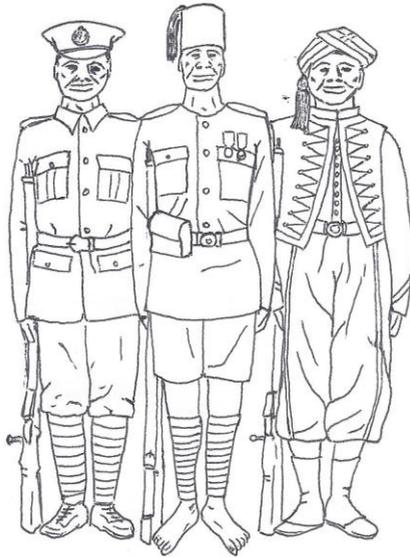


African and West Indian Soldiers of the First World War



The African and West Indian regiments of the British
Army in the First World War

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Introduction



Hi - can you tell me anything about the First World War?

What are you asking me for? There weren't any black people in that war.



What about me?

What about me?



What about me too?"



But you're not from the British army - you look like Africans.

I'm West Indian and I'm a British soldier!



I'm West Indian too and I'm a British soldier!



I'm African and I'm a British soldier too!



That's right. You might only ever have seen pictures of white soldiers in the First World War - you might even have been taught that by someone, but that's not the whole picture. The truth is that regiments of soldiers came from all over the world to be part of the British army in the World War One. You probably already know that thousands of Australian, New Zealand and Canadian soldiers came to fight in the war, as well as thousands more from the Indian army.

What a lot of people don't seem to realise though, is that thousands of soldiers from Africa and the West Indies also fought in the war. Nor do they realise that many of those soldiers were already seasoned professionals. One regiment from the West Indies was formed especially for the war, but another West Indian regiment had already been part of the British army for more than a hundred years. Some of the African regiments had existed for as much as sixty years.

Men from across the islands of the West Indies served in the West Indian regiments, and the African regiments were composed of men from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Gold Coast (which is called Ghana these days), Kenya, Uganda and Nyasaland (which is now called Malawi). You probably didn't know that, did you?

Another thing you probably didn't know was that the first bullet fired at a German by a British soldier in World War One was not fired in Europe - it was fired in Togo, by an African soldier from Gold Coast. You didn't know that? What a shame.

So what British regiments are we going to find out about in this book?

-The Middlesex Regiment? No!

- The Royal West Surrey Regiment? No!

- The Royal Horse Artillery? No!

Think again - are those regiments from Africa or the West Indies? No - even though they and many other regiments included many black British men in their ranks. The ones we are interested in came from the West Indies and Africa, and nearly all of the men in them were Africans and West Indians.

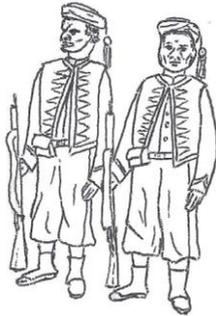
The regiments we are interested in here are:

- The West India Regiment
- The British West Indies Regiment
- The King's African Rifles
- The West Africa Regiment
- The Nigeria Regiment
- The Gold Coast Regiment

The West India Regiment (WIR)

The West India Regiment was by far the oldest of our regiments and dated right back to the end of the eighteenth century. In 1795, during the Napoleonic Wars, eight regiments of black soldiers were raised in the British West Indies, followed later by four more. Many of the men who made up these regiments were bought from slave traders in order to fill the ranks, but once in the army they were paid, equipped and fed the same as regular British soldiers. In 1807, all black soldiers became free men, by order of the British government, regardless of whether the islands they were stationed on had even started considering emancipating slaves yet. After the Napoleonic Wars ended, all but three of the regiments were disbanded, but by that time black soldiers had won victories in Dominica, Martinique and Guadeloupe, as well as fighting against Americans in Louisiana. They were highly praised and admired by the generals and other senior officers who had commanded them.

