-West Africa (London: HMSO, 1921), 282–83.

<sup>13</sup> TNA, WO 95/5388/1, "War Diary, 2WIR Oct-Nov 1915."

<sup>14</sup> TNA, WO 95/5388/1, "War Diary: 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion West India Regiment, West Africa (Cameroon), 1915 Oct & Nov"; F.J. Moberly, *Military Operations: Togoland and the Cameroons, 1914-1916, Official History of the Great War* (Uckfield, UK & London: Naval & Military Press & Imperial War Museum, Department of Printed Books, 2011), 328–37.

campaign, including pith helmets and tropical uniforms to combat the excessive heat.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the official history of the Cameroon Campaign, the West Indian Regiment is recognized as being the senior army formation within the expeditionary force.

Following their amphibious landing and capture of Duala in 1914, British forces attempted to push inland from the Cameroon coast to the German stronghold of Yaoundé. However, all attempts to reach the city during the spring and summer of 1915 failed on account of torrential rain and the prevalence of diseases, such as malaria, sleeping sickness, and yellow fever.<sup>16</sup> Dobell requested that additional soldiers for the expeditionary force on account of the heavy casualties caused by illness, and subsequently, two companies of 2WIR deployed to Cameroon in the fall of 1915. Accompanying 2WIR were half a company from Gambia, a Royal Engineers detachment, a single howitzer, and an Army Service Corps (ASC) armoured car from the United Kingdom. The only complete unit sent to Cameroon in 1915 was the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Light Infantry, which had mutinied in Singapore earlier that year.<sup>17</sup> The composition of the reinforcements further demonstrates the colonial ‘small wars’ nature of fighting in Cameroon. Whereas multiple battalions of various British and Indian regiments deployed to the Western Front, reinforcements for Cameroon instead consisted of sub-detachments from African garrison forces.

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<sup>15</sup> W.D. Cribbs, “Campaign Dress of the West India Regiments,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 70, no. 283 (1992): 185–87.

<sup>16</sup> MacPherson and Mitchell, *Medical Services*, 1921, 282–309.

<sup>17</sup> E Howard Gorges, *The Great War in West Africa* (Uckfield, UK: The Naval and Military Press, 2012), 226–27; Ooi Keat Gin, “Between Homeland and Ummah: Re-Visiting the 1915 Singapore Mutiny of the 5th Light Infantry Regiment of the Indian Army,” *Social Scientist* 42, no. 7/8 (2014): 85–94.

In Cameroon, West Indian soldiers were highly valued troops owing to their extensive prior experience with the type of small bush war that waged in the German colony. Between 1890 and 1902, West Indian soldiers participated in column operations in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and Gambia, followed by an uncharacteristic twelve years of peace.<sup>18</sup> The commander of the principal British force at Duala, Colonel E. Howard Gorges, wrote, “the West Indian soldier was endowed with a higher intellect than the West African, and many of the men were well educated and intelligent... They were also well-disciplined, staunch troops and good shots.”<sup>19</sup>

Cameroonian combat operations, particularly those involving West Indian soldiers, were defined by ‘column fighting.’ The ‘column’ was a military formation born out of the small, colonial wars that dominated the British military experience of the late nineteenth century. Like General Dobell’s ad hoc invasion force, British columns were, at most, 1,000-man formations made up of soldiers drawn from whatever local forces existed. Columns were self-sufficient entities, containing a mixture of infantry, artillery, engineer, and medical personnel, and could be made up of regular British soldiers, native guides and levies, or even sailors and marines from nearby naval vessels. Marching along narrow tracks through dense bush, columns could extend for miles before reaching their destination. Writing on the use of columns before 1914, Colonel Heneker of the Connaught Rangers said:

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<sup>18</sup> Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 207–43.

<sup>19</sup> Gorges, *The Great War in West Africa*, 21. Gorges was a British officer and commander of the West African Regiment in 1914 and having been stationed in Sierra Leone for many years was very familiar with West Indian soldiers.

It is generally conceded that several comparatively small columns, operating either separate lines of advance, or following one another along the same road [at 24-hour intervals] is a much more simple and effective way of moving against a bush enemy than by employing one huge cumbersome column. It must be remembered that each man in single file takes up about two yards of path at least, and that a large force with its attendant carriers will be so strung out...that it is quite possible the rear guard may not arrive in camp until some 8 or 10 hours after the advance guard. During the march of the column which finally relieved Kumassi in 1900, the force of 1,000 soldiers and 1,700 carriers was so lengthy...that the rear guard did not get into camp until 2 a.m.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas combat in Western Europe quickly became industrialized to counter the stalemate of the trenches, the Cameroon Campaign better reflected the type of war that the British Army had trained and prepared for since the nineteenth century: a campaign in which the army attempted to secure key strategic locations such as ports, cities, or forts. In a conflict that was defined by tactical change and innovation, the continuation of traditional prewar fighting methods was reflective of geographic rather than strategic considerations. The prominence of thick vegetation throughout the colony made a war of maneuver impossible, and attacking columns were forced to march on well-trodden, known paths. Fighting during the summer monsoon season was all but impossible.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, the march on Yaoundé dragged on from September 1915 to January 1916 on account of the terrain, weather, and distance (approximately 220 kilometres, which was unimaginable in Western Front operations) between Duala and Yaoundé.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> W.G.C. Heneker, *Bush Warfare 1906* (Uckfield, UK: Naval and Military Press, 2018), 60.

<sup>21</sup> In 1914, Cameroon's average annual rainfall was 155 inches at Duala on the coast, and above 412 inches in the north. See Moberly, *Togoland and Cameroon*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Gorges, *The Great War in West Africa*, 234–56; Moberly, *Togoland and Cameroon*, 329–31.

The high Cameroonian temperatures further burdened West Indian soldiers in the colony. Columns could only march during daylight hours to reduce the risk of a German ambush, during which time temperatures averaged 28° Celsius. Colonel Heneker of the Connaught Rangers provides some insight into conditions for WIR soldiers during their advance to Yaoundé in his description of column operations in neighbouring Nigeria:

[The] advantage of being able to escape the heat of the day is not possible in [West Africa, where] the sun is above the horizon for about twelve hours [per day]. It is impossible to begin a day's march before twenty minutes to six in the morning, and in the evening it is pitch dark again at about 6.20. While the sun is above the horizon — with the exception, perhaps, of an hour and a half in the morning, and one hour in the evening — its full power is felt...not more than 2 [and a half] miles an hour...should be counted upon.<sup>23</sup>

Soldiering with the British column was a miserable experience for West Indian soldiers. In addition to the heat and humidity, the renewed advance on Yaoundé occurred in the second of Cameroon's two wet seasons. After marching twenty-four kilometres on the day they left Duala, West Indian soldiers operated in almost constant rain for the following week, with the only reprieve occurring on October 6<sup>th</sup> when there was only one hour of rain showers.<sup>24</sup> Outside of this dry period, West Indians marched, setup and tore down encampments, and even fought in "very heavy rains."<sup>25</sup> The German rearguard further complicated the advance. German colonial troops hindered the progress of the

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<sup>23</sup> Heneker, *Bush Warfare 1906*, 127–28.

<sup>24</sup> TNA, WO 95/5386/4, "War Diary: West Africa, Cameroons; Lt. Col Hayward's Column, Headquarters," October 1915 – February 1916.

<sup>25</sup> TNA, WO 95/5386/4.

British columns by blocking tracks with felled vegetation and by launching hit-and-run raids against the advancing columns daily<sup>26</sup>

The establishment of nightly encampments would have been particularly tricky for British soldiers during the heavy rains. Soldiers carried personal items such as sleeping rolls on their backs, while larger items, such as tents, shovels, and ammunition, were carried by the 1,100 carriers who were attached to the column.<sup>27</sup> These items, transported in the open, would have been drenched following a day's march. Furthermore, once the column halted at a suitable location to establish camp, soldiers dug defensive trenches around the camp's perimeter, constructed observation posts from vegetation, and erected a massive complex of tents and defensive weaponry.

Life inside the camp was mostly mundane for the West Indian soldiers as no night attacks occurred. The soldiers' diets varied with officers and white non-commissioned officers receiving standard British rations while the Black West Indian rank-and-file were expected to supplement their diets through foraging. White troops received meals of bully beef, tea, biscuits and other delicacies, while West Indians received a daily intake of biscuit, rice, meat, and, occasionally, chocolate.<sup>28</sup> During the campaign, native soldiers — the British Army's title for non-white, colonial soldiers who operated in their own territory — were encouraged to supplement their diets by living off the land. In addition to the aforementioned fresh meat, yams were a common source of food during West

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<sup>26</sup> George N Njung, "Soldiers of Their Own: Honor, Violence, Resistance and Conscription in Colonial Cameroon during the First World War," PhD Dissertation (University of Michigan, 2016), 258–60.

<sup>27</sup> TNA, WO 95/5386/4.

<sup>28</sup> Gorges, *The Great War in West Africa*, 231; MacPherson and Mitchell, *Medical Services*, 1921, 304.

African campaigns.<sup>29</sup> Despite being part of Britain's Regular Army, the WIR was classified as a native regiment despite the group containing no African soldiers, likely due to an assumption that all Black soldiers were effective in the African bush, as well as the WIR's history of West African campaigning.

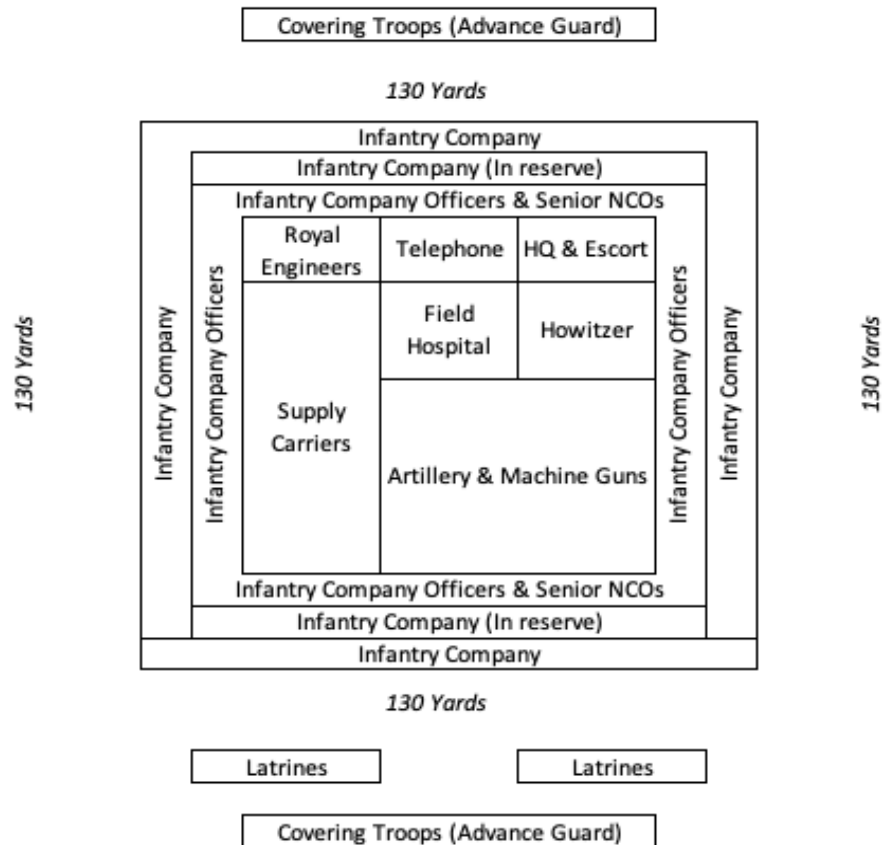


Figure Chapter 5.1 - Layout of a British Camp in Cameroon<sup>30</sup>

Matters of logistical practicality influenced Britain's policy of encouraging foraging amongst its native soldiers during African campaigns. High temperatures in

<sup>29</sup> Heneker, *Bush Warfare 1906*, 99–100.

<sup>30</sup> Based on image in Major C.R. Savile, "Standing Orders for the Eastern British Force," 20 November 1915, in Moberly, *Togoland and Cameroon*, 447. Once the remaining West Indian riflemen at Duala joined the column in November 1915, West Indians could be found along the flanks of the encampment.

Cameroon meant that carrying weight had to be kept to a minimum for soldiers and carriers. Local foods, although suitable for dietary considerations, were deemed too heavy for continuous transport. Bananas, in particular, were forbidden, as only half of a banana's weight was edible.<sup>31</sup> West Indian and African soldiers were thus encouraged to supplement their meagre diet by foraging as a means of employing an 'economy of weight' for the mobile forces. While a good concept, foraging was not always practical, and ultimately many native soldiers and carriers suffered from malnutrition as a result.

Between the rain, temperature, and physical exhaustion of campaigning in Cameroon was the constant presence of combat. The first known date of West Indians engaged in battle was October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1915, when both machine guns covered Haywood Column's crossing of the Mbila River.<sup>32</sup> During an engagement with fifty German askari at the village of Kwang-le-Bong on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1915, the commander of the West Indian machine gun section, Lieutenant Ramsden, was wounded.<sup>33</sup> The most substantial West Indian action of the campaign occurred on December 24<sup>th</sup> when a company of West Indian soldiers assaulted the village of Nkoa.<sup>34</sup> Besides these three actions, there are no other direct references to West Indian soldiers taking part in combat operations for the duration of the march to Yaoundé. Yet this does not necessarily mean that West Indians were not involved in other actions. The war diaries only reference operations against strategic positions such as the Mbila River or Kwang-le-Bong village, while only passing

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<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Hodges, *The Carrier Corps: Military Labour in the East African Campaign, 1914-1918, Contributions in Colonial Studies, No. 18* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 120–21.

<sup>32</sup> TNA, WO 95/5386/4.

<sup>33</sup> TNA, WO 95/5388/1, "War Diary, 2WIR, Cameroon: 1915-16"; Moberly, *Togoland and Cameroon*, 336.

<sup>34</sup> Moberly, 389. The Gold Coast is present day Ghana.



references to German patrols or ambushes appear. Given the prevalence of German ambushes during the entire march to Yaoundé, it is likely that West Indians took part in daily combat operations, particularly after the arrival of the remaining West Indian riflemen from Duala in November 1915.

When in combat, West Indian soldiers were under the constant supervision and leadership of their officers and non-commissioned officers. Even in 1915, officers still controlled their soldiers using ‘line and volley’ tactics and verbal commands as had been done since the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>35</sup> West Indian soldiers fired in single-shot volleys before hand-loading an individual round and waiting for a subsequent order to fire.<sup>36</sup> The West India Regiment’s standard weapon, the SMLE, was designed to facilitate an officer’s strict control over his soldiers’ firepower. However, having a ten-round magazine and the ability to fire twenty to twenty-five aimed shots per minute, the rifle was designed with a cut-off that separated the magazine from the chamber.<sup>37</sup> British soldiers practiced an economy of fire using only single-round reloads, with the rapid-fire provided by the ten-round magazine used only when necessary.<sup>38</sup>

WIR officers would have enforced strict control over their soldiers’ rifle fire during the West Indian assault on Nkoa. Although 2WIR’s war diary makes no mention of this action, tight control over soldiers in battle appears in the war diaries of other units that marched on Yaoundé. The Gold Coast Regiment, operating within the same column

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<sup>35</sup> General Staff, War Office, *Field Service Regulations*, Part I (London: HMSO, 1909; reprinted (with amendments), 1912). 19.

<sup>36</sup> GSWO, *Musketry Regulations*, Part I (London: HMSO, 1909; reprinted (with amendments), 1912), 112.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Ford, “Marksmanship, Officer-Man Relations, and the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield,” *War in History* 23, no. 3 (2016): 278–95.

<sup>38</sup> GSWO, *Field Service Regulations*, 19.

on December 24<sup>th</sup>, describes the capture of nearby Njame as being facilitated by a combination of maneuver through the open plains and volley fire from British forces.<sup>39</sup> As German fire intensified, the Gold Coast soldiers brought forward an accompanying machine gun, which provided suppressing fire. Njame represented a textbook battle according to prewar British assault doctrine, which dictated that “a firing line would be established...around 200 yards from the enemy, preferably helped by artillery firing over open sights.”<sup>40</sup> If West Indian forces utilized these regulations — and there is no reason to believe that they did not — the capture of Nkoa on December 24<sup>th</sup> would have been identical to the Gold Coast soldiers’ assault on Njame.

Despite the presence of soldiers who had been members of the Regular Army since before the war, fighting in Cameroon was markedly different than that in the war’s major theatres of operation. Although the entire British Army trained to fight identically, the nature of combat on the Western Front meant that British troops quickly abandoned single-shot volleys and strict fire control. Soon after the BEF’s landing in France, fire control quickly disappeared as “winning fire superiority meant blazing away madly whenever a German came into sight.”<sup>41</sup> The British imperial soldiers’ resulting ability to fire as they saw fit represented a shift in traditional officer-man relations as men assumed a certain degree of agency and individuality in battle. This abandonment was so much that wartime SMLE variants had no magazine cut-off device, which the War Office

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<sup>39</sup> TNA, WO 95/5388/3/2, “War Diary: Gold Coast Battalion, August 1914-April 1916.”

<sup>40</sup> Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, 49.

<sup>41</sup> Griffith, 50.

considered unnecessary given the nature of First World War combat.<sup>42</sup> As Matthew Ford has argued regarding the British Army's adoption of the SMLE, this change in officer-man relations meant that "officers would have to rely on [their soldiers] to carry out their allotted tasks in accordance with the demands of commanders" rather than soldiers relying on their officers for command and control to accomplish the same goals.<sup>43</sup> Thus, while their Indian and Dominion counterparts on the Western Front experienced a revolution in soldier individuality, West Indian and West African soldiers in Cameroon still fought using traditional methods under the constant control of their white officers. By 1918, most British soldiers fought as individuals. Their commanders and upper-echelon planners trusted them to practice good fire discipline, fire and maneuver, and a certain degree of initiative independent of their junior officers and non-commissioned officers. Yet, for WIR soldiers in Cameroon (and, later, German East Africa), battlefield tactics still relied heavily on the one-way relationship of an officer controlling those under his command.

Ultimately, the Cameroon Campaign was not a costly one for the West India Regiment. Of the half-battalion sent to Cameroon, only eight fatalities occurred. Two drowned while bathing in Duala on October 24<sup>th</sup>, while another died of a brain hemorrhage following the colony's surrender.<sup>44</sup> An additional four soldiers died following the end of hostilities in Cameroon. While none of the service files for these

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<sup>42</sup> AORG, "REME Technical Training School BAOR: Armourer's Wing Precis," (Rheindahlen, BRD: RAOC Printing & Stationary Service British Army of the Rhine, 1950), 247.

<sup>43</sup> Ford, "Marksmanship, Officer-Man Relations, and the SMLE," 289.

<sup>44</sup> TNA, WO 363, "First World War Service File: 6496 Archibald Bailey, WIR"; CWGC, "Find War Dead: WIR, First World War, Sierra Leone," accessed 04 July 2020, <https://www.cwgc.org/find/find-war-dead/results?regiment=West%2BIndia%2BRegiment&country=Sierra%2BLeone&war=1>.

soldiers currently exist, their cause of death was likely related to tropical disease given the prevalence of this topic within the war diaries of Nigerian, Gambian, Gold Coast, and Sierra Leonian units involved in the second march on Yaoundé. Only one soldier, Private Harold Phillips, died while there was still fighting in Cameroon on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1916. However, at the time of his death, 2WIR was guarding a road behind the column, so combat was an unlikely cause of Phillips' death.

For West Indian soldiers of 2WIR, fighting in Cameroon differed very little from the colonial wars that the regiment had fought during its history of garrisoning Western Africa. The Cameroon Campaign, like the British Empire's invasions of Togoland, German New Guinea, and Tsingtao, is one of the forgotten fronts of the First World War. Given the prevalence of Western Front experiences in Great War memory and historiography, it is not surprising that historians of the British West Indies and the First World War have neglected to incorporate West Indian combat experience in Cameroon into the historical discussion. Nevertheless, the presence of West Indian soldiers in battle as early as 1915 demonstrates that the War Office was keen to use West Indians in combat from an early stage of the war, albeit on certain terms that remained tied to race. 2<sup>nd</sup> West India Regiment, it seems, entered the First World War conducting operations which it had trained for and experienced for the better part of the previous century.

### **Guerilla War: German East Africa, 1916-18**

If there indeed was a forgotten front of the First World War, it was the East African Campaign of 1914 to 1918. What began as an assault by the inadequate Indian Expeditionary Force B transformed into a major operation that involved soldiers from all corners of the British Empire and which was defined by a brutally effective guerilla war.

Like Cameroon, British military planners hoped to cripple Germany's international naval campaign by capturing the German colony, and military planners anticipated a small-scale colonial war akin to the experiences in Cameroon and Togoland. Instead, a minuscule force of 15,000 German colonial soldiers successfully evaded the British imperial armies for four years, finally emerging from the bush nine days after the 1918 armistice.<sup>45</sup>

West Indian soldiers began arriving in East Africa in July 1916, only three months after the end of the Cameroon Campaign.<sup>46</sup> The remnants of 2WIR, which could only muster 500 soldiers, were deployed to East Africa alongside most of the former Cameroon Expeditionary Force. At the time of its deployment, 2WIR was well below the established strength of an infantry battalion. However, no replacements could be sent from Jamaica on account of a suspension of WIR recruiting and the need to maintain a garrison force in the West Indies. The War Office's solution was to deploy a detachment of volunteer soldiers from the three BWIR battalions in Egypt who would merge with 2WIR to form a composite West Indian infantry battalion for East African service.<sup>47</sup> These citizen-soldier wartime volunteers of the BWIR - 300 from 1BWIR and 100 each

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<sup>45</sup> See Byron Farwell, *The Great War in Africa, 1914-1918* (New York: Norton, 1986); Anne Samson, *World War I in Africa: The Forgotten Conflict among the European Powers, International Library of Twentieth Century History* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013); Kenneth P Adgie, *Askaris, Asymmetry, and Small Wars: Operational Art and the German East African Campaign, 1914-1918* (Auckland, NZ: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2013); Hoyt, *Guerilla*; Anne Samson, *Britain, South Africa and the East African Campaign, 1914-1918: The Union Comes of Age, International Library of Colonial History* (London & New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006); Gorges, *The Great War in West Africa*; Ross Anderson, *The Forgotten Front: The East African Campaign, 1914-1918* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 78–79. The former colony of German East Africa was comprised of the present-day countries of Burundi and Rwanda, parts of Kenya and Mozambique, and (primarily) the mainland portion of present-day Tanzania.

<sup>47</sup> Cundall, 73.

from 2BWIR and 3BWIR — were released from garrison duty in Egypt and sent to East Africa to join 2WIR.<sup>48</sup>

The British imperial experience in East Africa was markedly different from any other First World War operational theatre. Unlike other theatres such as Western Europe, Egypt, or Macedonia, the East Africa Campaign was, primarily, not a British operation. From the start of operations with the failed landing at Tanga of November 1914 to the campaign's end on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918, very few British soldiers were present in the colony. Two years of low-intensity conventional warfare followed the Tanga landing as British and imperial forces pushed into East Africa from the sea, Kenya, and Rhodesia before the conflict shifted to a rural, guerilla war. From a British military perspective, the East African campaign consists of three different phases: the landing at Tanga and control resting with the British Indian Army, the handover to South African forces and, from late 1917 onwards, the Africanization of imperial armies in East Africa which continued to the end of the war.

Four definitive characteristics marked West Indian experience in German East Africa: low-intensity conflict, 'war' against geography and ecology, problems with logistics and the supply of adequate reinforcements, and a visceral, mutual hatred between soldiers of BWIR(EA) and 2WIR. Given the lack of attention that the campaign has received from both popular representations and British histories of the Great War, it is unsurprising that historians of the West Indian war experience have primarily omitted the experiences of East Africa from the broader historical discussion of West Indians at war.

