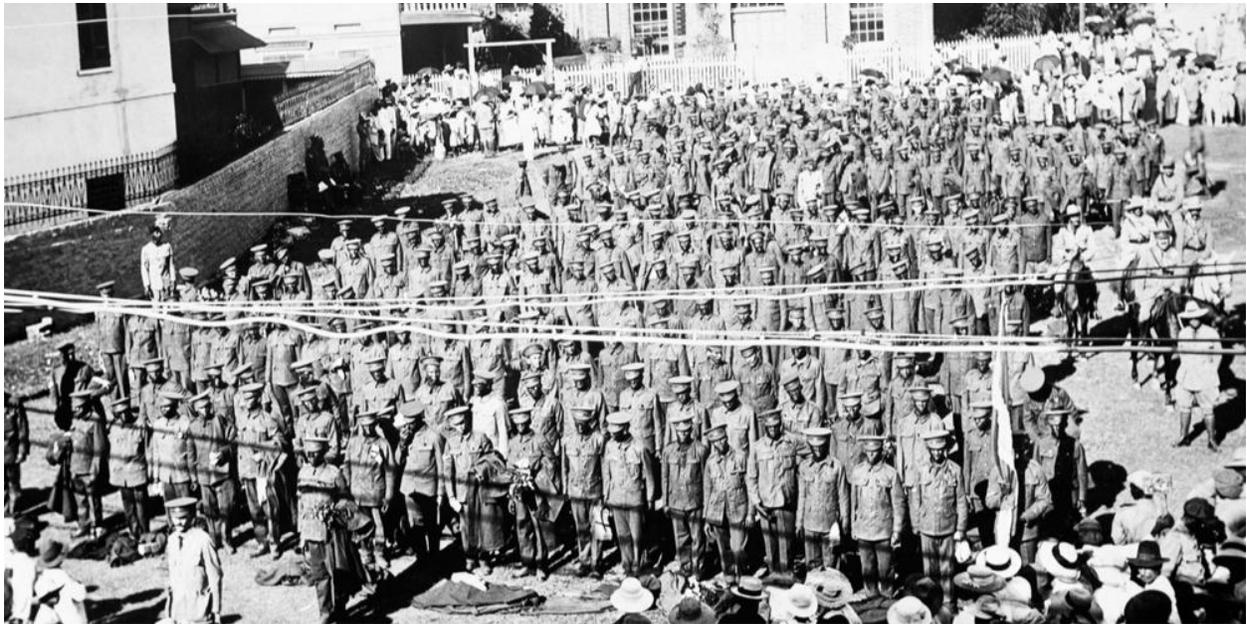


## **The British West Indies Regiment (BWIR)**

When war broke out in 1914, many men across the islands of the West Indies wanted to join up and go to fight in Europe, in the same way thousands of men were doing in England and across the British Empire. The West India Regiment (WIR) could not take all of them, and there was no other unit they could join. The governor of Jamaica wrote to the secretary of state for war, in London, asking for permission to form a new regiment for service in France and Belgium. In 1915 the reply came back and the British West Indies Regiment was formed. In September of that year volunteers who had already gone to Britain were formed into the first battalion of the new regiment and the first contingent of men left Jamaica for basic training in Britain shortly after. They were followed by many more contingents and by the end of the war, over 15,000 West Indian men had sailed off as part of the new regiment.



After basic training each contingent travelled to join the army fighting in France. Army life came as a shock though - the soldiers of the WIR they were used to seeing back home wore a colourful uniform which always seemed to attract plenty of female attention and WIR soldiers had never seemed to have too much hard work to do (when they were in Jamaica, anyway).

Instead of this, the men of the BWIR found themselves dressed in the same drab khaki uniforms as the rest of the army and, as strong young men with no previous experience of war, most of them joined the host of men needed to move artillery shells up to where they could be used by heavy guns.



They also dug trenches, loaded ships and trains and acted as stretcher bearers for wounded soldiers. Field Marshal Haig, the commander in chief of British forces on the Western Front, commented that he thought their discipline and morale was excellent and greatly admired their contribution to the war effort, even though most did not serve on the front line.

Things changed for a lot of the West Indians in 1916, when about 500 men went to join the war in East Africa and several battalions were sent to serve in Egypt and Palestine (which is where Israel and the West Bank of Jordan are now). Some served in Mesopotamia (Iraq) as well.



Most of the time they still did the sort of jobs they had done in France, but later in that year, West Indian soldiers also started to be used in combat roles. In September 1918 British West Indies Regiment soldiers advanced under enemy fire and succeeded in capturing around three miles of land from the Turks, securing the British supply line from further attack. Two soldiers were awarded medals for bravery. General Chaytor, their commander, said that there were no soldiers he would rather have with him than the BWIR. Between 1916 and 1918 around 60 medals were awarded to BWIR soldiers.



After the fighting stopped in November 1918 (in Europe and the Middle East, anyway), the soldiers of the BWIR were moved to Taranto in Italy to wait to be sent home. By December they were still waiting and rioting broke out after some were ordered to work as labourers. The rioting lasted for four days. Most of them went home in January of 1919, after the war was officially ended by the Treaty of Versailles. Like other colonial regiments which had been formed especially for the war, the British West Indies Regiment was disbanded in 1919.