From then on, one regiment stayed in Jamaica, while the others served in West Africa. Every few years they rotated. Over time the West India regiments developed a reputation as the best and most successful soldiers at bush fighting in the entire British army, and the soldiers called themselves 'the Queen's Gentlemen'. In the middle of the nineteenth century, two more regiments were raised, although these were both disbanded again, along with one of the existing regiments, soon after. Originally the WIR wore the same uniform as the rest of the army, but in 1858 they got a brand new, much more colourful one to wear. The new uniform featured a red fez with a white turban wrapped around it, baggy blue trousers worn with white gaiters, and a white jacket worn under a gold embroidered red waistcoat, although they wore plain khaki jackets on campaign. The uniform worn after 1858 is the same uniform the military bands of the Jamaica and Barbados Defence Forces wear today. The flashy new uniform was introduced to be more like the clothing worn in the part of Africa it served in, but it also made the soldiers very popular with the young ladies in Jamaica.



For much of the nineteenth century, most new recruits came from Sierra Leone, but the number volunteering began to fall and by the 1860s most new recruits were West Indians. In 1888, like many other British regiments at the time, the two regiments were amalgamated into a single regiment of two battalions (units of up to ten companies under a lieutenant colonel).

In 1867 Private Samuel Hodge became the first black soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross. In 1892, Lance Corporal William Gordon became the second.

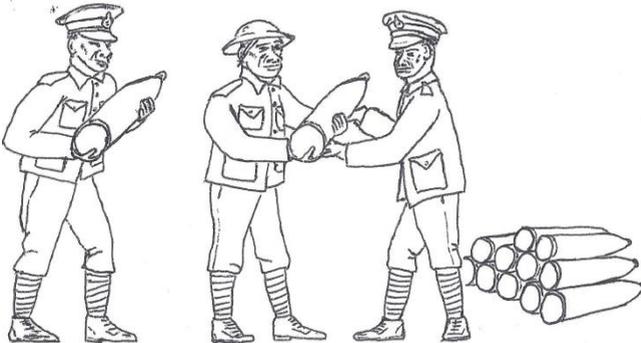
When the First World War broke out, the WIR expected, as the most experienced bush fighting unit in the British army, to see plenty of action. It took part in campaigns against the Germans in both West and East Africa, where the local people, not used to seeing black soldiers who spoke English and acted like Englishmen, thought they were very strange and called them 'Wazungu Waeusi' (black Europeans). Much to their disappointment though, once they got to East Africa, the best bush fighters in the army spent hardly any time campaigning and an awful lot of time doing garrison duty, while most of the fighting was done by a host of other regiments with much less experience of warfare in Africa. Partly this was because many of their officers were seconded to the new British West Indies Regiment, but it was also because they were being commanded by a South African general who had already told black volunteers in South Africa that he did not need them. It took as long to beat the Germans in Africa as it did in Europe - maybe if the West India Regiment had been allowed to do what it did best, the war in Africa might have been over sooner.

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 Britain and across the British Empire. The West India Regiment 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 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 that 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.

The African Regiments

Like the other colonial powers, the British Empire had raised regiments of locally recruited soldiers in several of its African colonies. Although soldiers had been recruited as early as the 1840s in the Gold Coast, most of the African regiments were first raised in the 1890s. Before that, the West India Regiment had provided most of the military presence needed in West Africa. At the beginning of the twentieth century the regiments in East and Central Africa were all amalgamated into the 'King's African Rifles', and most of the regiments in West Africa became part of the 'West Africa Frontier Force'. The West Africa Regiment, a Nigerian unit raised for the defence and security of Nigeria did not however, and remained independent of the WAFF. In West Africa the WAFF was backed up with the professionalism of the WIR and in East Africa the KAR was backed up by Sikh units provided by the Indian Army. In most cases, the officers of these regiments (like those of the West Indian regiments), were experienced British officers seconded from their own regiments, and many sergeants were also British. However, these officers were required to learn the languages of their African soldiers, in order to communicate properly with them. The soldiers were not expected to learn English. Although for some officers, service in Africa was an easy way to gain higher rank before returning to their old regiments, letters from many other officers to their families back in Britain often show that they identified closely with their men and enjoyed serving alongside them.

The War in Africa

The outbreak of war in Africa followed shortly on the declaration of war against Germany and Austria on 4th August 1914, with French soldiers invading the German Colony of Togoland on 6th August, followed by British troops from the Gold Coast on 12th August. Later on 12th August (or possibly the 15th) the first contact was made with German forces and soldiers from the Gold Coast Regiment fired the first British shots in anger of the war, at least a week before a British cavalryman in Belgium fired Britain's first shot against the Germans in Europe.