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<sup>48</sup> Cundall, 73.

As well, from a West Indian perspective, East Africa was one of the smaller operations in terms of personnel, with no more than 1,000 West Indians present at any given time. Nevertheless, experiences in East Africa represent an important, albeit forgotten, aspect of the West Indian war narrative. There, West Indians experienced a very different style of combat — guerilla warfare — and would first realize their position as second-class soldiers within the British imperial armies. As well, East Africa would be the lengthiest West Indian combat campaign during the First World War, with West Indian soldiers remaining in the colony from 1916 to 1918.

Within the sparse literature dedicated to the East African Campaign, the German guerilla campaign is the focal point regarding experience and memory. Edwin Hoyt described the German East African campaign as “the most successful campaign in the history of modern warfare.”<sup>49</sup> Byron Farwell described the German commander, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, as “a brilliant soldier who evoked universal admiration”.<sup>50</sup> Finally, Hew Strachan commented on how the German commander became “venerated as a master of guerilla war.”<sup>51</sup> Despite consisting mainly of limited, small-scale engagements, the asymmetrical war in German East Africa contained some of the most challenging combat conditions that British imperial soldiers experienced during the war.

Feuds between the professional soldiers and officers of 2WIR and the volunteer citizen-soldiers and officers of BWIR(EA) quickly quashed hopes for a large West Indian combat unit in East Africa. The animosity between both groups of West Indians was a

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<sup>49</sup> Hoyt, *Guerilla*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Farwell, *The Great War in Africa*, 355.

<sup>51</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford & Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2004), 93.

matter of class and prewar social standing. A 1913 article in Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* offers some insight into public perceptions regarding the WIR:

The average [WIR] recruit of to-day [sic] can in nowhere [sic] compare with his predecessor of 5 years ago. He is inferior both mentally and physically, and in a large majority of cases he is practically illiterate...The West India Regiment has justified its existence for over 118 years, but it is well-nigh impossible to expect high efficiency to be maintained with the material now at our disposal — it is difficult to turn out good men from poor material.<sup>52</sup>

Captain Roy Stanley Martinez, a white Jamaican with the BWIR(EA), explained the animosity between both units as a matter of social standing:

The WIR is classified as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Colonial Force, while the BWIR was originally classed as an active service unit and later on as an overseas contingent...The men of the [BWIR] are in the main volunteers from a somewhat higher social class than those of the [WIR]. The Colonial authorities...were aware of this, and to stimulate recruiting an entirely new regiment was raised.<sup>53</sup>

Soldiers with 2WIR had their own opinions about the BWIR(EA) troops who had yet to see combat. The regular soldiers of 2WIR referred to the BWIR's citizen-soldiers as "recruits, civilians, and 'sqaushies'."<sup>54</sup> Squashies most likely refers to quashie, itself defined as both "a generic name for a [Black] person, especially one considered as credulous or insignificant" and "a name of ridicule for the Ashantis" roughly meaning

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<sup>52</sup> "The Future Prospects of the West India Regiment; Jamaica is now Exhausted as Recruiting Ground; Men Below Standard; War Office Might have to go Back to Other Colonies," *Daily Gleaner*, 8 September 1913, 6.

<sup>53</sup> A.A. Cipriani, *Twenty-Five Years After: The British West Indies Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918* (Port of Spain: Trinidad Publishing Co., 1940), 55; 57, quoted in Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 89.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 108.



coward.<sup>55</sup> As a result of the intense animosity between both units, the initial plans to amalgamate 2WIR and BWIR(EA) were — initially - quickly put to rest. On August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1916, just two days after landing at Mombasa, the commander of BWIR(EA) received assurance from the Inspector General of Communications that the proposed amalgamation would not happen and that both West Indian battalions would continue to exist as separate entities.<sup>56</sup> Instead, only a handful of officers and non-commissioned officers from 2WIR would be attached to BWIR(EA), as no soldiers in that unit had yet experienced combat. These appointees included the commanding officer of BWIR(EA), Major H.C.V. Porter of 2WIR.

Despite initial assurances that both units would operate separately of each other, both the animosity and risk of amalgamation continued to exist. 2WIR, now permanently understrength due to the aborted merger, addressed its manpower issue by conscripting a contingent of BWIR(EA) reinforcements who arrived from Egypt.<sup>57</sup> On December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1916, a force of fourteen BWIR recruits arrived at Lindi, where 2WIR was stationed, and, despite Porter's protests, the men were permanently attached to 2WIR.

While no further instances of reinforcement poaching occurred, a steady attrition rate from combat and sickness meant that both battalions continued to drop below

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<sup>55</sup> "Definition of Quashie," in *Lexico.Com* (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://www.lexico.com/definition/quashie>; Jonathan Green, "Definition of Quashie," in *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (London: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 2011), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199829941.001.0001/acref-9780199829941-e-37451?rskey=GfV49m&result=1>.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6, "War Diary: East Africa, Army Troops; British West Indies Regiment," 01 July – 30 November 1916.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7, "War Diary: Lines of Communications; British West Indies Regiment," December 1916 – February 1918.

effective strength. By early 1918, both West Indian units experienced a manpower crisis, and the order was finally given to amalgamate the units. In the week preceding the proposed merger date of April 1<sup>st</sup>, BWIR(EA) soldiers stationed in Dar-es-Salaam were described by the base commandant as being restless regarding the matter.<sup>58</sup> On March 30<sup>th</sup>, just a day before the proposed merger, soldiers of BWIR(EA) paraded in front of the acting commanding officer and “requested to be paraded before the GOC [South African General Jacob van Deventer]” to voice their grievances over the merger.<sup>59</sup> Van Deventer put the matter to rest once and for all, stating:

Amalgamation of [the] British West Indies Regiment with [the] 2<sup>nd</sup> West India Regiment is found to be so repugnant to [the] former unit that I have deferred. If it is carried out serious trouble will result involving riot and probable murder. Therefore [I] propose to leave units as they are. Some disorder has already been threatened...the units [are] well behaved in other respects.<sup>60</sup>

While keeping both units separate from each other prevented a crisis of morale or mutiny, the maintenance of two West Indian battalions created additional problems for the EAEF. Instead of having a mixture of veteran soldiers and recruits in a single battalion; instead, there were two understrength units, one of which was comprised almost entirely of soldiers who had no combat experience. Furthermore, BWIR soldiers who arrived with the initial deployment were ill-equipped for modern combat operations, particularly in a tropical environment. West Indians with BWIR(EA) retained the old CLE rifle that they carried in Seaford and Egypt, including the Mk. VI ammunition that

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<sup>58</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6.

<sup>59</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6.

<sup>60</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, “Telegram: GOC East Africa to War Office,” 9 April 1918.

had been rendered obsolete in 1909.<sup>61</sup> The only weapon system BWIR(EA) received upon their arrival in East Africa was a section of machine guns that still fired Black powder ammunition.<sup>62</sup> These weapons used the .455/570 British round that was standard from the 1870s to 1890s, and the gun was made obsolete with the advent of smokeless ammunition in the 1880s. By 1915, such weapons were relegated to garrison service in colonial outposts.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, a message from Major Porter on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1916, stating that “boots and helmets [were] urgently [required],” it is evident that BWIR(EA) arrived without proper equipment or clothing for tropical operations.<sup>64</sup>



*Figure Chapter 5.2 - BWIR soldiers, possibly BWIR(EA)*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6.

<sup>62</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6.

<sup>63</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6.

<sup>64</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6. The helmet is assumed to be a tropical pith helmet rather than the typical steel ‘brodie’ helmet of the First World War.

<sup>65</sup> IWM, Q52462, “Print.” I hypothesize that these are members of BWIR(EA) based on their odd assortment of tropical and standard kit, and their leather webbing.

Eventually, BWIR(EA) rectified its equipment issue, receiving SMLE rifles, modern .303 machine guns, and new webbing in February 1917.<sup>66</sup> However, problems were common amongst reinforcement drafts for the remainder of the campaign. West Indians were deployed to BWIR(EA) as replacements without any preparation, training, or equipment with which to fight a guerilla war. A group of 95 replacement soldiers and 1 officer arrived on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917. They came “partially trained in drill & bayonet fighting only [and] came with long rifles [CLEs], old leather equipment, & no mosquito nets.”<sup>67</sup> A similar situation occurred on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1917, when a group of West Indian reinforcements, who were “conscripted in England” for East African service, arrived.<sup>68</sup> These soldiers arrived in Dar-es-Salaam with “poor and inadequate” training, with Porter commenting that they were an undisciplined group with improper equipment for combat operations.<sup>69</sup> These replacements likely came from 6BWIR, a labour battalion that had left the West Indies in April. Major Porter commented that the May 4<sup>th</sup> draft was a “most unsuitable draft that could have been chosen for this theatre of war.”<sup>70</sup> BWIR(EA)’s reinforcement situation was so dire that it led Major Porter to make the following demand of subsequent drafts:

1. [Reinforcements] should be given adequate inspection.
2. Men chosen [must be of] suitable character for African service.
3. Men to be equipped and clothed for conditions in Africa.

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<sup>66</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>67</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>68</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>69</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>70</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

4. [Men] should have completed a good physical training course during at least 2 months preliminary training.

Informing also of decision that unless above conditions [are] followed future drafts will not be accepted.<sup>71</sup>

2WIR's experience in Cameroon and smaller colonial wars before 1914 made it a valuable unit. 2WIR immediately joined a mobile column tasked with finding the German forces when they arrived in East Africa.<sup>72</sup> Fifty soldiers of the Zanzibar Rifles were attached to the West Indians to alleviate some of the manpower shortages caused by the aborted merger with BWIR(EA) permanently.<sup>73</sup> Conversely, BWIR(EA) joined the army's lines of communications troops owing to the inexperience of the West Indian soldiers and their unfamiliarity with African bush warfare. However, the nature of combat during the latter half of the East African campaign meant that BWIR(EA) soldiers were involved in many combat operations, albeit all low-intensity. As German colonial forces adopted guerilla tactics, their strategy shifted from engaging British imperial combat forces to striking at British supply lines. Ultimately, the guerilla campaign meant that West Indian soldiers found themselves in the firing line despite British plans to keep them out of it.

West Indian soldiers in East Africa experienced similar combat experiences during their time in Cameroon. This experience consisted mainly of small unit patrols. These patrols were launched for a variety of operational reasons, ranging from general

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<sup>71</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>72</sup> Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 255–56.

<sup>73</sup> TNA, WO 95/5334/4, "War Diary: Columns, Coast Column; Chief Royal Engineers," 01 August – 30 September 1916; Dyde, 255.

reconnaissance, in response to reports of the German presence in the area, to deny resources to the guerilla army, or operations that would be termed today as ‘search and destroy’ missions. Accordingly, the size and composition of West Indian patrols varied based on specific mission requirements. Extracts from the unit war diaries show patrols of anywhere from 5 to 25 soldiers, with equipment ranging from individual weapon systems to the support of heavy machine guns and light mortars.

As BWIR(EA) was guarding posts along the Ngeta-Ngerengere railway and 2WIR formed the advance base troops at the port of Lindi, patrols undertaken by both units tended to be defensive. Armed patrols were launched in response to reports of German forces in the area (likely foraging for food or conducting their reconnaissance patrols), to sounds of gunfire or explosions, or for general surveillance of the region. An early example that was typical of the West Indian experience occurred on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1916, within BWIR(EA)’s sector. The unit’s war diary states, “at 2100 a loud explosion was heard in [a southeasterly] direction. An officer’s patrol was dispatched [east] along the railway — nil results. May have been [a] bomb or mine in [the Dar-es-Salaam]-Kissami road.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917, a series of small patrols were launched from West Indian railway outposts in response to the presence of German patrols in the area.<sup>75</sup>

Both patrols detailed above were typical of the West Indian experience in East Africa in that both instances involved small groups of less than twelve soldiers, and neither patrol resulted in contact with the German forces. When West Indians made

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<sup>74</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>75</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

contact with German troops, combat tended to be short. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917, a BWIR(EA) patrol of twenty-three West Indians attacked a communications post. During the attack, West Indians wounded one white German officer and took one askari prisoner, then destroyed the communications equipment before resuming their patrol.<sup>76</sup> The swift nature of East African combat was demonstrated again on October 6<sup>th</sup>, when they encountered a German reconnaissance patrol. The West Indians “opened fire[,] which was returned by [the Germans] and after a short skirmish [the] enemy retired into the bush.”<sup>77</sup>

Despite the prevalence of minor engagements in East Africa, West Indians did participate in a limited number of significant operations within the theatre, particularly early in their campaign. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1916, the entirety of 2WIR experienced a rare instance of conventional warfare in East Africa when German sailors from the abandoned cruiser *Königsburg* attacked their positions at Kilwa with rifle, machine gun, and artillery fire.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, West Indians with BWIR(EA) launched their greatest operation of the war in October 1916. Two large detachments of West Indian soldiers — 73 and 63 soldiers respectively in each group - patrolled the railway line from Morogoro to the Ruwu River, with a third group of fifty-eight soldiers joining the patrol on October 12<sup>th</sup>.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>77</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>78</sup> TNA, WO 95/5341/9, “War Diary: 1 East African Division, 3 East African Brigade; 2 Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regiment,” 01 October – 30 November 1916; Hoyt, *Guerilla*, 145–46; Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 255–56. *Königsburg* was one of the German warships that was abroad at the start of the war. After a short raiding career that lasted only a few weeks, the cruised retreated into the Rifi Delta where it was subsequently trapped by British naval forces. Unable to flee on account of a lack of coal, the crew disembarked the ship and joined the German guerilla army, mounting the ship’s guns atop makeshift limbers that gave the German forces an artillery capability.

<sup>79</sup> TNA, WO 95/5318/6, “War Diary: BWIR(EA).”

Likewise, on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917, a patrol of WIR and King's African Rifles (KAR) soldiers engaged a German force of fifty Askaris, three German officers, and a machine gun, capturing three Askaris and thirty-five German porters in the process.<sup>80</sup>

The largest operation that West Indians participated in occurred in October 1917 in the area around Lindi. Owing to the heavy presence of German soldiers in the region, two columns of primarily African soldiers set out from Lindi and Kilwa in an attempt to encircle and destroy the German guerilla army.<sup>81</sup> 2WIR's Stokes mortar section of twelve West Indians and one British officer joined the column attached to the Bharatpur Infantry battalion.<sup>82</sup> Stokes mortars were ideal weapons for the East African Campaign, being man-portable light artillery pieces broken down into three separate loads weighing seventy-seven pounds when assembled.<sup>83</sup> The weapon's lightweight, small crew requirements, and its ability to bombard German defensive positions owing to its high launch angle made the Stokes mortar a very effective weapon in the latter stages of the campaign.<sup>84</sup> Operating as mobile artillery to the Lindi Column, the West Indian mortar section was the most active West Indian detachment in East Africa.

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<sup>80</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/8.

<sup>81</sup> TNA, WO 95/5323/1, "War Diary: East Africa, Lindi Force HQ," September 1917 – January 1918; Hugh Clifford, *The Gold Coast Regiment in the East African Campaign*, (Uckfield, UK & London: Naval & Military Press & Imperial War Museum, Department of Printed Books, 2014; originally published in 1920, details unknown), 148.

<sup>82</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/8.

<sup>83</sup> War Department, *Light Trench Mortar Drill Regulations* (Washington: War Department, 1918," 16. The Stokes mortar was a British design that was adopted by the American Expeditionary Force in 1917, hence the use of an American service manual as a source here.

<sup>84</sup> Hoyt, *Guerilla*, 155.



As was the case for most of the East African Campaign, the British forces were ill-prepared to fight the German guerilla army. The history of the Gold Coast Regiment in East Africa describes the march of the Lindi Column as follows:

For [the British] were combined all the risks of the attack upon prepared and unreconnoitred positions with all the moral and actual disadvantages which ordinarily attach to the defence. They were, indeed, only properly to be described as attacking forces because it was they that were advancing, the enemy which was retreating before them; but in the daily conflicts with the enemy, in which they were so constantly entangled, the actual attack was usually delivered by the latter. It was he, not the British, who selected the spot where fighting should take place; to him, not [the British], were secured, in practical perpetuity, the advantages of surprise and of being the first to open fire...<sup>85</sup>

Although tasked with providing light artillery support, the short range of the Stokes mortars meant that the West Indian soldiers were operating at the column's front with other infantry units. On October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1917, two days after leaving Lindi, the West Indians came under fire when German Askari ambushed the Bharatpurs as they crossed the Lukeledi River.<sup>86</sup> On October 26<sup>th</sup>, the column's camp was attacked, and on October 27<sup>th</sup>, the West Indians went out to kill a German sniper who had been harassing the encampment. The West Indians were continuously engaged in countering German ambushes and attacks until November 9<sup>th</sup>.

Despite the constant occurrence of armed patrols and the anticipation of combat, disease was the most significant cause of casualties amongst West Indian soldiers. By the end of 1916, seventy-five percent (approximately 388 soldiers) of BWIR(EA) had been

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<sup>85</sup> Clifford, *Gold Coast Regiment*, 148–49.

<sup>86</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/8.

admitted to hospital at least once due to disease.<sup>87</sup> The number of West Indians in hospital was so high that, by the end of February 1917, the battalion war diary began listing 'Hospital' as a location alongside the numerous outposts where soldiers were assigned. The prevalence of disease worsened as the West Indians experienced their first monsoon season. Ninety-four BWIR(EA) soldiers, representing sixteen percent of the battalion's strength, were in hospital as of February 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>88</sup> By March 31<sup>st</sup>, this number grew to 128 (21%), with an additional 26 and 13 soldiers invalided or dead as a result of disease, respectively.<sup>89</sup> BWIR(EA) hospitalizations peaked in May 1917 when 167 members were hospitalized, with a further 28 invalided and 28 dead, together representing thirty-four percent of BWIR(EA).

The situation was not much better for West Indians with 2WIR in Lindi. Despite being billeted around a prewar settlement, the town was still unsanitary at the time of the British occupation. Angus Buchanan, stationed at Lindi with the 25<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers at the same time as the West Indians, described the town as:

Low-lying and unhealthy, as is the Lukuledi Valley, south of the town, where the broad swamp estuary of the Lukuledi River flows into the bay. Moreover, the blackish-flavoured well water of the town was very bad, and added to the tremendous difficulty that was experienced in maintaining the health of white troops in the area.<sup>90</sup>

2WIR's war diary does not provide the same detail regarding West Indian hospitalizations as the BWIR(EA) war diary, although deaths from sickness appear. The

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<sup>87</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>88</sup> TNA WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>89</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>90</sup> Buchanan, *Three Years of War*, 175–76.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission shows twenty-six members of the West India Regiment commemorated in Tanzania, and a cross-reference with the battalion war diary shows that all but one died from sickness.<sup>91</sup>

Regarding sickness, the West Indian experience was indicative of the broader British imperial experience in East Africa. From January to May 1917 that BWIR(EA) experienced a spike in hospitalizations, the EAEF recorded 38,333 hospitalizations, with 642 deaths due to disease, which amounted to approximately twenty-one percent of the EAAF hospitalized per month.<sup>92</sup> Malaria and dysentery were the most common diseases within the theatre, together accounting for forty-nine percent of all hospital fatalities amongst soldiers and forty-four percent of deaths amongst carriers.<sup>93</sup> Both diseases feature prominently within the BWIR(EA) and 2WIR war diaries, as does pneumonia. Writing home during a break from rail line defence duties, Jamaican Corporal W. Jeffers of BWIR(EA) wrote, “I am still at the base having a foxy time, but I’ll soon be back to contend with the flies and rain which is a disease here. Are we ashamed? Oh, no. Every man in the army must get them somehow or the other.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/3; CWGC, “Find War Dead: WIR, First World War, Tanzania,” accessed 09 July 2020, <https://www.cwgc.org/find/find-war-dead/results?regiment=West%2bIndia%2bRegiment&country=Tanzania&war=1&csort=dateofdeath&tab=wardead&pageSize=50&casualtypagelimit=1>. The lone death from enemy action was 6261 Private James Richards, who died in hospital on 22 October 1917 from wounds received during the Lindi Column action.

<sup>92</sup> W.G. MacPherson and Thomas John Mitchell, *History of the Great War; Medical Services General History Vol IV*: (London: HMSO, 1921), 478.

<sup>93</sup> MacPherson and Mitchell, Vol IV, 478–79.

<sup>94</sup> “The Campaign in East Africa,” *Daily Gleaner*, 4 December 1916, 13. Letter was penned on 24 September 1916.

One explanation for the continuous presence of disease amongst West Indian soldiers was the poor quality of their diets. While a healthy diet did not prevent the contraction of malaria or dysentery, weaker, malnourished soldiers were less likely to recover from the disease once contracted. White personnel, ‘native’ soldiers (including West Indians), and African porters were entitled to food rations that differed in size and composition. On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917, Major Porter of BWIR(EA) commented that the widespread presence of malaria and dysentery within the battalion was a result of “insufficient fresh vegetables [that lowered] the resistance strength of men to disease”.<sup>95</sup> The difference in the quality and quantity of rations between ‘Europeans’ and ‘Africans’ was striking. White soldiers, regardless of rank, were provided luxuries such as fresh meat, bacon, tea, and jam; the West Indian diet instead centred on one pound of rice per week, with porters receiving less.<sup>96</sup> Finally, as West Indians with BWIR(EA) were often on half-rations due to their supply difficulties, it is not surprising that disease ravaged the unit’s ranks.

West Indians did attempt to supplement their meagre diets. Trinbagonian Lance-Corporal J.C. Bryan with BWIR(EA) wrote to his mother that he “had eaten a good many qualities of our Trinidad stuff such as pigeon peas, corn figs, coconuts [and] oranges.”<sup>97</sup> Bryan also described hunting monkeys to add meat to his diet, stating that he and the

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<sup>95</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>96</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7; Hodges, *The Carrier Corps*, 119–42.

<sup>97</sup> “Word from Lance-Corporal Bryan,” *POSG*, 7 January 1917, 5.

other West Indians at his outpost had “eaten a good many” during their stay in East Africa<sup>98</sup>

The difference in rations for white and Black soldiers extended beyond the West Indian formations, inspired perhaps by the British bush warfare mentality to have native soldiers supplement their issued rations by living off of the land. The army rationalized this mentality by the need to have soldiers carry as little weight as possible. African bush warfare, even during the First World War, was reliant on supplies carried by human porters and by the soldiers themselves. While local fruits and vegetables were plenty, the relationship between the food’s weight and its caloric value was deemed to be too heavy.<sup>99</sup> In British African territories, foraging easily provided food, but such was not the case in German East Africa.

At outposts along the rail line, particularly during the wet seasons when transport was almost impossible, West Indian soldiers were unable to gather local vegetables. Major Porter recognized the relationship between the soldiers’ inferior rations and the prevalence of disease within BWIR(EA). Porter requested fresh vegetables from his chain of command, but military authorities denied the request due to a lack of vegetables within the EAEF.<sup>100</sup>

At Lindi, the West Indians of 2WIR appeared to be better off regarding food and reinforcements. The local population still resided in Lindi and could be bartered with for meat, eggs, fruit, or vegetables. In Lindi, men of the 25<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers traded pieces of

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<sup>98</sup> “Word from Lance-Corporal Bryan,” *POSG*, 7 January 1917, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Hodges, *The Carrier Corps*, 120–21.

<sup>100</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

clothing for local food. On one occasion, Angus Buchanan described another soldier trading “an old shirt for two chickens, an under-vest for seven eggs, and an old football sweater for six vegetable-marrows.”<sup>101</sup> It is plausible that 2WIR soldiers did the same.

*Table Chapter 5.1 - BWIR Daily Rations, East Africa, 1917*<sup>102</sup>

European	West Indian	African Porters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1¼ lbs fresh meat</li> <li>• 5/8 ozs Tea or Coffee</li> <li>• 4 ozs sugar</li> <li>• ½ ozs salt</li> <li>• ¼ ozs Jam or Dried Fruit</li> <li>• 2 ozs Beans or Rice</li> <li>• 4 ozs Bacon</li> <li>• 1 lb flour or biscuits</li> <li>• Baking Powder</li> <li>• 2½ ozs rum 2 x per week</li> <li>• 2 ozs tobacco per week</li> <li>• Oil</li> <li>• 2 boxes of matches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 lb Rice</li> <li>• ½ lb mealie meal</li> <li>• 2 ozs ghee</li> <li>• ½ ozs salt</li> <li>• ½ lbs meat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1¼ lbs mealie meal</li> <li>• 3 ozs beans or dates</li> <li>• 2 ozs flour or sugar</li> <li>• ½ oz salt</li> <li>• ½ lb meat</li> </ul>

The spread of diseases worsened during the wet season of January to May. The rain was particularly problematic for West Indians in BWIR(EA). At Mikesse, the largest BWIR outpost in East Africa, the battalion war diary records heavy rain for March 1917, amounting to at least one inch of rainfall per day.<sup>103</sup> By April, rainfall levels were so much that it was impossible to deliver ammunition, personal kit, or food to all posts along the rail line. The Duthumi River bridge washed away on April 13<sup>th</sup> due to local flooding,

<sup>101</sup> Buchanan, *Three Years of War*, 107.

<sup>102</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7. Taken from the entry of 10 May 1917.

<sup>103</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

making re-supply impossible for several West Indian posts.<sup>104</sup> Corporal Jeffers wrote of the rain, “when it starts here it continues for days and weeks on a stretch, so that you can imagine what our half-built thatched sheds are like.”<sup>105</sup>

The constant attrition caused by illness had an unfortunate effect on West Indian forces: supervision and leadership of the men was made almost impossible due to the susceptibility for illness amongst the white officers.<sup>106</sup> Again, this was particularly problematic for BWIR(EA), which was spread out in blockhouses and towns at various locations along the railway.<sup>107</sup> These railway protection camps were described by Angus Buchanan of the 25<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers as “a mere gathering of small tents, within limited enclosures built up of sharp-spiked, tangled, thorn tree branches...called “bomas,” [which] were against an enemy surprise, as complete a protection as barbed wire.”<sup>108</sup> Due to illness, most of these posts were under the command of junior ranks, such as corporals, and the battalion’s dispersal along the rail line meant Porter himself could not take direct control of his soldiers. Officers were unable to command their soldiers for any amount of time and training the drafts of unsuitable recruits proved impossible during the monsoon seasons. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, Porter noted that the loss of their usual officers did not lessen the control of the West Indian soldiers; however, Porter made this comment before the arrival of the second group of untrained soldiers mentioned above.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>105</sup> “The Campaign in East Africa,” *Daily Gleaner*, 4 December 1916, 13.

<sup>106</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>107</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

<sup>108</sup> Buchanan, *Three Years of War*, 17. 25<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers was a unique New Army battalion, formed from volunteers who had extensive experience as scouts, guides, and hunters in British Africa. They served alongside 2WIR at Lindi for 1916 to 1917.

<sup>109</sup> TNA, WO 95/5370/7.

West Indians would remain in East Africa until the fall of 1918 when both units re-deployed to Egypt. BWIR(EA) immediately disbanded, and its remaining troops sent to the regimental depot of 5BWIR. 2WIR, which was by that point well below adequate strength, finished the war on garrison duty in Egypt. During the two years in which West Indian soldiers fought in East Africa, they engaged in a style of fighting and service that was markedly different from the ‘traditional’ experience of the First World War along the Western Front. Despite being involved in combat operations for such a lengthy period, West Indians in East Africa did not assault trench systems, march behind a creeping barrage, nor endure the rats and barbed wire of France and Belgium. Instead, West Indian combat experience in East Africa centred on the small-unit patrol and minor engagements, superimposed by the sharp dichotomy between seasons, malnourishment, disease, and the inability to communicate beyond the colony.

## **Conclusion**

Like their counterparts in Egypt, West Indian troops who were posted to Cameroon and German East Africa experienced battle through their participation in active combat operations during the Great War. Yet, in the years following the war’s conclusion, these experiences have been neglected by historians in comparison to combat operations in Palestine. Perhaps this was due to the nature of First World War combat operations; battle in Cameroon and East Africa was markedly different than what was experienced on the Western Front or in Sinai and Palestine. Beyond the use of aircraft as reconnaissance tools, the African bush war was decidedly un-industrial in comparison to what was, unquestionably, a war of technology and innovation. The EAEF’s logistics were still



reliant on human carriers, and soldiers fought an asymmetrical war that itself was a far cry from the Somme, Verdun, or even the West Indian action at the Damieh bridgehead.

Despite these differences, the absence of African combat service from discussions of the West Indian Great War experience is unwarranted. If the soldiers of 2WIR are taken into consideration (and they rarely are), there are more West Indians engaged in combat than were sent to the frontlines in the autumn of 1917. Furthermore, at least in the case of BWIR(EA), these veterans of African service re-deployed to as combat troops upon their arrival in Egypt in 1918, and likely would have constituted the majority of the approximately 500 replacements sent to 1BWIR following the suspension of operations in the Jordan Valley. These soldiers did not languish in East Africa until the end of the war, nor did they sit idly in Alexandria until the war came to a close, but rather re-joined their original battalions and served in the final stages of the Palestine Campaign and into the 1919 Egyptian Revolution.

This chapter aimed to demonstrate that West Indian combat experience was not limited to the Palestine Campaign as other historians have argued, but rather than West Indians had a varied combat experience through their involvement in Cameroon and German East Africa. The reason why this combat service has been dismissed by the existing historiography and West Indian collective memory of the war forms part of a much larger discussion on identity and the West Indies' place within the British Empire and will be discussed at greater length in chapter seven of this dissertation.

## Chapter 6: Labour

The Battalion is still doing well and earning itself a good name. By the way, there seems to be a feeling of disappointment that the B.W.I.'s are not actually engaged in fighting, though we in Europe may be doing very good work. Well, I think that we would much rather fight. I can in safety say that three-fifths of those of us who left with the earlier contingents would not have joined up had we known that we were never to take our place in the firing line, because fighting is ever so much more glorious than carrying shells or handling picks and shovels.<sup>1</sup>

Jamaican Sergeant Abraham Williams of 4BWIR gave the statement above in a letter sent home from Belgium to his brother. Like other members of 4BWIR, Williams enlisted in January 1916 amidst the British Army's initial push to recruit infantry soldiers from the British West Indies. Williams completed his basic training at Seaford, England, before he and the rest of 4BWIR were sent to Egypt to join the other three West Indian battalions near the Suez Canal. The arrival of 4BWIR meant that army leadership could, if they wanted, raise a West Indian infantry brigade and deploy the BWIR battalions to fight the Ottoman Army.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, like his peers in 4BWIR, Williams would not find himself as part of an infantry brigade at any point during the war, nor would his counterparts in 3BWIR. Instead, following the successful employment of Black Bermudian soldiers as Royal Artillery shell carriers during the winter of 1915-16, the War Office concluded that West Indian soldiers would be better utilized as military labourers rather than as infantry. Consequently, subsequent drafts of West Indian recruits were organized as labour rather than infantry battalions. They would be sent to the Western Front to carry shells rather

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<sup>1</sup> "At the Front," *Daily Gleaner*, 6 September 1917, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment," 104.

than the Sinai Peninsula to combat the Ottoman Army. Only the commanding officers' protests in Egypt kept 1BWIR, 2BWIR and 5BWIR from being converted into labour units.

In the century since the Great War's conclusion, the experience of military labour duties in Western Europe has come to dominate West Indian memory of the war. Of the fourteen BWIR and WIR battalions that served in the war, nine were labour units. C.L. Joseph suggested that the BWIR was re-purposed from infantry to labourers to prevent the Black West Indians from gaining combat experience.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Glenford Howe argued that West Indians' employment as Western Front labourers was part of a larger War Office plan to utilize non-white imperial subjects as labourers, despite their potential fighting capabilities.<sup>4</sup> Richard Smith argues that, despite the perceived inferiority of labour units within the British Army, West Indian soldiers enthusiastically connected their labour service to Britain's victory in the war due to their proximity to the frontlines and the necessity of logistics in waging war.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the West Indian experience, military labourers have received an increasing amount of scholarly attention in recent years as labourers' testimonies have been incorporated into the historical discussion. Ivor Lee and John Starling's *No Labour* provides an operational-level analysis of the tasks completed by British labour units in Britain and abroad during the war. Lee and Starling track the changes in Britain's Great War labour programme, including the recruitment of civilian labourers, the creation of

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph, 105–6.

<sup>4</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 96–98.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 79–97.

British and imperial labour battalions, the employment of the Chinese Labour Corps, and finally the utilization of some labour units as frontline infantry during Germany's 1918 Spring Offensive.<sup>6</sup>

Unsurprisingly, recent discussions of military labour experiences are also discussions of race. Ray Costello's *Black Tommies* includes a sizeable section on Black labourers, including West Indians employed by the BEF in Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> Richard Fogarty argues that interactions between Indochinese military labourers and the French civilian population led to an 'awakening' of nationalism and racial identities amongst Indochinese labourers that ultimately influenced independence movements throughout French Indochina.<sup>8</sup> Melissa Shaw's study of Canada's all-Black Number 2 Construction Battalion positioned the Black Canadian Great War experience as a fight to enlist and for greater rights at home rather than through the soldiers' wartime services.<sup>9</sup> Xu Guoqi has described China's decision to deploy a force of approximately 174,000 labourers to the Western Front — the war's largest body of labourers — as being part of a broader Chinese cultural movement to align the country with Western powers in the wake of the 1895 Sino-Japanese War and the 1911 Chinese Revolution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Starling and Ivor Lee, *No Labour, No Battle: Military Labour During the First World War* (Staplehurst, UK: Spellmount, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Costello, *Black Tommies*.

<sup>8</sup> Richard S Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Melissa N. Shaw, "'Most Anxious to Serve Their King and Country': Black Canadians' Fight to Enlist in WWI and Emerging Race Consciousness in Ontario, 1914-1919," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 49, no. 100 (2016): 543–80.

<sup>10</sup> Xu Guoqi, "China and Empire," in *Empires at War: 1911-1923*, ed. Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 214–34.

Despite recent interest in First World War labour troops, their experiences, like those of other soldiers whose service occurred behind the front lines, have not featured prominently in the war's popular memories. Yet labour was arguably just as significant a contribution as combat service was to the final allied victory. Labourers maintained the army in the field, facilitated the transport of ammunition, water, and food, they constructed trenches, barbed wire lines, and fortifications, and stocked artillery shells for large offensives. Yet the experiences of labour soldiers are absent from broader discussions of First World War experience. Historians of labour and race-relations amongst Western Front soldiers, too, have omitted examinations of the British Army's logistical requirement from their discussions of the labour experience. Only Lee and Starling's work attempts to bridge the divide between operational and experiential-labour histories, albeit while maintaining a focus on the army's operational requirements rather than the experiences and testimonies of individual military labourers.

This chapter, like Lee and Starling's work, closes the gap between the labour-battalion experience, as told through the BWIR, and the war's operational histories. This chapter will draw on the BWIR's working conditions and place within the larger British Army to discuss the formation of a collective West Indian soldier identity as occurred amongst West Indian combat soldiers in the EEF. West Indian labour service did not happen in a bubble. Like over 100,000 civilian and military labourers in Western Europe, West Indians were part of a more extensive military logistical system to keep the allied armies well-supplied in the field. Thus, in addition to discussing the West Indian wartime experience and identity formation amongst the BWIR's labour battalions, this chapter will also demonstrate how allied operational requirements and

wider military events influenced the recruitment of West Indians for primarily labour tasks as much as First World War-era racial prejudices that have so-far dominated the historical discussion.

### **Military Logistics and the Recruitment of West Indian Labourers**

Like many other aspects of the First World War, Britain's army was not prepared for the logistical demands of 1914 to 1918. Not that the British Army was unfamiliar with logistics or the labour requirements of lengthy campaigns; indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, Britain's use of African porters to carry supplies during many of the nineteenth century's wars of imperial expansion demonstrate an appreciation of the necessity of military labourers. What was different about the Western Front as opposed to previous conflicts was, like so many other aspects, the war's sheer size.

Before 1914, standard British military practice dictated that labour tasks were performed either by hired local, civilian labour, or by otherwise untasked combat troops. A British soldier on garrison service in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries routinely carried out labour tasks, including loading and unloading ships, rudimentary infrastructure repair, and the construction of defensive positions. During the Siege of Havana in 1762, British regulars and armed Black auxiliaries constructed earthworks as part of their regular military duties.<sup>11</sup> As recently as the 1913 British Army Field Regulations, combat soldiers performed labour duties when not in the firing line, so long as such commitments did not interfere with their primary tasks.<sup>12</sup> Such 'fatigue duties'

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<sup>11</sup> Bollettino, "Of Equal or More Service."

<sup>12</sup> GSWO, *Field Service Regulations Part II: Organization and Administration* (London: HMSO, 1909; Amended, 1913), 34-35.

were an expected part of a soldier's routine when behind the frontlines.<sup>13</sup> This practice continued during the First World War: for example, infantry units routinely constructed rear-line trench systems and were employed at military supply depots when not at the front.

During large military operations before 1914, British standard practice was to hire civilian labourers if fatigue duties alone could not satisfy the army's logistical requirements, which was a common occurrence. Hired porters were a staple of African bush warfare long before 1914 and continued to be so throughout the First World War. During the South African War, the Royal Navy employed thousands of Indian labourers in Durban to offload supply ships.<sup>14</sup> The employment of civilian labourers was a necessary, albeit temporary, aspect of Britain's strategic planning. Army commanders were free to hire civilians for labour tasks ashore, including loading motor transport, working in sanitary sections, and basic construction tasks.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in anticipation of major, sustained operations on the eve of the First World War, the British preference was to use hired civilian labour whenever possible to free soldiers for battle-related tasks.<sup>16</sup>

British military planners adhered to these prewar regulations regarding civilian labour and military logistics at the war's onset. French, Belgian, and British civilian labourers were hired as dockworkers and maintenance crews to maintain roads and rail lines leading to the front, aided by Army Service Corps (ASC) and Royal Engineer (RE)

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<sup>13</sup> GSWO, *Field Service Regulations Part I*, 84-85.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Hyslop, "Oceanic Mobility and Settler-Colonial Power: Policing the Global Maritime Labour Force in Durban Harbour c. 1890-1910," *The Journal of Transport History* 36, no. 2 (2015): 248-67.

<sup>15</sup> Admiralty, *The King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions for the Government of His Majesty's Naval Service*, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1913), 1224; GSWO, *Field Service Regulations Part II*, 82.

<sup>16</sup> GSWO, *Field Service Regulations Part II*, 82.

troops.<sup>17</sup> Yet army planners quickly realized that the old process of hiring civilian labour as required would not satisfy allied logistical requirements in Western Europe. Most of Belgium's civilian population were in German-occupied territories, and France's implementation of conscription quickly exhausted the local French population as a source of labour.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, prewar British military planners had not foreseen nor accounted for the army's exponential growth caused by the New Armies' establishment throughout 1914 and 1915. The BEF's growth to almost one million men by May 1915 resulted in an increased demand for ammunition, food, and other supplies, which put more strain on an increasingly overworked labour system. For example, by February 1916, the British required 100 rail cars per day just to clear stores offloaded from ships.<sup>19</sup>

The British Army attempted to increase its labour capabilities by employing prisoners of war and, contrary to the Field Service Regulations, British soldiers; but by early 1916 all local sources for labour had been exhausted.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in February 1916, unskilled labour was "almost entirely drawn from infantry [battalions] at the expense of [their] rest or training."<sup>21</sup> Soldiers whose roles were better suited to mobile warfare than static warfare, such as motor transport drivers, railway artillery, and field ambulance

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<sup>17</sup> Starling and Lee, *No Labour, No Battle*, 112–18.

<sup>18</sup> Starling and Lee, 124–26.

<sup>19</sup> TNA, WO 95/3965/5, "Maxwell to Ragueneau," Memorandum, 25 February 1916.

<sup>20</sup> Starling and Lee, *No Labour, No Battle*, 124–26; Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World War, 1914-1918* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2010), 41; Heather Jones, *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 223–38.

<sup>21</sup> TNA, WO 95/3965/5, "DCGS to British Army Commanders & IGC," Memorandum, 28 February 1916.



drivers, were temporarily reassigned to frontline labour tasks in an attempt to alleviate the army's logistical problem. Still, the BEF could not meet its demand for military labour.<sup>22</sup>

Amidst these labour shortages and preparations for offensive operations in the summer of 1916, the British Army decided to recruit dedicated labour battalions in January 1916. These units would consist of men unfit for general military service but who could undertake elementary labour duties. A labour recruit's medical fitness determined where and how they would be utilized in France and Belgium; those more fit would find themselves in units closer to the frontline. Others were employed as dockworkers and general labour far from the fighting. As the war progressed, labour troops were further divided based on technical abilities denoting a status of either 'skilled' or 'unskilled' labour, but during preparations for the Somme Offensive in July 1916, these new labour battalions completed unskilled tasks. Although these labour battalions would perform valuable work when deployed to France, by May 1916, there were only 4,000 labour battalion troops in France.<sup>23</sup>

In August 1916, members of the Bermuda Militia Artillery (BMA) arrived in France and were posted to British artillery depots as shell carriers and labourers. The War Office presumed that soldiers trained for combat duties, such as the BMA, would perform better under fire than their labour counterparts, whose basic training did not focus as much on combat operations. As trained artillerymen, BMA gunners were accustomed to the loud noises and physical work associated with an artillery park. The British Army

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<sup>22</sup> WO 95/3965/5, "DCGS to British Army Commanders & IGC."

<sup>23</sup> Starling and Lee, *No Labour, No Battle*, 138.

hoped that their combat training would permit them to continue operating if under fire. Here is another point where race alone does not present the complete narrative. Race alone was responsible for the BMA gunners lugging rather than firing shells, but trust in their training and dedication as soldiers placed them at the front rather than in the ports of Southern France. The deployment of Bermudians to the ammunition parks freed up British artillery gunners, who had previously performed such labour tasks, to return to their units and serve in their intended roles.<sup>24</sup> While it was hoped that the newly-arrived labour battalions would alleviate the extra labour duties that were assigned to infantry units resting behind the lines, the BEF's Assistant Adjutant General, Brigadier W.W. Breeks, inquired of the War Office:

Whether you could not make use for all fatigue purposes, such as ammunition supply etc., of more of these Black men of **good physique**, and thus reduce the numbers of the pool of trained white siege Artillery gunners you require [for labour duties]. If you could make use of more Black men for this purpose (and also perhaps to relieve Field Artillery men in the Parks), it would be possible to provide in [France] inside three weeks, probably 2000 **disciplined men trained as infantry with white Officers**.<sup>25</sup>

That senior BEF staff officers requested infantrymen to act as labourers at forward artillery positions was an interesting concept. Certainly, the notion that non-white labour could alleviate the BEF's labour shortages was not a radically new idea. In 1916, the War Office was deep in negotiations with the South African Government and the Colonial Office for the creation of a South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC) despite their

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<sup>24</sup> TNA, WO 95/3970/5, "BEF GHQ to War Office," Letter, 6 August 1916.

<sup>25</sup> WO 95/3970/5, "BEF GHQ to War Office," 1. Emphasis added here.

previous objections to the employment of Black troops in Europe.<sup>26</sup> At the South African Government's demands, the SANLC served as dockworkers and port labourers in France and, despite being a uniformed formation, the SANLC was not trained for combat, nor would they serve near the front. This was due to South African fears that the Black labourers would return home with a sense of equality with the country's white minority.<sup>27</sup> Yet the BEF understood that to provide effective service at ammunition dumps within range of German artillery, labourers had to possess some degree of military training. The BWIR, lacking a brigade or clear role along the Suez Canal, perfectly fit the BEF's requirements. Furthermore, unlike South Africa, there was no resistance from West Indian colonial administrators to further recruitment of Black West Indians. There are numerous explanations for the differences in attitude between both locations, including an established tradition of West Indian military service through the WIR and the West Indies' colonial status with British-appointed governors instead of the self-governing South African dominion.

In response to the BEF's ongoing labour shortage, the War Office immediately turned to the BWIR as a source of unskilled labour with military training. 3BWIR and 4BWIR, still undergoing their basic training, were immediately ordered from Egypt to France, where they, like the BMA, would serve as shell carriers for heavy artillery units.<sup>28</sup> The War Office's original intent was for 1BWIR and 2BWIR to follow shortly after, although this order was rescinded following the West Indian commanding officers'

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<sup>26</sup> TNA, WO 95/3970/6, "Buxton to Law," Telegram, 19 August 1916.

<sup>27</sup> WO 95/3970/6, "Buxton to Law."

<sup>28</sup> WO 95/3970/5, "TROOPERS [War Office] to GHQ France & GHQ Egypt," Telegram, 17 August 1916.

protests in Egypt. At the time of their arrival in France in September 1916, 3BWIR and 4BWIR together represented 17 percent of the BEF's labour battalion force. West Indian soldiers were immediately dispersed amongst Third Army's lines of communications and attached to ammunition dumps and Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) units in the Somme River area.<sup>29</sup>

Despite two West Indian battalions being tasked with labour duties, the creation of the SANLC, and the continued creation of labour battalions in Britain, the BEF still faced a labour shortage in the period immediately following the Somme Offensive.<sup>30</sup> As stated above, much of the BEF's early 1916 labour duties were undertaken by combat soldiers who were resting behind the lines, with the largest sources of such labour being the BEF's cavalry units and the Reserve Army. Together, these units constituted approximately 100,000 soldiers and were being kept behind the lines to exploit the Somme Offensive's anticipated breakthrough.<sup>31</sup> During the first half of the 1916 offensive, British losses meant that the Reserve Army was deployed permanently to the front (retitled as 'Fifth Army'), and many cavalry units were employed as dismounted infantry. Thus, despite the presence of eleven labour battalions along the Somme in the autumn of 1916, the BEF had lost most of its frontline labour capacity due to the Somme Offensive.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> TNA WO 95/338/1, "War Diary BEF France Vol 2 (Army Troops); 3BWIR," September 1916 — January 1919.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment," 105–7.

<sup>31</sup> James E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1916*, vol. I, History of the Great War (London: Macmillan and Co., 1932), 250.

<sup>32</sup> Wilfrid Miles, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1916*, vol. II, History of the Great War (London: Macmillan and Co., 1938), 541.

In September 1916, the War Office estimated that the BEF required an additional 6,000 soldiers for ammunition dump duties and an additional 10,000 labourers required to construct light railway lines in preparation for the anticipated post-Somme offensive operations of 1917.<sup>33</sup> To satisfy these requirements, the War Office suggested commencing another West Indian recruiting campaign with the express aim of recruiting labour battalions. Recruiting in the West Indies had stopped after 4BWIR's establishment, with subsequent West Indian volunteers being turned away during the spring and summer of 1916.

The BEF's urgent need for additional labour troops was again tied to developments in the ongoing Somme Offensive. Although the British offensive had led to some degree of mobile warfare on the battlefield, German artillery had destroyed or damaged most of the roads that the BEF relied upon to re-supply and reinforce its frontline troops.<sup>34</sup> Henry Rawlinson, commanding Britain's Fourth Army along the Somme, said that the army's critical task was "the rapid reconstruction of roads...to enable [Fourth Army] to be supplied with food and ammunition" and that the completion of this task would require "all of the labour battalions" that the BEF could muster.<sup>35</sup> While senior BEF commanders remained confident in the army's ability to achieve a breakthrough along the Somme, the maintenance of supply routes that supported the infantry was of paramount importance.

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<sup>33</sup> Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment," 105–6. These operations would include the April Arras offensive, the summer Ypres offensive, and November Cambrai offensive.

<sup>34</sup> Miles, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1916*, II:242.