Over the next four years, the WAFF fought through Cameroon, alongside French African troops, and into German East Africa, where the KAR had been engaged since the start of the war. To begin with, the majority of the units fighting in Africa were British and white Rhodesian, South African and East African. However white soldiers suffered badly from disease brought about by the climate and the local insects and by the end of the war, almost all the soldiers serving in Africa were black Africans. Hostilities in Europe came to an end on 11th November 1918, but this was not so in Africa and the last German units to surrender did so on 25th November, at Abercorn in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), meaning that the First World War actually lasted two weeks longer in Africa than it did in Europe.

The King's African Rifles (KAR)

The King's African Rifles was formed in 1902, from three smaller regiments which had existed since the 1890s. These were the First and Second battalions of the Central Africa Regiment, the East African Rifles and the Uganda Rifles. On their amalgamation, these became the First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth battalions of the new large regiment. A further battalion (the Sixth) was later recruited from Somali volunteers.

The uniform worn by the soldiers consisted of khaki shorts, khaki jacket or dark blue woollen jumper, grey or light blue puttees and a fez whose colour varied according to the which battalion the soldier was a member of. Footwear was unpopular, but locally made sandals were sometimes worn. Most men signed up for three to six years service, although some non commissioned officers served much longer (one Sergeant-Major served for twenty two years).

Although they were now one regiment, the different battalions continued to be based where they had been. Thus, the First and Second battalions stayed based in Nyasaland (modern Malawi), the Third battalion in British East Africa (Kenya) and Fourth and Fifth battalions in Uganda, and the Sixth battalion in Somaliland (the northern part of modern Somalia). Unusually for the time, many of the officers in the Third and Fourth battalions were Africans.

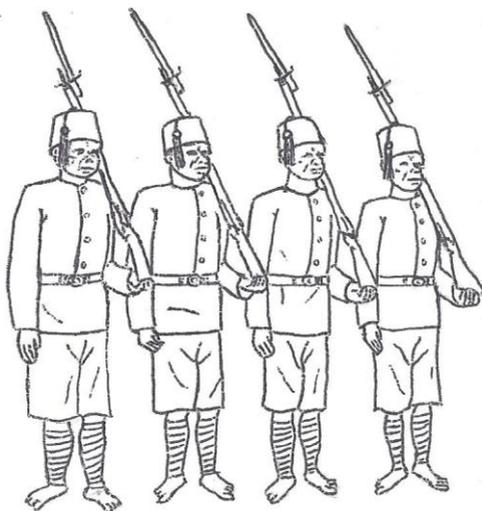
Between its formation and the start of World War One, the regiment took part in many campaigns, especially in Nigeria and Somaliland.

In 1908 the Fifth battalion was disbanded, followed, in 1910 by the Sixth battalion and in 1911, by the Second battalion.

When the First World War broke out, all three remaining battalions of the regiment were scattered across Nyasaland, Uganda and British East Africa in company sized garrisons. When warfare started between the British and the Germans in East Africa though, many of these scattered companies were brought together again into their battalions to form part of the force opposing the Germans. To begin with, the forces in East Africa included a number of English and Scottish regiments, as well as volunteer forces from Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe) and East Africa. As the war progressed

however, it was found that men who had grown up in Britain suffered more from illness and fatigue under the African sun (and in the African rain) than African soldiers did, and most of these units were moved back to Europe or India, leaving the KAR to provide an increasing proportion of the British force in East Africa. Accordingly, the Second battalion was re-raised in 1916. In early 1917 the Fifth and Sixth battalions were re-raised, and a Seventh battalion followed. At the same time, the battalions were reorganised as regiments again, and had further battalions of new recruits added to them, meaning that by the end of the war, the seven KAR regiments totalled twenty two battalions (containing around 35,000 men) and made up the majority of the British forces in East Africa. The last two years of the war in Africa were the harshest and by the end of the war, the KAR had suffered around 18,000 killed or wounded.