<sup>35</sup> Miles, II:242.

The War Office's request for more West Indian troops was a pronounced departure from earlier attitudes regarding Black troops' perceived usefulness in the colder European climate. In a similar departure from their 1914 position, the Colonial Office protested the use of West Indians as Western Front labourers, citing the experiences of the first West Indian contingents at Seaford during the autumn of 1915 as proof that West Indians were better suited to service in warmer locations, specifically Egypt.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, both offices found a compromise: all subsequently-raised West Indian units would be employed as labour battalions, but West Indian forces outside Europe would continue to be used as infantry. The Colonial Office estimated that ten further battalions could be raised from West Indian volunteers, with a potential for a further twenty battalions if Jamaica implemented conscription.<sup>37</sup>

The goal of recruiting a further 10,000 West Indian labourers was part of a wider British effort to recruit military labour following the Somme Offensive. In addition to the new BWIR battalions and SANLC, labourers were recruited in Malta, Seychelles, and from the various non-white peoples of the dominions. These latter groups included Canada's Number 2 Construction Battalion and the New Zealand (Māori) Pioneer Battalion. Most notably, the British Army contracted Chinese labourers beginning in July 1916 to serve with the Chinese Labour Corps, which, by the end of the war, contained over 100,000 personnel.<sup>38</sup> Beyond the Western Front, African porters formed the logistical backbone of the East African Campaign, while the Egyptian Labour Corps and

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment," 106.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph, 111.

<sup>38</sup> Starling and Lee, *No Labour, No Battle*, 38–41.

Arab Labour Corps performed similar tasks to the BWIR in Palestine and Mesopotamia respectively.<sup>39</sup>

The BEF's commanders were certainly aware of the importance of military labour in subsequent Western Front operations. Despite their best efforts to use a mixture of civilian and military labour, British military planners quickly realized that more labour resources were required for the planned offensives of 1917. While historians of the West Indian experience have placed West Indian labour troops within a bubble, an overview of Britain's plans for Western Front labour demonstrates that the recruitment of West Indians as labourers was part of a much larger imperial project to requisition labour from across the British Empire and beyond.

### **King George's Steam Engine**

Just as the BEF employed the Bermuda Garrison Artillery as shell carriers, so too did British military authorities assign the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> BWIR battalions to ammunition dumps upon their arrival in September 1916. Soldiers of 3BWIR's 'C' company were the first West Indians to come under fire on the Western Front when, on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1916, they were shelled in transit to British artillery batteries outside of Morlancourt.<sup>40</sup> The soldiers at Morlancourt were bombarded continuously until September 14<sup>th</sup>, when they departed the area. C company would suffer the West Indies' first casualty on the Western Front on September 9<sup>th</sup> and the first West Indian death on September 11<sup>th</sup>, both from

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<sup>39</sup> Hodges, *The Carrier Corps*; Kristian Coates, *The Logistics and Politics of the British Campaigns in the Middle East, 1914-22, Studies in Military and Strategic History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> TNA, WO 95/338/1, "War Diary: 3BWIR."

German artillery fire.<sup>41</sup> The soldiers of 4BWIR would experience a similarly swift introduction to the Western Front: while assigned to the Canadian Corps on September 12<sup>th</sup>, six members of 4BWIR were wounded by shellfire when laying telegraph cable near Albert.<sup>42</sup>

Despite coming under frequent fire from German artillery during their time near the frontlines, West Indian troops quickly demonstrated their discipline and knack as military labourers through the movement of artillery shells. At Dernancourt on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 3BWIR's 'B' company (roughly 180 soldiers) recorded 6,500 artillery shells unloaded during the day. Three days later, the same troops unloaded 7,500 shells over a day, and on September 14<sup>th</sup>, over 9,000 shells.<sup>43</sup> Dernancourt was a staging area for British artillery before the Somme Offensive, where labourers offloaded shells from railway cars for distribution amongst the local artillery units by cart and lorry.<sup>44</sup> The Dernancourt depot serviced a variety of artillery batteries, ranging from the lighter field artillery pieces to the heavy 12-inch howitzers of the Royal Garrison Artillery. While there is no breakdown provided regarding the exact number of shells that B company moved, over the course of

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<sup>41</sup> TNA, WO 95/338/1, "War Diary: 3BWIR."

<sup>42</sup> LAC, RG9-III-D-4, Vol 5004, Number 687, "War Diary: Canadian Corps Signal Company," 1915-1919; Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> TNA, WO 95/338/1, "War Diary: 3BWIR."

<sup>44</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1916*, I:273–80.



the three days described above the West Indians moved between 236 and 7,000 tonnes worth of shells.<sup>45</sup>

The excellent performance by West Indian labourers and the BEF's constant need for additional labour troops led the War Office to institute its proposed labour troop recruitment campaign in the West Indies. Within the British Isles, army labour recruitment procedures focused on each recruit's technical skills and medical classification. Recruits or conscripts who possessed technical skills such as engineers, architects, plumbers, or rail workers, were more likely to be posted to works and specialist engineer labour battalions. Likewise, recruits deemed medically unfit for combat service — those who were too old, asthmatic, and under or overweight — were posted to general labour battalions as unskilled labour.<sup>46</sup> Conscripted conscientious objectors found themselves in the Non-Combatant Corps: a British Army labour corps distinctive from the militarized labour battalions.<sup>47</sup> Regarding unskilled labour, the army's priority was to use medically unfit individuals rather than experienced labourers. Thus, if deemed fit for general service, prewar labourers would find themselves posted to

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<sup>45</sup> The range of shells moved by West Indian soldiers is derived from the two extremes of possibilities given the weight of a complete 18-pdr shell being 23 pounds, the weight of a complete 12-inch howitzer shell being 750 pounds, and the total number of shells moved by B Company over the course of the three days in September being 23,000 shells. Given the increased number of field artillery guns in comparison to heavy artillery guns, a likely estimate would be closer to the lower end of the spectrum. Details regarding the weight of artillery shells came from Great Britain, War Office, *Handbook for the 18-Pr. Q.F. Gun: Land Service* (London: HMSO, 1909), 23; and IWM, D 8888, "Newfoundland Troops in England: Artillery Training, 1941."

<sup>46</sup> Starling and Lee, *No Labour, No Battle*, 45–63. How recruits were posted within the British Army was a much more complicated process than I have described it here, particularly regarding the posting of the medically unfit.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Brock, *Against the Draft: Essays on Conscientious Objection from the Radical Reformation to the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 243–56.

a combat unit rather than a labour battalion, while a labour battalion might have its ranks dominated by prewar skilled workers deemed unfit for combat service.

In the West Indies, British planners found the best of both worlds: a large, experienced supply of skilled and semi-skilled labourers suited for Western Front employment. As was discussed in this dissertation's second chapter, the prewar West Indian economy was dominated by transient labourers who moved throughout the region to work on plantations and construction projects as needed. Amongst these temporary work projects, none was a more significant source of experienced West Indian labour than the Panama Canal, where approximately 2,000 of the 16,000 BWIR recruits (roughly 13 percent) were employed before their enlistment.<sup>48</sup> The employment of ex-canal workers was seen by West Indians as a logical method for Britain to expand its military labour resources. As one Jamaican wrote, incensed at the idea that canal workers be deemed medically unfit for military service, "It is common knowledge...that West Indian 'niggers' and steamshovels [sic] dug the Panama Canal, and I am at a loss to know why THEY CANNOT DIG A TRENCH".<sup>49</sup>

In addition to an abundance of experienced labour, British military recruiters quickly discovered that the West Indies contained many skilled, technical workers. While prewar generic labourers accounted for an estimated 59 percent of West Indian recruits from 1916 onwards, skilled tradesmen such as plumbers, mechanics, and electricians accounted for 14 percent of the West Indian labour recruits.<sup>50</sup> Such individuals would be

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<sup>48</sup> See Goldthree, "A Greater Enterprise Than the Panama Canal."

<sup>49</sup> "Volunteers from Panama: A Plea for Rejected Men," *POSG*, 2 August 1917, 3.

<sup>50</sup> TNA, through *Ancestry*, WO 364, *British Army WWI Pension Records 1914-1920*.

reassigned to more technical tasks within the battalions than simply moving shells and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, were routinely sent to the Mesopotamia with the Inland Water Transport.

In late November 1916, the War Office informed the Jamaican Legislative Council of the requirement to raise two additional BWIR battalions within the colony by April 1917. By March, over 5,000 Jamaicans had either enlisted or attempted to enlist.<sup>51</sup> By the end of March, 1,700 soldiers from Jamaica, Honduras, and St. Lucia departed Kingston as part of 6BWIR.<sup>52</sup> By April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1917, yet another BWIR battalion, 7BWIR, was in the final stages of training before their planned departure for France in May 1917.<sup>53</sup> By the end of the year, the number of BWIR battalions deployed with a British expeditionary force doubled in size from 6 to 12, of which 8 were in Western Europe (7 in France and Belgium and 1 in Italy).<sup>54</sup>

Unlike early West Indian contingents that formed the first four BWIR battalions, the BWIR labour drafts were notably undisciplined from an early stage. At multiple times during the Jamaican recruits' initial training and processing, both the Jamaican Constabulary and troops of 1WIR were called out to engage BWIR recruits to maintain law and order.<sup>55</sup> On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917, recruits of 6BWIR who were awaiting their departure from Jamaica rioted due to perceived persecution by the constables of the

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<sup>51</sup> "The Colony's Estimates are now Being Considered by its Legislators; The Jamaica Reserve Regiment," *Daily Gleaner*, 17 March 1917, 6. Although the article's title referenced the Jamaican Reserve Regiment, details contained within referenced recruitment for the Jamaican War Contingents (BWIR).

<sup>52</sup> TNA, WO 95/493/3, "War Diary: France; 4 Army Troops; 6 Bn BWIR," 1917 March — 1919 April, 3; Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 63.

<sup>53</sup> "Our Fighters," *Daily Gleaner*, 24 April 1917, 13.

<sup>54</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 63–70.

<sup>55</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 84–86.

primarily-white Jamaican constabulary.<sup>56</sup> That night, following an altercation between one member of 6BWIR and an unknown civilian in which the latter was wounded and sent to hospital, the offending soldier was ordered to the gaol by constabulary members. After fleeing with some nearby comrades, the soldier resisted his arrest and assaulted the constabulary with bricks. The altercation quickly escalated into a riot in which an estimated 400 members of 6BWIR descended upon Kingston in search of retribution against the police force for the detainment of their comrade and other instances of what they deemed to be unfair persecution. The result was a city-wide riot that involved the constabulary and civilians fighting against the recruits, with soldiers of 1WIR deployed to make peace. Civilians attacked the BWIR soldiers with bricks and rocks, and the soldiers attacked civilians and constabulary members in the same way.

Certainly, violent confrontations between the military and police were common in Jamaica. As discussed in this dissertation's second chapter, the frequency with which WIR soldiers attacked constables was a primary reason for Jamaica's business and political leaders demanding the maintenance of a permanent British (i.e. white) garrison on the island. Yet several factors elevated the severity of the 1917 Kingston riot above simple police-military animosity. One was the size of the event: West Indians had not experienced a riot where military members acted as agitators (rather than peacemakers) of that size since the mutiny of 1WIR in 1837, which still involved only 100 soldiers.<sup>57</sup> The second factor unique to the 1917 riot was white officers' active participation as rioters. As

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<sup>56</sup> "Enquiry into Late Disturbance in the City," *Daily Gleaner*, 31 January 1917, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, 141–44.

discussed in this dissertation's second chapter, the West Indies' planter elite were fearful that Black soldiers would revolt and riot, yet here Black soldiers were joined by their officers — white officers of European descent, primarily of the upper-middle class — in the Kingston riot. "I saw [Lieutenant] Fisher and a part of Contingent [6BWIR] men come down to Heywood [Street]," recounted Corporal Morrison of 6BWIR at the ensuing inquiry,

I saw a policeman fall to the ground. I saw another policeman run into the bar and come out with an iron bar as if he was going to strike Mr. Fisher...The police picquet, about fifteen [men], were on one side and Lt. Fisher was in front of the [6BWIR] picquet...the contingent picquet rushed right round and a general fight and mix up took place.<sup>58</sup>

The leadership of 6BWIR was directly questioned and subsequently blamed by the ensuing inquiry into the causes of the riot. The military court, headed by the General Officer Commanding — Jamaica (GOCJ), highlighted the indiscipline amongst the first batch of Jamaican labour recruits. In particular, the court demonstrated that a sizeable portion of the contingent possessed prior civilian convictions, and that their appearance was most "unsoldierlike."<sup>59</sup> Taking direct aim at 6BWIR's officer cadre, the court's report stated

The European staff is insufficient to train the raw recruits into officers and soldiers. The men walk out before they have learnt the most rudimentary lessons of discipline, and crowds of them are to be seen lolling about the street corners...with apparently nothing to do...As regards the officers, men are asked to give up whatever they may be doing for a living and join the contingent at 5(?) / a day less than the pay

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<sup>58</sup> "Enquiry into Late Disturbance in the City," *Daily Gleaner*, 31 January 1917, 14.

<sup>59</sup> "The Contingent Riot in January," *Daily Gleaner*, 11 July 1917, 11.

of a European chauffeur, carpenter or mechanic. The result is, in many cases, that the right kind of officer is not obtained.<sup>60</sup>

The report would further damn the BWIR officer cadre by recommending to “pay the officers the full rate of pay and allowances and make real efforts to obtain the right class of men as officers...not necessarily [men] of a high social standing.”<sup>61</sup> 6BWIR’s officers, it seems, were chosen based on their pre-war social status and societal connections rather than military experience, leadership qualities, or any other relevant experience. Although popular memory of the British Empire at war portrays the commissioning of officers based on social status rather than merit as the 1914-18 norm, the opposite was, in fact, true.

The absence of quality leadership in 6BWIR, combined with an abundance of prewar criminals in the ranks, continued to plague the battalion after its deployment overseas.<sup>62</sup> Despite the riot inquiry’s recommendations, 6BWIR deployed to France and was led by local Jamaican officers — the ‘men of a high social standing’ — rather than by experienced military commanders. As discussed in chapter three, whereas the first two BWIR battalions had trained, experienced British officers holding critical positions, 6BWIR was allotted only one regular officer and four British non-commissioned officers upon their arrival in France.<sup>63</sup> Amongst this British cadre were three veterans of Western Front fighting. Two NCOs of the 6/7<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots Fusiliers (RSF), Warrant Officers

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<sup>60</sup> “The Contingent Riot in January,” 11.

<sup>61</sup> “The Contingent Riot in January,” 11.

<sup>62</sup> For example, the subsequent enquiry into the 1917 riot uncovered that one member of 6BWIR had been charged five times prior to enlistment for crimes such as larceny and vagrancy. See “In Metropolitan Tribunals,” *Daily Gleaner*, 23 January 1917, 3.

<sup>63</sup> TNA, WO 95/493/3, “War Diary: 6BWIR.”

Burns and Graham, were veterans of the 1916 Somme Offensive, while the lone officer, Lt Spinney of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sherwood Foresters (SF), only joined the army in February 1916.<sup>64</sup> For the remaining two European NCOs, their posting to 6BWIR would be their first deployment of the war to an expeditionary force. 6BWIR's regimental sergeant major, Charles Lane, had served in the South African War, for which he received five medal clasps, however, he had been on home service since 1914.<sup>65</sup> The other NCO, G Hamilton, had seen brief service in Ireland following the 1916 Easter Rebellion but had not yet served in a Great War campaign.

Inexperienced and inept officers recruited in Jamaica filled the remaining 6BWIR leadership positions, with none being more out of place than the battalion's first and longest-serving commanding officer, Reginald Willis. How Willis came to command a battalion remains a mystery, although the riot inquiry's suggestion that officers were chosen because of their social status provides one explanation. Unlike all but one other BWIR battalion commander during the war, Willis had no prior military experience whatsoever. An Englishman, Willis emigrated to Jamaica in 1911 to take a post as the headmaster of Mannings School.<sup>66</sup> From 1911 to 1914, Willis was routinely involved with local educational committees and joined the Jamaica Reserve Regiment after the declaration of war. Passed over for deployment with one of the first four service battalions, Willis was eventually named the adjutant of 6BWIR when it was undergoing

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<sup>64</sup> H.G. Hart, *The Monthly Army List for February 1917* (London: HMSO, 1917), 1315a.

<sup>65</sup> TNA, WO 100/175, "Queen's South Africa Medal List: Somersetshire Light Infantry and West Yorkshire Regiment," 1899-1902, 234.

<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> "Educational: New Headmaster Elected for Mannings School," *Daily Gleaner*, 24 November 1911, 4.

training, including during the Kingston riot.<sup>67</sup> When he and the rest of 6BWIR left Kingston on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917, Willis was a captain and *de facto* commander of the battalion; upon arrival in France, he was promoted to major, and the appointment made permanent, despite Willis's lack of experience.

In the years following the war's conclusion, Willis came to be regarded as a strict military disciplinarian and tyrant in West Indian memory of the war. Etienne Dupuch, a future Bahamian politician, witnessed Willis slam his foot down on a soldier's frost-bitten leg, proclaiming, "I'm turning Jesus Christ out here. I'm making the lame walk."<sup>68</sup> Yet an examination of British Army court-martial records indicates that such a strict leadership style had little impact on 6BWIR's soldiers' behaviour. Members of 6BWIR accounted for 11 percent of the 301 charges laid against the BWIR that resulted in a trial by court-martial during the war, giving the unit the third-highest number of infractions amongst West Indian units.<sup>69</sup> Most charges laid against members of 6BWIR were challenges to authority, including insubordination, disregarding written orders, and generally lacking military discipline. The most obvious indication that Willis contributed to 6BWIR's infractions was the period in which the charges were laid; of the 35 charges laid against members of 6BWIR during the war, 33 occurred during Willis's command. Conversely, Edmund Ogle, an experienced commander of labour troops since 1915,

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<sup>67</sup> "Officers of the Fifth Jamaican War Contingent," *Daily Gleaner*, 26 January 1917, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Etienne Dupuch, *A Salute to Friend and Foe: My Battles, Sieges and Fortunes* (Nassau: Tribune, 1982), 78; quoted in Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 127. See also R.J.H. Griffiths, "To War With the Westies," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 80, no. 323 (2002): 229–31.

<sup>69</sup> TNA, WO 213, "Judge Advocate General's Office: Field General Court Martial and Military Courts."



instilled good discipline in the men when he took control of the unit in May 1918.<sup>70</sup>

Willis would eventually command 9BWIR, which mutinied at Taranto in December, 1918. This episode will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

Unsurprisingly, historians have used 6BWIR as the primary example of poor leadership in the BWIR. Yet, as discussed in chapter 3, 6BWIR is an exception rather than the rule, with officer positions often being assigned to experienced army and militia commanders rather than members of the local social elite. Nevertheless, indiscipline plagued the BWIR's labour battalions, with the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> battalions being only marginally better than 6BWIR in terms of the units' share of charges against West Indian soldiers (at 9, 8, and 9 percent respectively).<sup>71</sup> Conversely, 9BWIR and 11BWIR, each commanded by officers with recent Western Front leadership experience, had much lower numbers of charges levied against the soldiers at 3 percent each. The commanding officers of those battalions, Raymond Negus (9BWIR) and H Shipley (10BWIR) of the Shropshire Light Infantry and King's Own (Royal Lancaster Regiment) respectively, both served as deputy commanding officers of their respective battalions before assuming command of the West Indian forces.<sup>72</sup> As well, Negus had previously received the Distinguished Service Order for bravery during the 1916 Somme Offensive.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Great Britain, *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 16 September 1914, 7377; NLS, *Hart's Monthly Army Lists, March 1917*, 982. Ogle was an officer with the WIR before the war and spent the majority of 1914-17 as the deputy commanding officer of the 11<sup>th</sup> (Pioneer) Battalion, The King's (Liverpool Regiment). He was thus uniquely positioned to command 6BWIR given his extensive experiencing commanding both West Indians and military labour troops during war.

<sup>71</sup> TNA, WO 213, "JAG: FGCM."

<sup>72</sup> H.G. Hart, *The Monthly Army List for June 1917* (London: HMSO, 1917), 933a.

<sup>73</sup> "Mentioned in Despatches," *The Llangollen Advertiser*, 12 Jan 1917, 2.

The absence of quality officers certainly promoted an increase in misbehaviour within other British imperial First World War battalions. Isabella Losinger maintained that, within the Canadian Expeditionary Force, units with good disciplinary records often had battalion commanders who fostered a good relationship with their soldiers.<sup>74</sup> In his study of officer-man relations in the BEF, Gary Sheffield argued that a battalion's officer cadre played an integral role in maintaining soldier morale and fostering good discipline.<sup>75</sup> A paternalistic relationship between officers and enlisted ranks, Sheffield argued, was the basis of the British Army's leadership, morale, and discipline structure. As the BEF expanded during 1914-15, officers' positions were being filled by "men who had seen active service in the ranks, who had first-hand experience of the importance of paternalistic leadership to the ordinary soldier".<sup>76</sup> The relationship between poor leadership and indiscipline existed in the German Army as well, with Alexander Watson's *Enduring the Great War* demonstrating that inexperienced and inadequate German junior officers were paramount to the German Army's collapse in 1918.<sup>77</sup>

According to Sheffield, units with poor officer-man relations could be identified by repeated infractions of a specific nature, specifically cases of insubordination and disobedience or, albeit less often, officers' murder and mutiny.<sup>78</sup> These infractions indicated poor relationships between officers and the rank-and-file as they overtly

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<sup>74</sup> Isabella Losinger, "Officer-Man Relations in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919," PhD Dissertation (Carleton, 1990), 30-54.

<sup>75</sup> Sheffield, "Officer-Man Relations," 268-333.

<sup>76</sup> Sheffield, 269.

<sup>77</sup> Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Sheffield, "Officer-Man Relations," 291-95.

challenged officers' authority. A breakdown of the charges laid against West Indian soldiers by battalion further suggests a lack of capable leadership in most BWIR labour battalions. Crimes directed against military leadership — insubordination, disobedience, striking a superior officer, and general indiscipline — in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> BWIR battalions represent 24 of 40 crimes, 19 of 32 crimes, 18 of 31 crimes, and 19 of 32 crimes respectively; in short, over half of all crimes were committed against military leadership.<sup>79</sup> Conversely, only 6 and 8 similar charges were laid against members of 9BWIR and 11BWIR, respectively. As Jamaican Sergeant Robert Howell of 11BWIR wrote in a letter home, making clear the importance of good leadership, “we the boys of the 11<sup>th</sup> battalion are striving hard to make ours the crack battalion of the whole British West Indies Regiment, and this is not impossible when I tell you that of all the several battalions we have got the best Commanding Officer, the best Adjutant, and the [best] Regimental Sergeant Major.”<sup>80</sup>

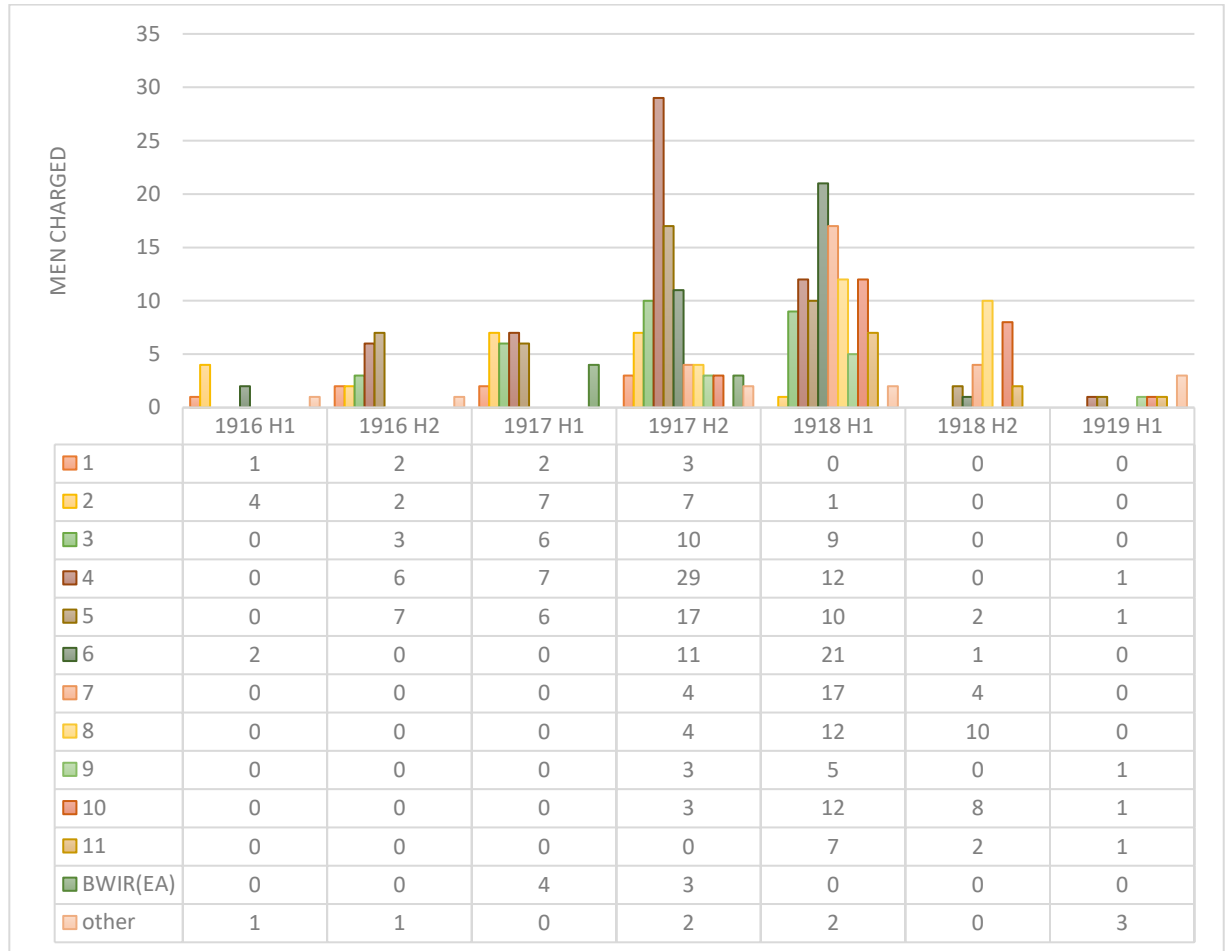
Although the frequency of indiscipline was high amongst the labour-raised battalions, it paled compared to the number of infractions committed by members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> battalions. Despite being the first West Indian units in France and benefitting from a complement of experienced British officers and non-commissioned officers, both battalions had a higher-than-average number of charges laid against their soldiers. 4BWIR was the least-disciplined West Indian unit, accounting for 16 percent of all West Indian charges during the First World War. Disciplinary issues existed within 3BWIR and

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<sup>79</sup> TNA, WO 213, “JAG: FGCM.”

<sup>80</sup> “From the Front,” *Daily Gleaner*, 18 May 1918, 17.

4BWIR despite both battalions being commanded by experienced WIR officers who had extensive experience commanding West Indian troops and who had experienced operations prior to 1914.



*Figure Chapter 6.1 - Charges Laid Against West Indian Soldiers by Battalion and Bi-Annual Period.<sup>81</sup>*

That the BWIR labour battalions were markedly less disciplined than their infantry sister units in Palestine and East Africa should come as no surprise. In his study

<sup>81</sup> TNA, WO 213, "JAG: FGCM." 'Other' includes West Indian soldiers attached to the regimental depot at Plymouth or who were charged in the West Indies before being posted to a numbered battalion.

of crime and the British Armed Forces, Clive Emsley noted that British soldiers would commit crimes when tempted to do so.<sup>82</sup> Manning the frontlines offered little opportunity for theft or violent assault compared to service behind the lines. As the BWIR labour battalions spent most of their time at docks and depots behind the lines, there were simply greater opportunities to commit crimes. Yet, it is also possible that the absence of quality leadership in the BWIR labour battalions caused an inflation in charges laid against soldiers. As Emsley states, “the more sensible officers and NCOs listened to grievances and tried to do something about them; or simply allowed the men to let off steam. Other ranks were never blindly obedient cannon fodder, especially the citizen soldiers who volunteered in 1914, and leadership by listening and negotiation was always important.”<sup>83</sup>

In the case of 3BWIR and 4BWIR, widespread misconduct stemmed from their labour employment rather than ineffective leadership. It must be remembered that these battalions were raised initially as infantry, rather than labour units. According to the West Indies’ traditional First World War narrative, West Indian soldiers enlisted to fight and became frustrated with British military authorities after being reduced to manual labour. Although this was not true in the 6th through 11th battalions’, which the War Office had specifically raised as labour units, the dominant narrative of denied combat service holds for the soldiers of 3BWIR and 4BWIR. As 4BWIR’s Abraham Williams stated in the

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<sup>82</sup> Clive Emsley, *Soldier, Sailor, Beggerman, Thief: Crime and the British Armed Services since 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 84–104.

<sup>83</sup> Emsley, 113.

quote at the start of this chapter, the West Indian soldiers would “much rather fight [than labour].”<sup>84</sup>

Like the West Indian soldiers in Egypt discussed in chapter four, so too did West Indian soldiers in France and Belgium seek to adopt a ‘soldierly’ identity that differed from their prewar civilian identities. Despite often working within range of German artillery and being shelled regularly, the West Indian Western Front experience lacked one fundamental requirement of the soldier identity: combat. None of the BWIR battalions in France or Belgium would go into battle, unlike their counterparts in Palestine and East Africa. Thus, for West Indian soldiers in the BEF, Western Front service provided little opportunity to fully embrace a soldier identity, which was particularly important to the trained infantrymen of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> battalions. By nature of their non-combatant role, labour troops were seen as inferior troops within the British Army despite the essential role that military labour played in Britain’s war effort. To foster a soldierly identity, West Indian soldiers chose to distance themselves from the rest of the Labour Corps, who mostly worked at docks and rail lines far from the frontline. West Indian soldiers subsequently coined themselves the ‘King George Steam Engine’ on account of their reputation for quickly loading and moving artillery shells and their status as ‘frontline labourers.’ This soldier-like identity emphasized the danger faced by West Indian labour troops rather than their active participation in combat. In a letter published in the Port of Spain Gazette, Trinbagonian Sergeant Alfred Warner described the excitement expressed by West Indian troops when under fire:

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<sup>84</sup> “At the Front,” *Daily Gleaner*, 6 September 1917, 13.

At this time you can imagine how joyful we all feel as we rush to the spot [when a German aircraft flies overhead]. Sometime the Hun machines come over our lines in ‘mass formation’ throwing bombs like rain. As to the shells we throw ourselves flat on our faces, sometimes in the mud, to escape the flying pieces of shrapnel. One night we received a despatch message that we were wanted up the lines next day. You can imagine how glad we all felt.<sup>85</sup>

Hurard Prulins, another Trinbagonian of 8BWIR, echoed Warner’s emphasis on the dangers felt by West Indian troops. “It’s a perfect hell fire all around,” Prulins wrote, “I can see the dead bodies of heroic Tommies — wounded comrades, etc. But we are making havoc of those coward Huns...believe me that that dogged tenacity of a British soldier has always associated itself with my spirit, death is nothing to me.”<sup>86</sup>

Both soldiers emphasized the dangers of their regular tasks as opposed to their participation in the fighting. Although their experiences would ultimately differ from West Indians posted to Palestine, both groups shared this association with proximity to the front and soldiering. As discussed in chapter four, West Indians in Palestine felt their service meaningful when constructing dugouts opposite the Ottoman Gaza-Beersheba line; not because their tasks were combat-related, but because they were operating within sight and range of Ottoman rifle and artillery fire. West Indian soldiers on the Western Front responded similarly. Still, while West Indian labour tasks in Palestine were temporary, BWIR soldiers on the Western Front maintained the relationship between proximity to the battlefield and soldiering for the war’s duration. When carrying shells,

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<sup>85</sup> “More News of Our Boys,” *POSG*, 9 December 1917, 2.

<sup>86</sup> “Letters From the Front,” *POSG*, 8 December 1917, 2.

laying barbed wire, or constructing dugouts at the front, the West Indians felt they were acting as soldiers.

This quasi labourer/soldier identity was threatened when the BWIR labour battalions were employed far from the front, which resulted in an increase in misconduct amongst the ranks. The suffering of West Indian soldiers during the winter of 1916-17 led the BEF to utilize the West Indians only as shell carriers during the warmer months of the year. As winter set in, the West Indians were moved to warmer locations, first in the south of France and, later, to southern Italy. There, their tasks changed completely. Rather than stacking shells or maintaining forward positions under constant fire, the West Indians could be found loading coal onto ships, performing road construction, or serving as manual labour at military airfields.<sup>87</sup> Given that such roles positioned the West Indians closer to the rest of the Labour Corps than their comrades fighting abroad, periods spent in the south of France or Italy correspond to spikes in charges brought against West Indian soldiers in Europe.<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, the West Indian military experience in Europe was an uneventful one. The BWIR battalions were all in Italy during the German Spring Offensive of 1918 and were unable to join many of their Labour Corps compatriots on the frontlines as the BEF retreated. Instead, West Indian soldiers were divided amongst the BEF, carrying shells

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<sup>87</sup> TNA, WO 95/4040/4, "War Diary: L of C; Marseilles Base; DAD Labour," 1916 August-1918 March; William Dale and Winston Gray, *War Memoirs: Corporal William Dale and the Boys of Stewart Town*, ed. Gloria E Fidler (Kingston, JA: Winston Gray, 2009), 48–50.

<sup>88</sup> TNA, WO 213, "JAG: FGCM."



and maintaining trench infrastructure near the front while acting as dockworkers and unskilled labourers during the winter months.

### **The Inland Water Transport**

The nature of military labour employment in western Europe lent itself to unskilled labour, which most West Indian soldiers were before the war. Yet amongst the thousands of prewar labourers who enlisted in the labour battalions was a small minority of technically trained individuals such as electricians, pipefitters, and engine drivers. Within the context of the wider British war effort, these individuals' talents would be wasted stacking shells along the Western Front or occupying trenches outside Gaza. Instead, British military authorities in the army and War Office felt that such men would be better employed with a Royal Engineers unit rather than in labour or infantry battalions. The MEF's Inland Water Transport (IWT) was chosen as a destination for technically-trained West Indian soldiers.

No two military campaigns are alike, and this was certainly true during the First World War. Each Great War British expeditionary force faced unique logistical challenges, some of which have already been discussed in this dissertation. In France and Belgium, the army modernized ports and expanded roadways and rail lines to meet logistical demands. In Egypt, the EEF relied on new railways and water pipelines to support its push into Sinai Peninsula. British commanders in East Africa resorted to using porters because of the region's topography.

Due to a lack of overland infrastructure in Mesopotamia, the British campaign centred on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, over which the IWT transported all troops and supplies. Maintaining the MEF using only a riverine supply force required a flotilla

of ships, ranging from Victorian-era paddle steamers, self-propelled barges, and even local wooden sailboats.<sup>89</sup> As the IWT expanded in the early months of 1916, they, like the BEF's labour directorate, faced a personnel shortage. Yet, unlike the labour shortages in the other expeditionary forces, the MEF could not recruit unskilled colonial labour to alleviate their workforce issues, but rather required personnel with particular skills — namely, seafaring experience.

Ultimately, like labour shortages in other operational areas, the MEF resorted to recruiting IWT members from smaller British colonies. MEF planners initially hoped to secure enough members for the IWT from the Royal Indian Marine; however, IWT organizers quickly realized that Indian seafarers alone would not satisfy the IWT's personnel requirements. Instead, the IWT expanded its recruiting area to the colonies, primarily to Nigeria — where there was a sizeable Nigerian Merchant Marine — and the British West Indies.<sup>90</sup> Originally, IWT demands were only for experienced mariners, but as logistical needs increased, so too did the expansion of IWT infrastructure ashore. Carpenters were required to perform ship repair, donkeymen for small engine repair, and telegraph operators for camp operations. By the end of the war, West Indians assigned to the IWT served ashore as clerks, anti-aircraft gunners, engineers and carpenters, and aboard ships in engine rooms, cargo holds, and bridges.<sup>91</sup> It is likely, too, that the IWT valued West Indians and other members of the African diaspora based on their superior swimming skills. Kevin Dawson argues that Africans and members of the African

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<sup>89</sup> Hall, *The Inland Water Transport in Mesopotamia*, 209-15.

<sup>90</sup> Hall, 13-14.

<sup>91</sup> Hall, 50-51.

diaspora demonstrated their bravery and earned a reputation for strong swimming and aquatic skills amongst white Europeans by hunting dangerous aquatic animals such as sharks and crocodiles.<sup>92</sup>

Initially, IWT organizers recruited suitable technicians from the ranks of the BWIR battalions already in Egypt. This decision was logical; military recruitment was, at that point, suspended in the West Indies, and there was yet no decision from the War Office or EEF regarding the planned employment of the BWIR battalions in Egypt. IWT planners viewed the un-employed BWIR battalions in Egypt as a valuable resource: trained, medically fit soldiers who were deemed surplus to the army's requirements. When the War Office contacted the BWIR battalion commanders and Colonial Office regarding the possibility of reassigning a portion of the BWIR to the IWT, both groups responded hesitantly. The Colonial Office maintained that, as the West Indians enlisted to serve in infantry battalions, there would be minimal interest amongst West Indian volunteers to transfer to what was, essentially, a non-combatant force. The EEF quashed the IWT's hopes of reassigning the entire West Indian contingent to Mesopotamia, but the IWT was permitted to request volunteers from the West Indian battalions. Surprisingly, West Indian soldiers — perhaps, like many of their imperial comrades, bored of their garrison service around the Suez Canal — responded enthusiastically to the IWT's call for volunteers.<sup>93</sup> Thirty-nine members from the first three BWIR battalions arrived in Mesopotamia on July 4th, 1916, with another draft of sixty-two soldiers arriving on July

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<sup>92</sup> Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 39–50.

<sup>93</sup> On boredom and Suez defence tasks, see Kitchen, *The British Imperial Army in the Middle East*, 257.

31st. These were followed by the largest single West Indian IWT draft of 331 officers and men in December 1916.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the secondment of soldiers from the various West Indian islands to the IWT, West Indian involvement in the Mesopotamian Campaign was primarily a British Honduran endeavour. While IWT commanders were content to request volunteers from the existing BWIR battalions, British Honduras was the only location where IWT-specific recruitment took place in the West Indies. These recruiting efforts came to fruition in August 1916, when the entirety of the 407-strong British Honduras Contingent was attached to the IWT without being sent to a BWIR unit.<sup>95</sup> Another, albeit smaller, draft of 42 men from British Honduras arrived in Mesopotamia in August 1918.<sup>96</sup> West Indian political and military leaders recognized the unique presence of a national contingent within a larger regional military contingent in the war's latter stages, where the 'British Honduras Company' was listed as a separate entity alongside the eleven BWIR battalions.<sup>97</sup>

Details regarding the conditions experienced by West Indian soldiers in Mesopotamia are scant at best, with no letters or subsequent memoirs from West Indians in the MEF known to exist. The absence of detail, however, could provide some insight into the West Indian Mesopotamian experience. Unlike other operational theatres, such as the Western Front, Italy, Palestine and East Africa, there is no record of misconduct

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<sup>94</sup> Hall, 185.

<sup>95</sup> J. Cran, "British Honduras," in Charles Lucas (Ed.), *The Empire at War*, Volume II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 434-45.

<sup>96</sup> Hall, *The Inland Water Transport*, 185.

<sup>97</sup> For example, see Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 72.

amongst West Indian soldiers in Mesopotamia.<sup>98</sup> The death rate was also remarkably low, with only thirteen West Indians dying while in the service of the IWT.<sup>99</sup>

In contrast to West Indian service in France, Belgium, and Palestine, service in Mesopotamia represents a real void within the British West Indian war narrative. The West Indian MEF contingent was the smallest West Indian contingent of the war, and only the WIR's Cameroon Campaign resulted in fewer service-related deaths. For these reasons, it is unsurprising that subsequent historians of the West Indian wartime experience have neglected to incorporate the West Indians' Mesopotamian experience into the broader narrative. Yet West Indian contributions to the Mesopotamian campaign were not insignificant, being only marginally smaller than 2WIR's East African contingent discussed in chapter five.

## **Conclusion**

Labour experience was, in many ways, the dominant West Indian episode of the First World War. Interwar nationalist historians and politicians such as C.L.R. James and Arthur Cipriani focused their attention on West Indian participation in Palestinian combat operations; but the piling of shells and loading of ships has been used in recent years by nationalist historians in an attempt to demonstrate the racist system in which West Indians enlisted. In many ways, the primary West Indian First World War narrative stems from the experiences of the 3rd and 4th BWIR battalions: soldiers who enlisted as infantry,

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<sup>98</sup> TNA, WO 213, "JAG: FGCM."

<sup>99</sup> Hall, 193.

were trained as infantry, but who were instead used against their wishes as military labourers.

Yet, like so many other aspects of the West Indies' war memory, this analogy only tells a partial truth. While 3BWIR and 4BWIR were undoubtedly raised and trained as infantry battalions, the same cannot be said of other BWIR formations that laboured in western Europe. Discussions between the War Office and Colonial Office amidst the 1916 military labour crisis led to the commencement of a labour recruitment campaign rather than an infantry recruitment campaign as had occurred from 1915 to 1916. Indeed, it must be remembered that the British Army ceased their West Indian recruitment campaign following the establishment of 4BWIR due to there being enough recruits to support a West Indian infantry brigade and an appropriately sized infantry reserve.

The British Army also took a different approach in establishing the labour battalions as opposed to the service battalions. As was discussed in chapter four, the army made numerous efforts to staff the first four BWIR battalions with suitably trained and experienced infantry officers in addition to local West Indian officers. Starting with the sixth battalion, however, the requirement for experienced and trained leadership was abandoned, which ultimately resulted in the appointment of two inexperienced West Indian officers as battalion commanders. West Indian labour battalions received only a fraction of the European staff that was provided to the first, second, and East African battalions. It must be remembered too that, by this stage of the war, the British Army had an ample supply of experienced officers and non-commissioned officers to draw on if they wanted to staff the sixth through eleventh battalions as the first four were; instead, the last six BWIR battalions were staffed in the same way as other British labour

battalions. As well, unlike the West Indian battalions created during 1915-16, the labour battalions received no training in tactics or maneuvers.

The dominant West Indian First World War labour narrative is that the Caribbean volunteers were forced to labour instead of fight, as they volunteered to do. Again, this was certainly true of the third and fourth battalions, as evidenced by the high rate of infractions when compared to the other BWIR battalions, but can the same be said with certainty of the other labour battalions? While indiscipline existed in the other labour battalions, the number of charges laid in each battalion was not as high as those in 3BWIR and 4BWIR and correlate to the strength of battalion leadership rather than to their employment. West Indian military labourers of 1916-17 instead seemed more content with their employment and reacted to poor relations with their officers. The ninth and eleventh battalions, both under the command of officers with substantial Western Front experience, had a much lower number of charges than the other labour battalions, and 6BWIR would experience a sharp decrease in indiscipline following the appointment of an experienced officer as battalion commander in 1918.

What is known is that, in terms of personnel, labour duties represented the most significant West Indian experience of the war. By the 1918 Hundred Days Offensive, West Indian labourers could be found in Belgium, France, Italy, and Mesopotamia, not to mention basic labour duties undertaken by 1BWIR and 2BWIR during their time behind the front. BWIR labourers nonetheless modified the traditional soldier identity to suit their circumstances, emphasizing geographic proximity to the front and the dangers of German shelling over bayonet charges, trench raids, and combined operations. By the end of the war, an indeterminate number of tons of shells were moved by West Indian

labourers, who were moved to Italy to serve as dockworkers amidst the British Army's slow demobilization. Grouped at the port of Taranto and completing tasks that were normal during the winter periods along the south of France, tensions between the West Indian volunteers and the white-dominated military hierarchy would finally reach their breaking point, ushering in the modern era of British West Indian nationalism and a racial awakening amongst the BWIR's Black troops.



## Chapter 7: The Return

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918, Germany's surrender was celebrated throughout the British West Indies. In the days leading up to Armistice Day, Jamaica's *Gleaner* reported on the rapidly evolving situation in Berlin and along the Western Front. By November 11<sup>th</sup>, Jamaicans were aware of Kaiser Wilhelm's abdication, of the socialist revolution in Germany and, more importantly, that a German Army delegation was meeting with the Supreme Allied Commander, Ferdinand Foch, to discuss terms of an armistice.<sup>1</sup> When the *Gleaner* printed news of the war's conclusion twenty-four hours after the fact, it was, by then, old news; Jamaican headlines were dominated not by Germany's surrender but rather the alarming prevalence of influenza that was spreading across the island.

West Indian soldiers abroad, for their part, paid even less attention to the end of the war. Of the twelve West Indian battalions still in the field, only 1BWIR's war diary referenced the signing of the armistice, stating matter-of-factly that "Germany and Austria had accepted the Allied terms and had signed an armistice that day."<sup>2</sup> The other West Indian battalions continued with their assigned tasks. As winter approached, the labour battalions in Western Europe boarded transport ships bound for the naval base at Taranto, in southeastern Italy, where they would spend the winter. This is not to suggest that West Indian labourers were ambivalent or ignorant to the importance of the armistice; rather that, unlike their infantry comrades, their daily tasks remained unchanged.

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<sup>1</sup> "German Delegates Meet General Foch," *Daily Gleaner*, 11 November 1918, 30.

<sup>2</sup> WIC, "War Diary: 1BWIR."

The surrender of the Central Powers in late 1918 should have brought an end to the West Indian experience in the First World War. The wintering of the labour battalions in warmer climates meant that West Indians would not cross the Rhine with the Army of Occupation, while 1BWIR and 2BWIR found themselves in Ramallah, Palestine, once again on lines of communications duties at the time of the Ottoman armistice.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the Regular Army soldiers of 2WIR were moved from East Africa to Egypt, the battalion reduced to non-effective strength following two years of disease-related casualties.<sup>4</sup> Instead, arguably the most important even from a West Indian perspective — the BWIR's mutiny at Taranto — was yet to occur. West Indian troops had spent the previous three years gradually adopting a militaristic identity that fit their wartime service, either as combat infantry in Egypt and Palestine or as high-risk labourers on the Western Front. Yet, at Taranto, they would face elements of the British imperial military system that opposed Black subjects' participation in the armed forces and ultimately challenged West Indian soldierly identities.

As identified in this dissertation's introduction, West Indians wartime volunteers expected some contractual reward for their service. Such rewards ranged from pay, hot meals, and medical care, to social mobility and land ownership following demobilization. As well, the creation of a West Indian dominion, responsible government, and universal male suffrage were all discussed at length in West Indian newspapers in the war's final

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<sup>3</sup> TNA, WO 95/4732, "War Diary: 2BWIR."

<sup>4</sup> TNA, WO95/4732, "War Diary: 2WIR." It seems that, just as 2WIR soldiers complained of mistaken identity during the Great War, somewhere along the way archivists placed 2BWIR's and 2WIR's 1918-19 war diaries in the same file.

two years. Yet, while Black West Indians looked to the postwar world as one of hope and promise, most Britons — civilians and servicemen alike — instead hoped that the peace of 1918 would instead return Britain and its empire to the state that existed before 1914.<sup>5</sup> These conflicting desires and attitudes regarding race, empire, and the post-1918 world would ultimately increase the war divide between Black West Indians and white Britons regarding the Caribbean, resulting in the formation of a British West Indies independence movement.