After the war, the KAR was reduced in size, but served again in World War Two. When Uganda, Kenya and Malawi gained independence, the KAR regiments based in them became the armies of the new nations.



The Gold Coast Regiment

The Gold Coast Regiment originated in organisations formed in the 1850s in what is now Ghana. The 'Gold Coast Corps' had been recruited in the early 1830s for the defence of settlements in the colony. By the 1850s it consisted of a number of small organisations which were mainly used in a policing role. These were amalgamated in 1879 and renamed the 'Gold Coast Constabulary'. This also had a military role and in 1893-1894 it took part in a campaign against the Ashanti kingdom, who had been threatening tribes in what is now central Ghana.

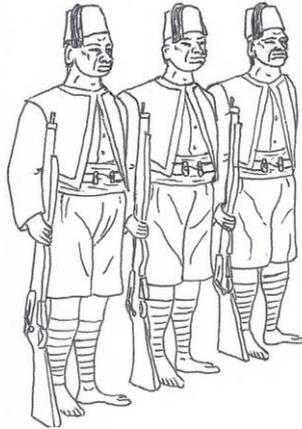
The Gold Coast Artillery Corps was formed in 1850 and from the late 1850s wore a uniform similar to that of the West India Regiment. It was disbanded in 1863 however, after its soldiers had mutinied. Many of its former members joined local forces which later became part of the Gold Coast Constabulary.

In 1901 the Gold Coast Constabulary was renamed the 'Gold Coast Regiment' as it became part of the newly organised West African Frontier Force under the direction of the Colonial Office. It was organised into one battalion of infantry and one battery of artillery. The artillery possessed only small field guns which could be moved by hand through the thick jungle found in much of the country.

The uniform which was adopted for the whole West Africa Frontier Force was modelled on the one worn by the earlier Gold Coast Artillery Corps and consisted of a khaki sleeved waistcoat, shorts and puttees. Footwear was optional and most chose to go barefoot. For dress and parade order, a red cummerbund and a red sleeveless jacket edged in gold were also worn, along with a red fez with a tassel. The jackets of senior non commissioned officers were further decorated with lines of gold 'frogging'.

For normal duties a brown woollen jumper could be worn over or instead of the sleeved waistcoat and a green woollen 'Kilmarnock' cap with a pom-pom was worn instead of the fez. For campaign dress the Kilmarnock cap was worn with a khaki jacket or the brown jumper instead of the sleeved waistcoat. Photographs show that the red cummerbund was often worn on

campaign as well.



On the outbreak of the First World War, the Gold Coast Regiment was the main force used to capture the neighbouring German colony of Togoland (modern Togo) and destroy its powerful radio masts. This was already happening before the war really got started in Europe and the the first bullets fired by a British soldier against the Germans in the war were fired by a Gold Coast Regiment soldier named Alhaji Grunshi more than a week before the first engagement in Europe.

The regiment then took part in the invasion of the German colony of Cameroon and spent the end of 1914 and most of 1915 fighting in the campaign to gain control of the colony and destroy its ability to relay radio messages to German warships.

In 1916, the Gold Coast Regiment entered the campaign against the Germans in East Africa (modern Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania), which had been going since August 1914. It fought through most of the East African campaign, engaging German forces in many places in what are now Tanzania and Mozambique. In mid 1918, the regiment returned to barracks in the Gold Coast and took no further part in the remainder of the campaign.

The Nigeria Regiment

The earliest Nigerian military force was raised in 1862, when Lieutenant Glover, governor of Lagos Colony, raised a militia of eighteen men known as Glover's Hausas, to assist the West India Regiment companies who provided for the security of the colony. The militia was later expanded to a strength of one hundred, renamed the Lagos Constabulary and largely took over the security of Lagos from the WIR.

In 1886 the Northern Nigeria Protectorate was established and a force of two paramilitary battalions, known as the Royal Niger Constabulary, was raised for its protection.

In 1890 the Southern Nigeria Protectorate also established a small locally raised constabulary, known as the Oil River Irregulars. In 1891 this was renamed the Niger Coast Constabulary.