The notion of Britain and the British Empire seeking a return to ‘normalcy’ after the First World War was discussed at length by Susan Kingsley Kent in her work *Aftershocks*. Kent maintains that, in the decade following Germany’s surrender, Britons rallied around the notion of ‘the nation’: embracing ‘Britishness’ — white, masculine, ideologies — to the detriment of other, marginalized groups within the British Empire. Kent argues that Britain’s collective trauma of the First World War led to a national entrenchment of prewar notions of race and imperial hierarchy; that, while previously marginalized groups (Blacks, Indians, Jews, and Catholics) hoped that their wartime experiences would result in a betterment of their social standing, most Britons instead objected to any change to the prewar social norm, often violently.<sup>6</sup> In his article “Forging a Peaceable Kingdom,” Jon Lawrence argues that the violent ‘normalization’ of the

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<sup>5</sup> See Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); <sup>5</sup> Jon Lawrence, “Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain,” *The Journal of Modern Military History* 75 (2003): 557–89.

<sup>6</sup> Kent, 35–63.

British Empire through brutal military responses to events in India, Ireland, and Britain were supported by a large number of the British population.<sup>7</sup>

The Taranto mutiny and subsequent awakening of British West Indian nationalism have been examined in the existing historiography and then explained through a racial lens. W.F. Elkins first discussed the Taranto mutiny as an episode of racial and nationalist awakening in his 1970 article “A Source of Black Pride in the Caribbean.”<sup>8</sup> Writing from a Marxist perspective, Elkins pitted the white officer bourgeoisie against the Black proletariat within the context of First World War British military service. Subsequent studies of the West Indian First World War experience have been built on Elkins’ research, most notably Glenford Howe’s *Race, War and Nationalism*, in which the Taranto mutiny is presented as the primary reaction of Black West Indians to repeated racism from the white British military authorities.<sup>9</sup> Richard Smith also takes this position regarding the mutiny, describing the event as a breaking point for West Indian troops after a year of progressively worsening conditions.<sup>10</sup>

West Indian soldiers demonstrated their loyalties to the British Empire during 1914-18 and, to that end, fulfilled their end of the unwritten social contract between soldier and empire. Peace was supposed to bring prosperity, social mobility and perhaps increased West Indian autonomy, all of which West Indians fought for during the numerous strikes and demonstrations that occurred before the war. Yet, at Taranto, West

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence, “Forging a Peaceable Kingdom,” 557–89.

<sup>8</sup> Elkins, “A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean.”

<sup>9</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 164–67.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 130–35.

Indian soldiers were harshly reminded of their place with the imperial hierarchy and became aware that Britain would not honour its end of the social contract. West Indian service in the First World War changed nothing, and West Indians responded to this breach of contract by reverting to familiar tactics in the West Indies before 1914: through strikes and challenges to imperial authority.

Writing on the paradoxes of Caribbean identity, Stuart Hall commented

identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves, it is stories which change with historical circumstance. And identity shifts with the way in which we think and hear them and experience them. Far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognition which others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition.<sup>11</sup>

Although written about the influence of the United States Black Power movement on Jamaican race consciousness, one can apply Hall's thesis to West Indian First World War soldiers. Although hoping that Britain would reward their military service after the war, West Indian soldiers in 1914 were, undoubtedly, British. West Indian calls for land grants, the right to vote, and increased employment were always demanded within an imperial framework. The 1903 Water Riots were not an attempt to overthrow imperial rule but rather a result of imperial governance overstepping its boundaries. Yet, when the British Army denied West Indian soldiers pay increases or ordered them to service the latrines of Italian, civilian labourers, West Indian soldiers responded by questioning their assumed imperial identity. As Hall states, identity stemmed from outside responses to

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *New Left Review* 0, no. 209 (1995): 8.

West Indians, who responded accordingly by gradually turning their backs on the British Empire.

### **Breaking the Contract**

While the underlying causes of the 1918 Taranto mutiny have largely been attributed to the treatment of West Indians immediately before the mutiny, British disregard for West Indian soldiers occurred much earlier. As discussed in this dissertation's third chapter, in many ways, such challenges date back to 1914 when some in the War Office maintained that Black West Indians were only fit for African fatigue duties or local defence. In the last year of the war, War Office policy implied the inferiority of West Indian soldiers by not extending to them the same military pay increases given to other imperial soldiers. Britain's 'Army Order 1' of 1918 increased the daily rate of pay for imperial troops by sixpence, setting the daily rate of pay for a private at one shilling, sixpence.<sup>12</sup> Yet, BWIR soldiers were not included in the list of soldiers eligible for the pay increase. Despite having been deemed imperial soldiers upon enlistment, and subject to standard British military rates of pay, when Army Order 1 was issued the BWIR were listed as 'native' rather than 'imperial' troops.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, white members of the BWIR battalions, primarily white non-commissioned officers attached from British battalions, were afforded the pay increase. In contrast, West Indian enlisted ranks, both white and Black in the WIR and BWIR, were excluded from Army Order 1.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 161.

<sup>13</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "War Office to Fiddian," Letter, 16 December 1918.

<sup>14</sup> "'Tommy and Jack'," *John Bull*, 12 July 1919, 15.

The distinction between native and imperial troops relates to the British Army's institutional hierarchy of its soldiers. At the top of that hierarchy were the metropolitan or British troops, which included soldiers from England, Wales, Scotland, and, at least, until 1921, Ireland. Below that were imperial troops, men from the dominions and Indian, who, along with the metropolitan troops, were rewarded with the pay increase. Finally, there were native troops, including the King's African Rifles, the West African Frontier Force and, in the War Office's opinion, the British West Indies Regiment. These were the soldiers and regiments that fought mostly in the First World War's fringe campaigns, far from the Western Front. They were local troops, raised for local defence, who, for the most part, fought in their traditional territories.

The response to the pay increase (or lack thereof) amongst West Indians was, understandably, negative. Soldiers who fought in the EEF and in East Africa were particularly incensed, going so far as to write letters to West Indian colonial administrators and the West India Committee's Contingent Committee to advocate on their behalf.<sup>15</sup> Inquiries were made in the United Kingdom's House of Commons in November 1918, where the War Office explained that the pay increase was made available only to "regiments with their depots in the United Kingdom," and that "the non-commissioned officers and men [of the BWIR] have received the benefit of the accelerated grant of proficiency pay and relief from hospital stoppages, but that they are not eligible for [the additional pay increase]."<sup>16</sup> The 'stoppages' which the War Office

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<sup>15</sup> WIC, Algernon E. Aspinall, Contingent Committee, Minutes, 25 June 1918.

<sup>16</sup> "British West Indies Regiment's Pay," *WICC*, Vol 33, 28 November 1918, 346.

referenced referred to the army's traditional practice of stopping a soldier's pay if he were admitted to hospital for reasons relating to offences listed in the *Army Act 1881*.<sup>17</sup>

Hospitalisations that resulted in pay stoppage included self-inflicted wounds and the treatment of venereal disease.<sup>18</sup> In 1917, hospital stoppages were halted entirely for the entire British Army, including the West Indians.<sup>19</sup> In short, the War Office's position was that West Indian troops should be content with what limited financial benefits had been provided to them.

Exposing the hypocrisy of army pay was the British Government's extension of pay increases to members of the South African Overseas Contingent. According to the criteria set forth in Army Order 1, South African troops should have been denied the 1918 pay increase for the same reason that West Indians were denied an increase: there were no South African regimental depots in the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> Yet special exemption was made for South African soldiers, clearly demonstrating that the 1918 pay increase was influenced more by imperial hierarchy and race than it was by a regiment's actual wartime service. Ultimately, the London-based West India Committee, which included the former governors of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, British Guiana, the Bahamas, Barbados, and the Windward and Leeward Islands, petitioned on behalf of all BWIR soldiers to extend the pay increase of 1918 to include West Indian troops. The West India Committee was, for the duration of the war, the BWIR's advocacy group in London; the

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<sup>17</sup> *Army Act 1881*, c. 138.

<sup>18</sup> J.M. Hogge and T.H. Garside, *War Pensions and Allowances* (London, New York, & Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), 320–21.

<sup>19</sup> Hogge and Garside, 324–25.

<sup>20</sup> WIC, "Thurn et al to War Office," Letter, 30 December 1918, 1, in "War Diary: 1BWIR."



committee coordinating fundraising efforts to support troop movements from the West Indies to Europe, provided gifts to West Indian and Bermudian soldiers at Christmas and, from 1918-19, advocated on behalf of West Indian soldiers for the army pay raise. However, this campaign did not begin until November 1918, and did not extend to WIR soldiers who had always been considered ‘native’ troops before the war.<sup>21</sup>

British efforts to divide its army by segregating which soldiers received pay increases were part of British attempts to maintain prewar societal norms in a postwar world. For the millions of imperial soldiers who participated in the war effort, the armistice represented a moment to ‘cash in’ on four years of imperial service. Although each soldier enlisted for varying personal reasons, collective groups within the British armed forces sought to improve their position within the British Empire. West Indian newspapers echoed the sentiments of Caribbean political leaders who hoped that West Indian participation in the Great War might result in great regional autonomy, or even the creation of a federated West Indian dominion.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, individual Black West Indians hoped for land reform and universal male suffrage. On the contrary, Britons, above all else, desired a return to the prewar status quo. As Susan Kingley Kent notes, in the Great War’s aftermath

British society as a whole constructed its coherent narrative through a variety of developments and events designed to tell a particular story of the nation, one that involved the separating out of forces to whom blame for British ills could be assigned so that safety could be established [for British society]: Jews and Blacks had behaved ignominiously during the

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<sup>21</sup> WIC, “Thurn et al to War Office.”

<sup>22</sup> “Future of the West Indies,” *POSG*, 21 July 1917, 11.

war, seeking refuge while native Britons conducted themselves with honour...<sup>23</sup>

Within the context of the British Empire, the conflicting wants and desires of Britons and imperial subjects frequently came to blows during the immediate interwar years.<sup>24</sup> By 1925, Britain enacted the Coloured Alien Seaman Order that forced all undocumented Black sailors in Britain to register as aliens, which hindered Black sailors' abilities to secure employment.<sup>25</sup> Tensions between British merchant sailors and Black imperial sailors competing for a limited interwar job market resulted in violent demonstrations and riots throughout Britain in 1919.<sup>26</sup> At the heart of these conflicts was the question of 'Britishness' and to whom the term applied. For many imperial subjects after 1918, active participation in the Great War brought with it a certain degree of *Britishness* – an identity and connection with the imperial metropole in which imperial soldiers were at least on par with their British comrades – while Britons themselves sought to maintain the prewar social norms regarding national racial identities.

The exclusion of West Indian soldiers from army pay increases was the first in a series of British actions designed to differentiate the West Indians from their British comrades during 1918-19. During a voyage from Egypt to Italy, West Indian soldiers were tasked with doing "nearly all fatigue duties" aboard their troopship, despite being a

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<sup>23</sup> Kent, *Aftershocks*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Helen M. Rajabi, "The Idea of Race in Interwar Britain: Religion, Entertainment and Childhood Experiences," PhD Dissertation (University of Manchester, 2013), 9–10.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Tabili, "The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seaman) Order, 1925," *Journal of British Studies* 33, no. 1 (1994): 54–98.

<sup>26</sup> Jacqueline Jenkinson, "Black Sailors on Red Clydeside: Rioting, Reactionary Trade Unionism and Conflicting Notions of 'Britishness' Following the First World War," *Twentieth Century British History* 19, no. 1 (2008): 29–60; Rajabi, "The Idea of Race in Interwar Britain," 9–10.

minority amongst the approximately 2,000 (mainly white) soldiers aboard.<sup>27</sup> The tasks assigned to the West Indians included cleaning their own shipboard living spaces and the decks that were occupied by the white soldiers, who were not required to maintain their own quarters. The West Indian soldiers — some veterans and all trained as infantry — provided no documented opposition to their employment at sea.

At Taranto, Italy, however, West Indian troops reached their breaking point. British naval personnel established a base at Taranto following Italy's 1915 entry into the war. With the establishment of British Expeditionary Force (Italy) (BEF(I)) in October 1917, the port became the main location to disembark British personnel and stores for the Italian Front. Following BEF(I)'s establishment, Taranto became a principal winter port for West Indian soldiers, who had previously spent their winter months in the south of France. At the time of the German armistice, 8BWIR, 10BWIR, and 11BWIR were already employed at Taranto Base.<sup>28</sup> By the end of November, all but 1BWIR, 2BWIR, 5BWIR, 2WIR and the IWT were in Italy as well.

Little had changed for the BWIR battalions in Italy following the suspension of hostilities. Like other British military formations, routine duties continued in the period between the signing of the armistice and Germany's official surrender in 1919 under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles; the West Indians continued to be used as labour troops at the Taranto port as they had been during the winter of 1917-18. Seventeen soldiers from 4BWIR were attached to a Royal Engineer section to construct additional messing

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<sup>27</sup> "Trinidad: The Interesting Case of Major Harrigin," *The Workman*, 19 July 1919, 2.

<sup>28</sup> WIC, "West Indian Contingent Committee," Report, 31 December 1919, 1.

halls in Taranto in November 1918.<sup>29</sup> Soldiers of 6BWIR rotated between military training classes and dock worker duties, while troops from both 3BWIR and 8BWIR were employed as general labourers under the Taranto labour supervisor's direct control.<sup>30</sup> As with other locations where West Indians laboured, sickness remained a problem for BWIR troops in Italy. The appearance of influenza resulted in the entirety of 4BWIR being placed into quarantine immediately following their arrival on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1918.<sup>31</sup> On the surface, West Indian working conditions in Taranto did not differ from West Indian labour experiences between 1916-18.

Yet, beneath the surface, conditions were not as straightforward as they appeared. Numerous factors came together to create a situation in which mass West Indian dissatisfaction was likely, if not inevitable. The concentration of BWIR battalions at Taranto in November 1918 represented the largest collection of West Indian soldiers of the war, amounting to approximately 12,000 soldiers (roughly the equivalent of a complete West Indian infantry division). More importantly, this gathering of West Indian forces included five of the six most ill-disciplined and poorly led West Indian units: 3, 4, 6, 7, and 10BWIR.<sup>32</sup> As was discussed in the previous chapter, these battalions suffered from a combination of poor leadership (particularly the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> battalions) and

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<sup>29</sup> TNA, WO 95/409/3, "War Diary: 4BWIR."

<sup>30</sup> TNA, WO 95/495/3, "War Diary: 6BWIR,,"; TNA, WO 95/338/1, "War Diary: 3 BWIR,,"; and TNA, WO 95/4262, "War Diary: 8BWIR."

<sup>31</sup> TNA, WO 95/409/3, "War Diary: 4BWIR."

<sup>32</sup> TNA, WO 213, "JAG: FGCM." 5BWIR — the Reserve Battalion in Egypt — had the second-highest amount of court martial charges of any BWIR battalion, accounting for 14% of all BWIR charges during the war; however, it should also be noted that, as a reserve battalion servicing the rest of the BWIR, 5BWIR was often overstrength, often being twice the size of a typical infantry battalion. Therefore, it is unsurprising that this battalion accounted for a large portion of the BWIR's total infractions.

frustrations over employment as labour troops (especially in 3BWIR and 4BWIR, which were initially raised as infantry). Poor leadership, frustrations regarding their terms of employment and widespread animosity regarding the West Indian's exclusion from army pay raises, created an atmosphere in which indiscipline was sure to rise.

Soldiers in 3BWIR were particularly outraged by Britain's failure to raise West Indian military salaries in line with other imperial units. On December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1918, a collection of West Indian non-commissioned officers in Italy, led by 3BWIR's Sergeant M. Murphy, forwarded a signed petition to the Colonial Office outlining a list of grievances that came out of their wartime service.<sup>33</sup> In addition to demanding the pay increase provided to other imperial troops, Murphy and the other petitioners demanded an increase in separation allowance and the ability to be granted officer commissions and promotion above the rank of sergeant. These privileges, Murphy noted, were granted to West Indians who were "serving in European, or 'British' Regiments...[and] members of the British West Indies Regiment [in Egypt] have been promoted to such ranks."<sup>34</sup> The petitioners summarized their grievance by stating

The result of careful consideration of the forgoing matters is that we feel we have been serving as Soldiers in the British Army, assisting in a World War for Justice and Freedom, yet we, ourselves have not derived the same benefits as those along with whom we have been doing our bit and that where any such benefits have been derived it has been on a one-sided basis.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> TNA, CO 28/294/24, "M. Murphy to Secretary of State for the Colonies," Letter, 6 December 1918.

<sup>34</sup> TNA, CO 28/294/24, "M. Murphy to Secretary of State for the Colonies," 3.

<sup>35</sup> TNA, CO 28/294/24, "M. Murphy to Secretary of State for the Colonies," 4.

The petitioners' words echo Adrian Gregory's assessment of the 'economy of sacrifice' that he argued developed in Britain during and after the First World War. The economy of sacrifice, Gregory states, was "the continued need for those who had not been directly touched by loss to at least appear to pay tribute to those who had."<sup>36</sup> Murphy and the other West Indian petitioners saw the War Office's refusal to grant them the imperial troop pay increase as ignorant of their wartime service as soldiers or labourers.

Murphy and 179 other West Indian non-commissioned officers at Taranto signed the petition. While not every signee was a member of 3BWIR, the comparison to the combat units in Egypt would have certainly resonated with members of 3BWIR and 4BWIR. Murphy reminded the Colonial Office that 3BWIR was not raised as a labour unit, but instead as "Infantry of the Line" and should be afforded the same privileges as other imperial troops.<sup>37</sup> Soldiers of 3BWIR and 4BWIR, who had for two years protested their employment as labourers in acts of insubordination and general indiscipline, had finally reached their breaking point.

At the same time that Murphy and his comrades in 3BWIR and 4BWIR penned their petition, West Indians with 9BWIR and 10BWIR rebelled against British military authorities. Tensions created by a lack of quality leadership and grievances over army employment were compounded by the return of Lt.-Col Reginald Willis to the BWIR as commander 9BWIR. Willis, who was discussed in the previous chapter, had commanded 6BWIR until May 1918, when he departed in hopes of commanding a British infantry

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<sup>36</sup> Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 257.

<sup>37</sup> TNA, CO 28/294/24, "M. Murphy to Secretary of State for the Colonies," 3.

battalion.<sup>38</sup> Willis's attempts to command a fighting unit were unsuccessful and, in November, he replaced Raymond Negus as the commander of 9BWIR. It must be remembered that Willis had a reputation amongst West Indians as a strict disciplinarian with little regard or care for the Black soldiers under his command.<sup>39</sup> Upon assuming command of the 9<sup>th</sup> battalion, Willis implemented the same authoritarian rule that had defined his tenure as commanding officer of 6BWIR, and, on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1918, Willis ordered soldiers of 9BWIR to clean the latrines of Italian civilian labourers who also worked the Taranto docks.

9BWIR was one of the more disciplined West Indian units of the war, particularly amongst the labour battalions raised after 1916.<sup>40</sup> Yet Willis's order for West Indians to clean civilian latrines, in addition to widespread pre-existing West Indian grievances regarding pay, benefits, and promotions, proved to be a breaking point. Unlike War Office policy that aimed to differentiate the West Indians as inferior soldiers within the larger British imperial armies, Willis's order challenged the West Indian 'soldier' identity that the soldiers had gradually adopted during their wartime service. West Indian troops, who had spent the better part of two years transitioning from civilians into British soldiers, were suddenly told that their position within the local Taranto Base social hierarchy was below that of Italian civilians, despite the West Indians being uniformed British subjects. In response to Willis's challenge of their wartime identity and the War

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<sup>38</sup> Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 127.

<sup>40</sup> TNA, WO 213, "JAG: FGCM."

Office's efforts to differentiate West Indians from metropolitan and dominion services, the 9<sup>th</sup> battalion mutinied.

On the morning of December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1918, soldiers of 9BWIR assaulted their white officers at Taranto, including Colonel Willis, whose tent was slashed open by bayonet-wielding West Indians.<sup>41</sup> That same day, Sgt Murphy of 3BWIR and 179 other West Indian non-commissioned officers penned and signed their petition to the Colonial Office demanding increases in pay, separation allowance, and the ability to be promoted beyond sergeant. The following day, a large portion of 10BWIR and the entirety of 9BWIR refused to work.<sup>42</sup> As the mutiny progressed, more BWIR battalions voiced their dissatisfaction with their current situation. Even after the deployment of Italian soldiers to Taranto on December 11<sup>th</sup>, West Indian demonstrations continued.<sup>43</sup>

British responses to the mutiny were swift. As early as the mutiny's first day, the Taranto base commander requested that a white British battalion be sent to Taranto to quash the mutiny and that the BWIR battalions be immediately dispersed throughout the Mediterranean to Egypt, Malta, Salonika, or Marseilles.<sup>44</sup> By December 10<sup>th</sup>, all West Indian troops in Taranto, whether participating in the mutiny or not, were disarmed. Threats of escalation, however, remained, and 9BWIR was subsequently disbanded, and its personnel dispersed amongst the remaining five battalions at Taranto.<sup>45</sup> Finally, on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1918, the British commander in Italy, the Earl of Cavan, dispatched the

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<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 130.

<sup>42</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "War Office to GHQ Italy," Telegram, 11 December 1918.

<sup>43</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "War Office to GHQ Italy & GOC in C," Telegram, 11 December 1918.

<sup>44</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "Base Commander Taranto to War Office," Telegram, 9 December 1918.

<sup>45</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "Base Commander Taranto to War Office," Telegram, 10 December 1918.



8<sup>th</sup> Worcestershire Regiment and one machine gun company to Taranto to put down the mutiny, with another British battalion on standby if needed.<sup>46</sup>

The army sought to eliminate any chances of a repeat. Forty-nine West Indians were charged in relation to the mutiny and sentenced to 3-5 year's hard labour, with a further thirteen members charged for unrelated offences at Taranto during the same period.<sup>47</sup> Private Sanches, the mutiny's alleged mastermind, was initially sentenced to death, however that sentence was commuted to 20 years' imprisonment. What remained of the BWIR labour battalions were unceremoniously repatriated to the West Indies instead of returning to their duties. The West Indians were divided into three large groups of 1,413, 5,067, and 986 enlisted ranks respectively and left Taranto as early as December 1918.<sup>48</sup> Such was the unceremonious end to the largest West Indian contribution of the Great War.

While their labour counterparts were mutinying at Taranto, combat soldiers of 1BWIR, 2BWIR and 5BWIR, as well as the regular troops of 2WIR performed occupation duties in the Ottoman Empire. Like other British imperial units of 1918-19, the West Indian combat battalions had begun the gradual demobilization process with the repatriation of attached officers and non-commissioned officers from other British units. In January 1919, 2BWIR lost CSM R.C. James, Lt J Fisher, and Lt F McNeil of the Welsh Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> (Garrison) Battalion Worcestershire Regiment, and 7<sup>th</sup> East

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<sup>46</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "IGC Italy to War Office," Telegram, 11 December 1918.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 131.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "GHQ Italy to War Office," Telegram, 19 December 1918.

Yorkshire Regiment respectively.<sup>49</sup> In February, Lt H.A. Hahn of 2BWIR was sent to Kantara for demobilization. During their occupation duties, the West Indian battalions conducted patrols, underwent additional training, and select officers were awarded leave to the United Kingdom. The West Indians received welcome news in February 1919 that the War Office retroactively applied the 1918 pay increases to West Indian troops after the WIC intervened in the matter following the sergeant's petition of 1918.<sup>50</sup> Still, this demobilization routine continued until April 1919, when the BWIR battalions were ordered to Egypt for demobilization via Taranto.<sup>51</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Taranto mutiny, the base commander at Taranto was reassigned and replaced first by Major General Henry Thullier of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division, and later by one of Thullier's brigade commanders, Brigadier Cyril Cary-Barnard. Cary-Barnard, like Willis (who remained part of Cary-Barnard's staff in the aftermath of 9BWIR's disbandment), had a reputation as a racist disciplinarian.<sup>52</sup> Cary-Barnard was an England-born veteran of the Boer War who had served with the West African Regiment during the Edwardian era and as a staff officer, battalion commander, and brigade

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<sup>49</sup> TNA, WO 95/4732, "War Diary: 2BWIR."

<sup>50</sup> WIC, "The West Indian Contingent Committee," Report, 31 December 1918, 3.

<sup>51</sup> TNA, WO 95/4732, "War Diary: 2BWIR." 2WIR, however, would remain in Egypt on garrison service.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 134–35; James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 76–77. Within the existing historiography and certain West Indian accounts of the war, Cary-Barnard's name has been often misspelt, including as 'Carey Bernard,' by Smith, James, and Howe, as well as by Arthur Cipriani in his memoirs. However, British records indicate his family name being 'Cary-Barnard' as presented here. See IWM, Q25882, "Brigadier General Cary-Barnard with staff of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division studying a relief map," Photograph, *The British Army on the Italian Front, 1917-1918*, c. 1917-18; Creagh, O'Moore, and E.M. Humphries, eds. *The V.C. and D.S.O: A Complete Record of All Those Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men of His Majesty's Naval, Military, and Air Forces Who Have Been Awarded These Decorations From the Time of Their Institution, With Descriptions of the Deeds And and services which won the distinctions and with many biographical and other details*. Vol. II. London: The Standard Art Book Co, n.d., 350.

commander with the BEF on the Western Front and in Italy.<sup>53</sup> In addition to dealing with the slow repatriation of the West Indian labour battalions, Cary-Barnard's tenure as Taranto base commander was marked by a lack of adequate labour troops to operate the port in the absence of West Indian forces. In the immediate aftermath of West Indian labour demobilization at Taranto, the base was short of its labour requirements by 1,400 labourers even after hiring additional Italian civilian labourers.<sup>54</sup>

When the West Indian combat troops began arriving at Taranto in April 1919, they encountered a hostile environment spurred on by Cary-Barnard's views on Black soldiers and general attitude towards West Indians in the wake of the 1918 mutiny. Owing to the labour shortage at Taranto, soldiers of 1BWIR, 2BWIR and 5BWIR found themselves employed as general labourers when other combat troops in the area were employed as garrison troops. When ordered to clean a barracks that was recently vacated by the Maltese Labour Corps, a group of thirty 1BWIR soldiers protested their employment as barracks cleaners to their supervising officer, Major A.E. Harragin: a decorated veteran of the Palestine Campaign. West Indian soldiers argued that, as combat troops, they should not have to complete such tasks.<sup>55</sup> Harragin sympathized with the soldiers but reminded them that 'orders were orders,' and the soldiers returned to their

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<sup>53</sup> TNA, "The Official Army List," 1922, 414; TNA, WO 76/527, "Records of Officers' Services: Cyril Darcy Vivian Cary-Barnard," 1902. Like Cary-Barnard's name, other historians of the West Indian Great War experience have incorrectly given his nationality as South African, presumably due to a mistake made by Arthur Cipriani in the compilation of his wartime memoirs. However, Cary-Barnard's service record indicates that he was born in London to an Irish family. See also *Thom's Irish Who's Who: A Biographical Book of Reference of Prominent Men and Women in Irish Life at Home and Abroad* (Dublin & London: Alexander Thom & Co., 1923), 10.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, CO 318/347, "GHQ Italy to War Office," Telegram, 19 December 1918.

<sup>55</sup> "The Case of Major Harragin," *The Workman*; James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 76.

duties without further protest. Yet, upon hearing of the West Indian protest, both Willis and Cary-Barnard chastised Harragin and punished the various members involved in the protest by placing them at the bottom of the demobilization list.

The case of Major Harragin's men was not a unique experience to West Indian soldiers during Cary-Barnard's tenure as the Taranto base commander. Shortly after the arrival of 5BWIR, Cary-Barnard issued orders to all BWIR officers that West Indian soldiers found guilty of an offence would only receive Field Punishment No 1 or No 2 and that lesser punishment, such as forfeiture of pay or confinement to barracks, did not apply to West Indian troops.<sup>56</sup> Field Punishment No 1 involved a soldier being tied to an object such as a stake or gun wheel for upwards of two hours per day, while Field Punishment No 2 was the assignment of extra labour duties.<sup>57</sup> The following day the commander of 5BWIR, Major Thursfield, met with Cary-Barnard to protest the use of West Indian soldiers as general labourers.

I told the Base Commandant that on the formation of the Regiment and on enlistment the men had been promised that they should be treated as British troops, that this promise had in Egypt always been scrupulously kept, and that I took it that work would not be given to them which British troops would not be called on to do. [Cary-Barnard] replied that he was perfectly aware of the promise, and intended to take no notice of it; that the men were **only niggers**, and that no such treatment should ever have been promised to them; that they were **better fed and treated than any nigger had a right to expect**; that he would force them to do it.<sup>58</sup>

Such attitudes toward the Black West Indians were common at Taranto, even for the combat soldiers who arrived from Egypt. When three British soldiers were chased out

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<sup>56</sup> James, 76–77.

<sup>57</sup> "Discipline and Punishment," Canadian War Museum, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 76–77. Emphasis added here.

of a BWIR encampment after calling a group of West Indians “Black swine,” Cary-Barnard ruled that the West Indians were the aggressors, and they were subsequently punished for “creating a disturbance.”<sup>59</sup> When sports were organized for the British forces at Taranto, Cary-Barnard ordered the events segregated and forbade the West Indians from competing alongside white troops, even though West Indians had routinely participated in inter-army competitions when part of the EEF in Egypt and Palestine.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the West Indians were forbidden from visiting the messes of white units or from visiting the same hospitals as British troops, being sent instead to the Native Soldier hospital.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike West Indians assigned to labour battalions, however, there were no strikes, riots, or mutinies by members of the combat battalions during their time at Taranto, although there are reasons that can explain this lack of response. The combat soldiers were cleaning vacated barracks, not occupied ones, and the West Indians sent to Taranto after the mutiny benefitted from superior military training and superior leadership than their labour battalion counterparts. In fact, Trinbagonian Captain Arthur Cipriani of 1BWIR was the lone voice of discontent amongst the West Indians, going so far as to file an official protest with the War Office concerning Cary-Barnard’s treatment of the West Indians. After a lengthy investigation that did not conclude until 1920, the War Office ultimately sided with Cary-Barnard, stating that the BWIR infantrymen were treated no different than any other British soldier; that, like all other soldiers, they were required to

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<sup>59</sup> “The Case of Major Harragin,” *The Workman*.

<sup>60</sup> James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, 76–77.

<sup>61</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 166–67.

do some fatigue work, that they could not avail of the local messes because of their status as ‘troops in transit’ and not part of the permanent garrison, and that, unlike the labour battalions, the infantrymen were not called on to perform demeaning work such as cleaning latrines other than their own.<sup>62</sup>

The discrimination faced by members of the BWIR at Taranto radicalized some West Indian soldiers. In the wake of the mutiny, sixty non-commissioned officers formed the ‘Caribbean League,’ a grassroots nationalist movement that advocated for the “promotion of all matters conducive to the General Welfare of the islands constituting the British West Indies and the British Territories adjacent thereto.”<sup>63</sup> At the same meeting, a sergeant of 3BWIR proclaimed that “the Black man should have freedom and govern himself in the West. [sic] Indies and that force must be used, and if necessary bloodshed to attain that object.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, at the same meeting, the Black organizers threatened their white non-commissioned officers. Black nationalist and West Indian labour movements also protested the treatment of the West Indian soldiers at Taranto. *The Workman* — the English-language newspaper in Panama — labelled both Willis and Cary-Barnard as “two Englishmen of a type (not entirely unknown to Trinidad) peculiarly titted to estrange colonials and demolish, rather than keep together, that structure which it has taken great men so many years to build — (the British Empire).”<sup>65</sup>

## Ex-Servicemen

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<sup>62</sup> TNA, CO 318/359, “War Office to Colonial Office,” Letter, 25 June 1920.

<sup>63</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, “Report on Caribbean League Meeting,” 17 December 1918, found in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. IX (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 807.

<sup>64</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, “Maxwell Smith to Henry Thuillier,” Letter, 27 December 1918, found in Hill, IX:805.

<sup>65</sup> “The Case of Major Harragin,” *The Workman*. No definition could be found for ‘titted’ in this context.

When the First World War ended, demobilized soldiers received, amongst other service medals, the Victory Medal; on the reverse side was inscribed ‘THE GREAT WAR FOR CIVILISATION 1914-1919.’ The inscription reflected popular notions of why the war was fought: for liberal ideologies such as freedom and democracy, justice, and righteousness.<sup>66</sup> The ‘war to end all wars’ was supposedly fought against German militarism, and service in that war by marginalized groups was supposed to improve living, social, and political conditions at home. Many Irish nationalists, for example, volunteered in the hope that wartime service would persuade Britain to enact the Home Rule Bill, while the dominions’ Indigenous soldiers hoped that wartime service would lead to increased political power within their respective countries.<sup>67</sup> Yet in both of these cases and the West Indian example discussed here, wartime service changed nothing. Home Rule was never enacted in Ireland, resulting in the Irish War of Independence from 1919-21. Indigenous soldiers returned as second-class citizens in the dominions. And West Indians returned to an economic recession, limited employment opportunities, and the inability to participate in colonial politics, nor were the colonies federated or granted dominion status.

While their time spent at Taranto had reminded West Indians of their position within the British military’s hierarchy, their return to the West Indies marked a return to the prewar world. Although the West Indies experienced an economic boom during the

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<sup>66</sup> See Vance, *Death so Noble*, 12–34; Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994), 8–50; Allen Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 197–266.

<sup>67</sup> Grayson, *Belfast Boys*, 9–22; Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples*, 97–148.

war years, the cessation of hostilities meant that the British West Indies once again became an economic afterthought to American plantations in the Caribbean and Central America.<sup>68</sup> Like other ex-servicemen throughout the British Empire, West Indians returned home to limited job prospects and little social change.



*FigureChapter 7.1 - Obverse of British Victory Medal (1918)<sup>69</sup>*

Even before the war had ended, British West Indian political leaders had recognized the need to plan for the eventual return of West Indian soldiers. A 1917 letter to the editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette* noted that most soldiers had “waved well-merited promotion to answer the call of empire,” and that,

Very many of these volunteers could ill afford to give up their jobs and go; but they went. Every one of them except perhaps those who were in

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<sup>68</sup> For example, see Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 299–307; Franklin Knight, “The Struggle of the British Caribbean Sugar Industry, 1900–2013,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 48, no. 1/2 (2014): 149–65; Beckert, *Empires of Cotton*, 409–15.

<sup>69</sup> Retrieved from Government of Canada, “Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal),” Veterans Affairs Canada, 2020, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/medals-decorations/details/10>.



the public service — will have to begin life afresh; for it would be impossible for them to pick up the threads where they left off.<sup>70</sup>

Local West Indian governments had been preparing for the return of 15,000 West Indian soldiers before the war had finished. In 1917, Jamaican legislators proposed that returning soldiers receive free land grants, an exemption from land taxes, and preferential employment on public works projects. The Jamaican governor, however, disregarded those requests and instead insisted that returning soldiers be engaged through a series of public works projects.<sup>71</sup> The Jamaican Government's position was that it was not the colony's responsibility to care for ex-servicemen. Rather, prewar employers would "be pressed to re-engage men," and that an "ex-comrades association" would be formed as a social network for the ex-servicemen.<sup>72</sup> The Jamaican Government would, however, provide free technical training to returning soldiers as a means of transitioning them into new industries; an endeavour that the Trinbagonian Government chose to undertake as well. Other British West Indian colonial governments managed ex-soldier's pensions on behalf of the British Ministry of Pensions, and provided training and helped men find employment as needed. Still, no serious efforts were made regarding the reintegration of ex-servicemen into West Indian civilian society, as promises to connect the Rio Grande settlement to the rest of Jamaica proved to be empty.<sup>73</sup>

To make matters worse, in addition to returning to a region with poor employment opportunities, West Indian ex-servicemen were also returning to a higher cost of living

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<sup>70</sup> NATT, *POSG*, "The Problem of Our Returned Soldiers," 18 September 1917, 11.

<sup>71</sup> TNA, PIN 15/1782, "British West Indies Regiment: Assistance to Discharged Soldiers," Précis, 16 January 1917.

<sup>72</sup> PIN 15/1782, "British West Indies Regiment: Assistance to Discharged Soldiers."

<sup>73</sup> TNA, PIN 15/1784, "Pensions Etc., Administration; British West Indies," 10 December 1935.

than they had been accustomed to before enlistment. Over the course of the First World War, living expenses throughout the British West Indies increased exponentially, leading the General Officer Commanding — Jamaica to demand that the War Office increase the pension rate for ex-WIR soldiers to reflect the higher cost of living.<sup>74</sup> The request for increased regular-service pensions stated that, between 1919 and 1921, the cost of living in the West Indies increased so much that it was almost on par with that of the United Kingdom, owing to “the proximity of Cuba and the adverse rate of exchange with the United States, America.”<sup>75</sup>

West Indian colonial governments did attempt to alleviate ex-servicemen’s problems. Land settlement schemes were eventually undertaken in St. Vincent and, most notably, Jamaica.<sup>76</sup> Land settlement schemes were not unique to the British West Indies in the war’s aftermath. Throughout the British Empire, similar schemes were enacted to employ thousands of otherwise unemployed ex-soldiers as farmers, develop untouched land throughout the empire, and, most importantly, prevent an exodus of British subjects to non-imperial realms, most notably the United States.<sup>77</sup> Yet, in the British West Indies, land settlement carried an additional factor in that it was one of criteria tied to the right to vote. According to John Gannon, in order to vote in Jamaica,

One needed to be a British subject, twenty-one years of age, under “no legal incapacity,” and having received within the past twelve months no “relief from public or parochial funds.” In addition, one was required to have paid annual real property taxes totaling one pound and ten shillings,

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<sup>74</sup> TNA, T 161/148, “War Office to Treasury,” Letter, 1 April 1921.

<sup>75</sup> T 161/148, “War Office to Treasury.”

<sup>76</sup> TNA, T 161/220, “St Vincent Road and Land Settlement Scheme,” Folio, 1923.

<sup>77</sup> Kent Fedorowich, *Unfit for Heroes: Reconstruction and Soldier Settlement in the Empire Between the Wars*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

while a renter had to show a minimum annual income of fifty pounds and an annual rent of at least ten pounds.<sup>78</sup>

Unlike metropolitan Britain, universal suffrage was not enacted in the British West Indies during the war, and a man's right to vote was tied to his status as a landowner. Despite the many other hurdles one had to overcome to be granted the right to vote (particularly the income requirements), the provision of crown land to Jamaican ex-servicemen eliminated the biggest barrier to suffrage for these soldiers.

Nevertheless, the Jamaican colonial government developed a land settlement scheme in 1923: setting aside approximately 3,000 acres of cultivatable land in the Rio Grande Valley in northeastern Jamaica. The land had been previously developed for banana plantations and was thought to offer the best opportunity for agricultural development. Furthermore, the region received significant rainfall, and its location near the Rio Grande would provide ample water to sustain ex-soldier farming efforts. The Jamaican Government proposed allotting plots of land to ex-soldiers rent-free for their first year, after which the newfound farmers could either keep their land and start paying land taxes or return the land to the government and find other employment.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the Rio Grande's perceived suitability for farming the land was less suited to permanent settlement. The valley was, first and foremost, isolated, being cut-off from transportation networks for five months of the year owing to heavy rains that flooded the Rio Grande River. Beyond the river, the closest transportation link to Montego Bay was

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<sup>78</sup> John Gannon, "The Origins and Development of Jamaica's Two-Party System, 1930-1975," PhD Dissertation (Washington University, 1976), 15.

<sup>79</sup> "Yesterday's Session of the Hon. Legislative Council; Member for Portland Presents Report of the Committee for the Settlement of Returned British West Indies Soldiers on the Crown Lands as in the Rio Grande Valley and Elsewhere," *Daily Gleaner*, 6 December 1923, 3.

over eleven miles away. While the Jamaican Government, suddenly wealthy due to a global increase in sugar cane prices in the immediate postwar world, set aside £25,000 in 1924 to link the Rio Grande settlement with road networks in Montego Bay, such efforts never came to fruition.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, most of the land was covered in dense vegetation that first had to be cleared before significant farming operations or settlement could begin.<sup>81</sup> For these reasons, as was the case with other land settlement schemes throughout the British Empire, Jamaican land settlement efforts were, ultimately, a failure.

Opportunities did exist for West Indians to move within the British Empire for employment during the interwar years, although such opportunities were more limited than for other imperial subjects. West Indians swelled the British Merchant Navy's ranks during and immediately after the Great War, although demobilized white, British sailors came to dominate that industry again during the 1920s. The Colonial Office did provide some opportunity for intra-imperial movement to West Indian ex-servicemen in the 1920s, albeit not within the West Indies. Fiji, with its large sugar industry, was the suggested emigration point for interested demobilized West Indian soldiers during the interwar period. In Panama, the British consulate distributed over 2,000 application forms for resettlement to Fiji to the West Indian population in 1921, but there appears to have been little interest from West Indians as only 200 of the forms were returned to the British consulate.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "Business Before Hon. Legislative Council Yesterday; Scheme for Settling Returned Soldiers of the British West India Regiment and British West Indies Regiment, on Crown Lands in Portland, to be put Through at Cost of £25,000," *Daily Gleaner*, 30 April 1924, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 156–57.

<sup>82</sup> "The Fiji Island a Possible Field of Labor," *The Workman*, 12 November 1921, 1; "Indian Emigration Proposals," *WICC*, Vol 33, 21 February 1918, 73.

Ultimately, soldiers returned to the same colonial social systems and hierarchies that had existed before the war. Britain's West Indian colonies were still ruled by a combination of minority-elected whites or governors appointed by Britain. While West Indian participation in the war had renewed local discussions on the region's political future — talks of a West Indian Federation, West Indian Dominion, or even the British West Indies entering the Canadian Confederation as the tenth province — the region's political structure remained unchanged from the previous eighty years.<sup>83</sup>

While the First World War had suspended most West Indian challenges to imperial rule discussed in this dissertation's second chapter, domestic peace was only temporary. Many prewar barriers to Black social mobility remained in place, and the expected rewards of military service never materialized. In the face of continued local discrimination, a lack of universal suffrage, and minority white rule, West Indian working-and middle-class subjects launched a series of strikes against colonial rule that can be seen as a continuation of prewar anti-imperial actions. What Raphael Joseph has coined as the "correlation of race, colour, and status" resulted in a series of strikes at dockyards throughout Jamaica between June and December 1918.<sup>84</sup> In July 1919, race riots erupted in British Honduras in response to unemployment, poor social conditions,

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<sup>83</sup> See "Federal Union," *POSG*, 10 October 1917, 11; "West Indian Confederation With Canada," *POSG*, 23 November 1917, 2. Ultimately, the only successes regarding West Integration were the University of the West Indies and the West Indies cricket team. See June Soomer, "Cricket and the Politics of West Indian Integration," in *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture*, ed. Hilary McD. Beckles and Brian Stoddart (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 256–68.

<sup>84</sup> Raphael Joseph, "Nascent Unions: A Study of Trade Union Development and Labour Relations in the English-Speaking Caribbean with Particular Reference to Jamaica, Antigua, Trinidad and Tobago," PhD Dissertation (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973), 31–32.

and reports of anti-Black race riots occurring in Britain.<sup>85</sup> In November 1919, a general strike began in Trinidad and Tobago that, like the 1903 water riots before, was only put down following Royal Marines landing in Port of Spain.<sup>86</sup>

Ex-soldiers of the BWIR would become active participants in the interwar anti-imperial revolutionary uprisings that swept the Caribbean and would play a prominent role in the 1919 strikes in British Honduras and Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>87</sup> At home, the returning soldiers found a sympathetic Black population who, like those stationed at Taranto, had experienced the return to prewar status quo that was forced upon them by British authorities.<sup>88</sup> Some West Indian ex-servicemen viewed the labour struggles that rocked the immediate interwar Caribbean as a continuation of their wartime struggles for equal pay and treatment within the British Army. Ex-servicemen quickly adopted these emerging Black labour movements as social groups that fulfilled many of the requirements that the British regimental system had provided during the war.

Trade unions welcomed scores of ex-soldiers into their ranks and advocated on behalf of the ex-servicemen. Alexander Bain Alves, a prewar organizer with the cigar makers' unions, in 1921 spoke of soldiers who "went to fight for King and country and to protect the bank account of big men," and that

Ex-soldiers who left their country in a burst of glorious patriotism to fight for King and country, for the consideration of empire, and to make the

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<sup>85</sup> Adan Ewing, "Caribbean Labour Politics in the Age of Garvey, 1918-1938," *Race & Class* 55, no. 1 (2013): 23-45.

<sup>86</sup> W Elkins, "Black Power in the British West Indies: The Trinidad Longshoreman's Strike of 1919," *Science and Society* 33, no. 1 (1969): 73-75.

<sup>87</sup> Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 16-17.

<sup>88</sup> Elkins, "Black Power in the British West Indies," 72.

world free for Democracy are left sick, stricken with consumption. Shell shocked fits, frost bitten, forsaken and alone without a pension or without a friend to live as paupers and die as paupers...they stood like true Britons to all that happened at the front, but they are in mortal terror of what is happening now at the rear in their own country.<sup>89</sup>

In Alves's fiery speech, one easily sees the contradictory connections between service in 'The Great War for Civilisation' and the everyday living conditions for most Black and Creole soldiers in the West Indies. Unemployment was prevalent, especially in Jamaica, and West Indian ex-servicemen, like their dominion and metropolitan counterparts, could not easily re-enter the workforce they had left.<sup>90</sup> It must be remembered that, according to the surviving BWIR pension records, 13 percent of West Indian recruits were unemployed before the war. In comparison, 55 percent were unskilled labourers or members of the working class.<sup>91</sup> In many respects, most West Indian soldiers returned to worse employment conditions than they had experienced before the war, and conditions were worsened by the War Office's numerous refusals of disability pensions. Furthermore, the colonial government put minimal effort into soldier land settlement, which would have allowed a significant number of Black ex-servicemen to participate in local politics because of the automatic extension of voting roles associated with Jamaican land ownership. If conditions were worse after the war than before, and nothing had changed, then why exactly had West Indians fought in the Great War?

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<sup>89</sup> "The Case of An ex-Soldier Who Was In The Union Poor House," *Daily Gleaner*, 14 November 1921, 8.

<sup>90</sup> Shani Roper, "'A Almshouse Ting Dat': Development in Poor Relief and Child Welfare in Jamaica during the Interwar Years," PhD Dissertation (Rice University, 2012), 1–44.

<sup>91</sup> TNA, WO 364, "BWIR Pension Records."

Dismayed, thousands of ex-soldiers emigrated from the British West Indies to regions within the American sphere of influence, such as Cuba, where steady employment and higher wages were easily found.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, some West Indian colonial governments deemed it easier to facilitate ex-soldier emigration to American zones than to undertake land settlement schemes and employment programmes in their respective territories. The Jamaican Government, for example, provided 4,000 ex-soldiers with Cuban work permits and transportation to facilitate Jamaican emigration in 1919.<sup>93</sup> By 1921, this scheme was expanded to include finding suitable employment for ex-soldiers throughout Central America and the United States and was encouraged by Grenada's and Barbados's governments.<sup>94</sup>

While state-sponsored emigration appears to fly in the face of the grander British imperial mission of soldier settlement, the encouragement of West Indian relocation to the American sphere of influence makes sense in comparison to Britain's own attempts at domestic land settlement. As Kent Fedorowich demonstrates, Britain's own domestic soldier settlement schemes were marred by inflation, poor economic factors and, much like the British West Indies, by the ignorance of certain ministries to land settlement schemes.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, fears of mutiny, revolution, and Bolshevism were important factors in Britain establishing an imperial soldier settlement scheme so quickly after the war had ended; to remove ex-servicemen from the cities and metropole where they might be

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<sup>92</sup> Moya-Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, 300–302.

<sup>93</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 154.

<sup>94</sup> "Helping Returned Soldiers to Get Work," *The Workman*, 19 November 1921, 2-3; "Returned Soldiers Leaving," *The Workman*, 07 February 1920, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Fedorowich, *Unfit for Heroes*, 35–36.



subject to radical influencers and instead relocate them to rural parts of the empire, far from anti-imperial agitators.<sup>96</sup> Black West Indian ex-servicemen were not afforded the same opportunities for imperial settlement as their white counterparts, being limited to domestic efforts in the West Indies and resettlement to Fiji. Thus, faced with the same financial and governance factors that limited an effective domestic settlement scheme in addition to longstanding fears regarding Black ex-servicemen and revolution, it is not surprising that West Indian colonial governments simply cut their losses and exported these potentially agitated soldiers abroad.

The emigration of thousands of West Indian ex-servicemen to the Americas set the stage for the final act of interwar West Indian radicalization. In Latin America's fruit and sugar plantations and the American West Indian diaspora's ranks, these ex-soldiers found an established Marxist revolutionary system that advocated for both workers' and Black rights.<sup>97</sup> The most important of these was the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), headed by Jamaican Marcus Garvey and based in the United States. Like other Black advocates, Garvey enthusiastically supported the allied war effort as a means for persons of colour to "secure favourable treatment in the postwar world."<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the opinions of many Black subjects, soldiers and citizens alike, on the eve of war were perhaps best conveyed by American Black advocate W.E.B. DuBois:

We of the coloured race have no ordinary interest in the outcome [of the war]. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and

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<sup>96</sup> Fedorowich, 36–37.

<sup>97</sup> Elkins, "Black Power in the British West Indies."

<sup>98</sup> Adam Ewing and Ronald J. Stephens, "Introduction," in *Global Garveyism*, ed. Ronald J. Stephens and Adam Ewing (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2019), 6.

democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.<sup>99</sup>

Yet Garvey and DuBois, like the West Indian ex-soldiers, realized that wartime service did not bring about social improvement for Black citizens of either the British West Indies or the United States; a harsh reality the UNIA quickly acted on. In particular, Garvey incorporated the West Indian military experience into his calls to radicalize the Black race. At the opening of the UNIA's 1921 convention in New York City, Garvey remarked, "we desire as a race that opportunity, that freedom, that democracy that is common to humanity — that for which we fought in France and Flanders and Mesopotamia, but that which is denied us by the people for whom we fought and with whom we fought."<sup>100</sup> In the same speech, Garvey further commented that the UNIA was "not dependent on the statesmanship of fellows like DuBois to lead this race of ours, but we are depending on the statesmanship of fellows like the New York Fifteenth [Regiment], the West Indian regiments, and the Eighth Illinois [Regiment], who fought their way in France."<sup>101</sup> This second quote, in which Garvey highlighted the Black ex-soldiers of the United States and the British West Indies as being the 'statesmen' who would advance the Black race, was particularly militant; Black political emancipation

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<sup>99</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis* 16, no. 3 (1918): 111.

<sup>100</sup> Marcus Garvey, "Opening Convention Speech," New York City, 1 August 1921, found in Hill, *Marcus Garvey & UNIA Papers*, 2011, IX:129.

<sup>101</sup> Garvey, "Opening Convention Speech," found in Hill, IX:130.

would be achieved not through diplomacy, as W.E.B. Dubois had suggested, but through military action. “We are tired of being kicked about,” Garvey added to end his speech,

We are tired of being tossed around. The hour has come for a definitive decision and we are about to take the step of decision...we would like the world to understand that the Negro is prepared to be as peaceful now as he has always been, but nobody knows that the Negro is preparing to demand things that are his. Yield up the things that are belonging to the Negro and we will have everlasting peace and abiding peace. It may seem strange to hear the Negro talk in the terms of war, but that is the only medium through which men can get salvation. I do not care what the philosophers say and theologians say — war to me is the only medium through which man can seek redemption...Tonight, as representatives of 400,000,000 Negroes of the world we re-echo the words of Patrick Henry, “We care not what others may say, but as for us, give us liberty or give us death.”<sup>102</sup>

Garvey’s fiery rhetoric resonated with many ex-members of the BWIR. Sergeant A.

McNaught, formerly of 6BWIR, wrote to Garvey’s *Negro World* newspaper in 1919

lamenting the prejudices experienced by Black soldiers during and after the war. Like

many other ex-soldiers, McNaught returned to Jamaica with poor employment prospects

and little support from the British Army despite the high cost of living on the island.

“From the shell-ploughed battlefields of France and Belgium,” McNaught wrote, “we are

given for ‘ration allowance’ 25 cents per diem as against 60 cents for the other troops on

being demobilized home. Is it possible that 24 cents per day can board a man at the

present high cost of living? Is not this actually forcing us to do some mean act for our

sustenance?”<sup>103</sup> McNaught would echo Garvey’s words from the 1921 convention, adding

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<sup>102</sup> Garvey, “Opening Convention Speech,” found in Hill, IX:130–31.

<sup>103</sup> A. McNaught, “British Officers Tell French People Negroes Were Monkeys Recently Caught and Tames and Their Tales Cut Off,” *Negro World*, 1 November 1919, found in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. XI (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 1456.

Instead of having our wrongs righted, what do we see? We see that the Government was afraid of the returned soldiers, as we see them hurrying to have them scattered in the island. We also see the appointment of private constables all over the island, as they fear that our grievances would outburst in an uprising or some such thing.<sup>104</sup>

Many West Indian ex-servicemen, such as McNaught, felt that their wartime service entitled them to some sort of compensation from the imperial government. Charles O'Brien, the Governor of Barbados, commented in 1919 how numerous, discontented ex-soldiers complained about post-demobilization pay, and how the letters he received "invariably commence by reciting the services which the writers have rendered to their 'King and Country'".<sup>105</sup> An anonymous ex-BWIR sergeant and pre-war teacher wrote to *The Gleaner* in 1919 communicating his intent to seek work in Cuba owing to the lack of prospects in Jamaica, noting that "idleness is to me a torment, not an enjoyment; I cannot accept it as a fitting recompense for sacrifice."<sup>106</sup>

Radicalized by the disconnect between their wartime service and their postwar treatment, West Indian ex-servicemen took action. On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1919, some former BWIR soldiers participated in a riot in Belize Town, British Honduras, during which the soldiers protested against the discrimination they had experienced during the war.<sup>107</sup> In Trinidad and Tobago, local police forces feared that ex-soldiers would fire on government officials during the 1919 Armistice Day parade, resulting in the honour guard's disarmament and subsequent boycotting of the event by hundreds of Trinbagonian ex-

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<sup>104</sup> McNaught, "British Officers," found in Hill, XI:1458.

<sup>105</sup> Charles O'Brien to Viscount Milner, Letter, 13 October 1919, found in Hill, XI:1358.

<sup>106</sup> "The Position of a Returned School Master who was a Member of the B.W.I.R.," *Daily Gleaner*, 28 July 1919, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Hill, *Marcus Garvey & UNIA Papers*, 2011, XI:1078.

servicemen.<sup>108</sup> By 1924, Jamaica was engulfed in yet another strike that involved over 1,000 labourers, many of whom were ex-soldiers, engaging police forces with “bricks, rocks, revolvers, and rifles”.<sup>109</sup>

If service in the First World War was an awakening for Black West Indian soldiers, their return to the West Indies during labour turmoil and a heightened period of class consciousness radicalized and weaponized that experience. Ostracised from the very empire they had volunteered to fight for, West Indian ex-soldiers turned instead to the Black labour movement that grew significantly in the war’s aftermath.<sup>110</sup> Here, ex-soldiers encountered others with shared experiences of imperial discrimination who were the lone voices advocating for the betterment of the West Indies’ Black soldiers. In the ranks of interwar Black nationalist organizations, West Indian ex-servicemen found comradeship, shared ideologies, and racial radicalization.

## **Conclusion**

The homecoming experienced by West Indian soldiers from 1919 onwards was an awakening of sorts. The most experienced of the ex-soldiers had been overseas for the better part of four years, during which time they had experienced British campaigning on three different continents. As the preceding chapters have discussed, individual experiences varied. All West Indians encountered soldiers and civilians from other British realms and territories, yet these interactions could be markedly different. Some in Egypt

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<sup>108</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 196–97.

<sup>109</sup> “2 Killed 40 Wounded in Battle Fought by Rioters with Police in the City,” *Daily Gleaner*, 10 June 1924, 1.

<sup>110</sup> Ewing, “Caribbean Labour Politics.”

bonded with Anzac troops while bathing in the Suez Canal; others encountered racial prejudice from British and South African officials. Due to the nature of campaigning and weather patterns, those in East Africa had little interaction with anyone beyond their platoon or company. Perhaps except for 3BWIR and 4BWIR, West Indian soldiers tended to reflect positively on their wartime service, having served admirably for King and Empire.

However, peace with Germany came with a clear reminder of the British Empire's social and racial hierarchy. Like the Indigenous dominion soldiers of Timothy Winegard's study, West Indian troops quickly realized that little had changed since before the war. The BWIR was unceremoniously disbanded in the wake of the Taranto mutiny, and ex-soldiers returned to the West Indies without land ownership, voting rights, or employment. For many, especially the earliest West Indian recruits, life after the war was worse than before the war, as many found that their prewar occupations had been filled. While the rest of the British Empire conducted land settlement schemes, West Indian troops were instead encouraged to leave the empire altogether to find a better life in American-dominated Cuba.

Discriminated against by British officers at Taranto and cast aside by their colonial governments, many West Indian ex-soldiers were radicalized during the early interwar period by their experiences of late 1918 onwards. Amongst the ranks of radicalized Black associations of the West Indies and America, ex-soldiers found sympathetic voices who sought self-determination and universal improvement for all persons of colour. Despite the British and West Indian colonial governments' efforts to portray the war as a unifying episode for all British subjects, West Indian nationalists and

radicalized Blacks pointed instead to years of mistreatment at the hands of the white-dominated British Army.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

Writing on the eve of the Second World War, the London-based West India Committee suggested that the Regular Army West India Regiment be re-raised in light of recent German militarism and expansionism on the European continent.<sup>1</sup> The WIR was disbanded in 1927, 9 years after the end of the First World War and 122 years after its initial formation, amidst greater British defence cuts that swept through the imperial forces. The WIR, the West India Committee argued, had provided exemplary service in Cameroon during the Great War, and having proved the capabilities of the West Indian soldier since the French Revolutionary Wars, the WIR would be an invaluable asset in defending the West Indies in the likely event of a second war with Germany. Yet, despite the West India Committee's passionate (and ultimately futile) advocacy for the re-establishment of the WIR, no mention was made regarding the BWIR. It was as if the regiment had never existed.

Over a decade before the start of the First World War, some West Indian planters had attempted to replace the permanent Black garrison with a white, British garrison. A final compromise was reached between the planters and the War Office in which the Royal Navy would serve as a contingency to a possible revolt of West Indian soldiers. The WIR would guard the islands from foreign invasion, and armed British sailors and marines, in essence, would protect the islands from the imaginary WIR insurrection that had been feared since the French Revolutionary Wars. In the Great War's aftermath, the debate continued. Owing to Britain's control of the seas and normalized relations with the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Story of the Westies: Origin of a Famous Regiment," *WICC*, 4 May 1939, 176.



United States, the WIR was first reduced to a single battalion in 1921 before its eventual disbandment in 1927. The 1920s, like the fifty years before the First World War, saw much social upheaval in the British West Indies, and each time the navy was able to suppress the masses.

Conversely, the BWIR — raised for the duration of the war only — was unceremoniously disbanded in 1920, swept aside by the imperial government due to the regiment's reputation for disobedience and mutiny. While other imperial regiments, including the WIR, were represented at the 1919 victory parades in London, soldiers of the BWIR were quickly transported back to the West Indies and disarmed for a hasty demobilization. Despite assurances from the Colonial Office and local governments that voluntary wartime service would be met with postwar reward, West Indian ex-soldiers instead found much of the same from their prewar reality. Some of these interwar experiences were common to other British imperial soldiers; unemployment, a lack of promising prospects, and a questionable future were just as much part of the British experience as they were part of the West Indian demobilization. Yet, in other respects, West Indian soldiers had to contend with unique problems upon their return. While many demobilized metropolitan and dominion soldiers had been granted the right to vote during or immediately after the war, West Indian suffrage remained tied to land ownership, which most ex-soldiers - unemployed and with little prospect for employment - could not afford. Despite having fought a war in defence of liberty and liberal ideologies, the reality of the interwar West Indies was anything but.

The sharp contrast between interwar West Indian society and the West Indian wartime experience ultimately radicalized thousands of ex-soldiers against imperial rule.

West Indian soldiers shared many of the same dangers as their metropolitan and imperial counterparts; they served as combat infantry in Egypt, Palestine, and East Africa, and as labourers in Western Europe, Italy, and Mesopotamia. In the Jordan Valley, West Indian troops attacked Ottoman positions alongside Australian and New Zealand mounted infantry behind a volley of British artillery fire. At the Somme, West Indian soldiers hauled tons of artillery shells in what was supposed to be ‘the big push,’ where, unable to defend themselves, hundreds were killed by German counter-barrages. Like all other imperial troops, West Indians suffered immensely from malaria and dysentery in the East African bush. In Mesopotamia, West Indians formed the backbone of the expeditionary force’s logistical system. On five different fronts, West Indian soldiers shared the dangers, hardships, and experiences of British and dominion soldiers. They did not, however, share in the rewards after the war was won.

The most radicalizing event for British West Indian soldiers was not their Great War experience as other historians have argued, but rather a combination of unrealized benefits that were hoped to come out of imperial wartime service and a sharp return to prewar imperial societal norm. In the decades preceding the Great War, the British West Indies was a tumultuous imperial province; riots, labour demonstrations, and other episodes of social unrest had commonly occurred on many of the islands in the century before 1914. Yet when the war began, West Indian nationalists and imperialists, Black and white alike, voiced their support for Britain and encouraged West Indians to enlist so that their loyalty to Britain might be proved and, more importantly, rewarded.

The ‘fight’ to establish a West Indian contingent separate from the WIR has been well documented in the existing historical discussion. Primarily, discussions surrounding

the establishment of what would become the BWIR during 1914-15 have been treated in existing studies as the first of a long line of British prejudices against Black West Indians. Yet such criticisms of Britain's war plans for their Caribbean colonies fail to address broader developments and defence concerns for Britain's global war effort. Contrary to existing studies, West Indian recruitment was not forbidden by the War Office; more specifically, it was the creation of a West Indian overseas contingent that was initially shelved by the War Office in 1914. Enlistment into West Indian local defence forces was not only permitted following the start of the war, it was actively encouraged by the War Office so to that West Indians could defend the colonies from German raids against strategic facilities such as Trinidad's oil fields, Guyana's farmlands, and Jamaica's sugar fields. It is no coincidence that, as soon as the last of Germany's surface raiders, the *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, was interred in the United States, the War Office immediately began discussions with the West Indian colonial governments regarding the creation of a Black, overseas contingent. As well, the WIR maintained a recruitment campaign during 1914-15, only ceasing once the BWIR was formed.

West Indian soldiers can be split into three different groups for the purposes of analysis, with each group having its own unique experience of the war. The first group contains West Indians who actively participated in Great War combat operations, and included soldiers from 1BWIR, 2BWIR, 5BWIR, and 2WIR. Following a training program that lasted the better part of one year, as was the norm for other units comprised entirely of wartime volunteers, the earliest West Indian enlistees were pressed into service as lines of communications troops in Palestine, guarding the water pipeline that was of vital importance for British military planners in their campaign against the Ottoman

Empire. By 1917, West Indians would take their place in the firing line, and they participated in the final offensives in the Jordan Valley. Some of the more capable soldiers of the early contingents were sent to German East Africa where, alongside their comrades of 2WIR, they engaged in two years of bush warfare in arguably Germany's most successful campaign of the Great War.

The second group consisted of the unwilling labourers of 3BWIR and 4BWIR: West Indians who enlisted as combat soldiers but who were instead pressed into service as shell carriers and military labourers to address the BEF's labour crisis of 1916. Unsurprisingly, these soldiers were overwhelmingly critical of their wartime experience, having enlisted to fight but instead relegated to the war's rear echelon. In the century following the First World War, historians have fixated on this group as being indicative of the broader West Indian wartime experience and have pointed to Britain's employment of these soldiers as shell carriers against their will as yet another example of institutional prejudice. Yet these soldiers constituted a minority of West Indian servicemen as the third group, the labour troops, were not 'hopeful soldiers' who were instead relegated to labour tasks, but were instead dedicated labour troops who were recruited as such. Just as existing studies failed to consider imperial defence when discussing the lack of a 1914 West Indian recruitment campaign, so too have historians failed to contextualize the establishment of BWIR labour battalions within the British Army's strategic requirements for 1916-17. Unlike their counterparts in 3BWIR and 4BWIR, the seven junior BWIR battalions were established and organized as labour troops from the onset, as is evident from their lower officer complement in comparison to the infantry battalions, the appointment of non-infantry officers to hold command positions, and the recruitment of

labourers throughout the Caribbean, particularly in Panama where thousands of West Indians gained invaluable labour and construction experience on the Panama Canal project.

Hopes for a prosperous postwar world, however, did not come to fruition. In the war's immediate aftermath, West Indian soldiers were quickly reminded of their place within the empire's social hierarchy. Despite three of service on four different fronts, British military authorities were quick to dismiss their wartime service in comparison to their metropolitan and imperial comrades. Altogether, the War Office's initial decision to deny West Indian soldiers the army pay increases of 1918, the failure of West Indian colonial governments to address ex-servicemen's needs through land settlement or employment schemes, and, more importantly, the mistreatment of West Indian soldiers at Taranto by British officers demonstrated that the empire's framework after the war would be no different than it was before. Disheartened and dismayed, West Indian ex-servicemen flocked to the sugar fields of Cuba or to the United States, where they channeled their frustrations over unfulfilled wartime expectations into interwar Black nationalist organizations.

Voluntary service in the Great War did not bring about a betterment of Black West Indian society, but rather a continuation of prewar normalcy. After the war, British society was desperate to return to a prewar normalcy, as evidenced through Britain's violent reactions to nationalist movements in Ireland and India in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> Prewar power structures, political ideologies, and, most importantly, social hierarchies remained

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<sup>2</sup> Kent, *Aftershocks*, 1–9.

unchecked by four years of war. Some ex-soldiers could avail of cheap land and — if profits from farming were high enough — the rights and privileges of voting, but this was not the norm. West Indian governments in Jamaica, Grenada, and Barbados actively encouraged the emigration of ex-soldiers to the United States and Cuba as a means of ridding the empire of its burden of rewarding its former soldiers. While ex-servicemen associations existed for BWIR veterans who remained in the British West Indies, ex-servicemen emigrants —disheartened, dismayed, and angry — instead turned to established labour movements and an emerging West Indian nationalist movement for advocacy and support, whereupon their wartime experiences were quickly radicalized for use against the state for which they fought.<sup>3</sup>

The transformation of ex-soldiers into nationalists and anti-imperialists following the First World War was not unique to the British West Indies. After experiencing combat on the Western Front and encountering French society, French Indochinese soldiers and labourers returned in the 1920s with the aim of achieving self-determination for Indochina.<sup>4</sup> In India, Gandhi's Indian National Congress quickly pointed to Indian services and sacrifices during the war to advocate Indian Home Rule.<sup>5</sup> Even in Britain, the ranks of unemployed ex-soldiers demanded a betterment of their social conditions on account of their wartime service.

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<sup>3</sup> TNA, CO 950/93, "Memorandum of Evidence," British West Indies Regiment Association, c. 1936.

<sup>4</sup> Fogarty, *Race and War in France*.

<sup>5</sup> Gajendra Singh, "India and the Great War: Colonial Fantasies, Anxieties and Discontent," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2014): 343–61.

Yet, as this dissertation has argued, West Indian radicalization was predicated on events that happened *after* the war rather than during the war and was more related to treatment at home than actual military experiences (Taranto mutiny aside). In this context, the radicalization of West Indian soldiers is best comparable to the rise in Irish republicanism in the final year of the Great War. Until April 1918, Ireland had provided an all-volunteer force to the British Army consisting of three divisions, manned by both unionists and nationalists alike. Yet, following Britain's decision to enact conscription in Ireland, coupled with increasing casualty rates at the front and Britain's treatment of prisoners following the 1916 Easter Rising, Irish republicanism overtook 'Home Rulers' as a counter to Ulster unionists. Like their Irish comrades, West Indian soldiers were radicalized by Britain's insistence on maintaining the status quo at home despite the sacrifices and services of imperial troops at the front.<sup>6</sup>

While the West Indian wartime experience was unique, the West Indian interwar experience was not. Unemployment, poor social prospects, and relegation to second-class citizenship were normal in the West Indies as they were for colonial subjects in French Indochina, the Irish, and in Indigenous peoples in the British dominions. Like many ex-soldiers on both sides of the conflict, West Indian ex-servicemen became radicalized during the interwar years, mobilizing their wartime experiences in a call for greater autonomy and the Black race's advancement.

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<sup>6</sup> Grayson, *Belfast Boys*, 147–66; Adrian Gregory, "'You Might as Well Recruit Germans': British Public Opinion and the Decision to Conscript the Irish in 1918," in *Ireland and the Great War: A War to Unite Us All?*, ed. Adrian Gregory and Senia Paseta (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 113–32.

This dissertation has presented a localized history of Great War military service within an imperial context. Through abandoning a West Indian nationalist perspective on the First World War, this study demonstrates how West Indian experience in the Great War was more complex than racially-motivated abandonment and dismissal by the British Empire, as earlier studies have argued. Furthermore, this dissertation outlines how a colonial society with little prewar military tradition mobilized, prepared, and fought a major war. Within the context of the wider British imperial armies, West Indian contributions cannot be labelled alone as crucial to Britain's victory. Yet, the services rendered by West Indian soldiers were certainly crucial when serving alongside imperial soldiers.

In Port of Spain's Memorial Park stands the monument to Trinidad and Tobago's war dead. The cenotaph is dominated by the bronze sculpture of two British soldiers, flanked on either side by mourning statues. One soldier stands upright, armed with a Lee-Enfield rifle as if charging into battle; the other lays beneath the former. The armed soldier is in no way representative of men of the BWIR; his brodie helmet and SMLE rifle betray two pieces of equipment that would not have been used at the same time by BWIR soldiers.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, both figures possess different facial features, with the wounded soldier a Black man and the standing soldier presumably white. For the Black soldier, there is nothing of the sort; laying dead or dying, the figure offered and gave everything in the name of military service but, unlike his bronze counterpart, will not

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<sup>7</sup> BWIR troops in Western Europe would have been issued brodie helmets, but not SMLE rifles, while those in Egypt and East Africa would have had the rifle but wore tropical pith helmets instead.



enjoy the fruits of a postwar world. There is perhaps no better analogy of the British West Indian wartime experience.



*FigureChapter 8.1 - Port of Spain War Memorial<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Destination Trinidad and Tobago, "Memorial Park," <https://www.destinationtnt.com/memorial-park/>, accessed 02 November 2020.

### Appendix 1: British Army First World War Organizational Structure

Formation	Approximate Size	Example
Army Group	500,000 – 1,500,000	British Expeditionary Force
Army	250,000	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
Corps	100,000	I Corps
Division	25,000	29 <sup>th</sup> Division
Brigade	5,000	263 <sup>rd</sup> Brigade
Battalion	1,100	1 <sup>st</sup> British West Indies Regiment
Company	200	‘B’ Company
Platoon	60	No. 2 Platoon
Section	12	Unnamed

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