In 1897, to guard against French expansionist moves in West Africa, two battalions of soldiers were raised in the Northern Nigeria protectorate. Later in 1897, once the French threat had subsided, the battalions of both the Northern and Southern Protectorates as well the Lagos Colony were converted from constabularies to full military status and grouped together with most of the other military forces in West Africa to form part of the West Africa Frontier Force (WAFF).

As part of the WAFF, the Nigeria regiments adopted the same uniform to those worn by the Gold Coast Regiment. Nigerian soldiers also commonly carried machetes.

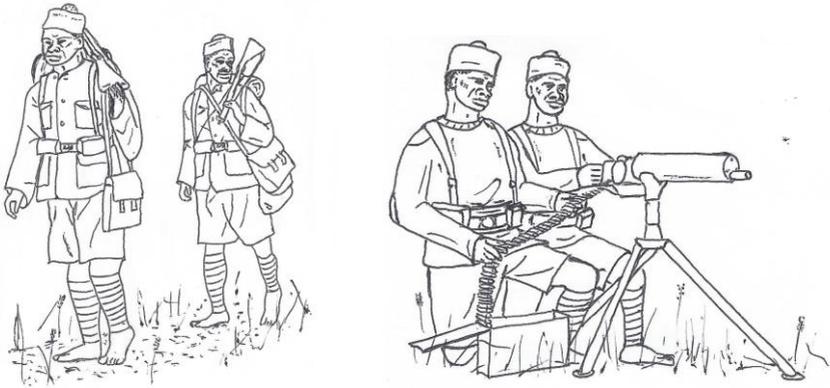
In 1900 the two northern battalions which had been raised three years before absorbed the Royal Niger Constabulary and became the Northern Nigeria Regiment, which remained part of the WAFF.

In 1906 the Lagos colony was joined with the Southern Nigerian Protectorate and its forces amalgamated into a Southern Nigeria Regiment of two battalions.

Eight years later, in 1914, the Northern and Southern Nigerian Protectorates were amalgamated into one large colony and the Northern Nigeria Regiment was joined under one command with the Southern Nigeria Regiment to form the Nigeria Regiment - a single regiment of four battalions, although these had not had an opportunity to train together yet

when the First World War broke out.

The Nigeria Regiment was part of the Anglo-French force which invaded the German colony of Kamerun (Cameroon) in 1914. They served throughout the eighteen months of this campaign and fought many successful actions, with many soldiers receiving medals for bravery and dedication to duty. At the conclusion of the hard-fought campaign to capture Kamerun, the Nigeria Regiment was selected for service in East Africa. However the terms of the soldiers' contracts meant that they were not obliged to serve outside West Africa. Volunteers were sought and new companies were formed which comprised equal numbers veterans and new recruits. These companies were formed into four battalions and the force was designated the Nigeria Brigade, with a strength of about 2500 men.



The Nigeria Brigade departed for East Africa in December 1916. It was very active throughout the last two years of the war and served in many areas of the campaign, including the invasion of Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) in late 1917. The last two years of the war were very hard and marching columns travelled huge distances in pursuit of the Germans, often with minimal supplies, leading to a great deal of sickness and exhaustion. This, combined with casualties from the fighting, led to a constant need for reinforcements. By November 1918, when the war ended, 13,980 Nigerian soldiers had served in the African campaigns.

The Military Labour Corps

At the start of the First World War, there were very few roads in West, Central and East Africa and only a handful of railway lines. Although the military campaigns in Africa often began following the established roads and railway lines, the armies quickly found themselves in territory where supplies of food, equipment and ammunition could not be taken by road or rail transport. Much of the territory was not even suitable for pack animals. Therefore the only option available was to employ large numbers of men to carry the necessary supplies. Still more were needed to improve and extend roads as fast as possible to make more areas easily accessible.

Although some units such as the King's African Rifles already employed carriers, far more were needed, as the number of carriers required by an expedition was often greater than the number of soldiers involved (supplies were required for the carriers as well as the soldiers and these had to be carried too by further carriers).

To begin with, the Military Labour Corps was organised into battalions of one thousand men, divided into ten companies of one hundred, each led by three headmen. Soon it was found that smaller units were more useful and the battalions quickly broke up. There were also problems of desertion and men leaving companies to join others where they had found friends. Because of these issues the battalion system was abandoned and the corps was reorganised into twenty five man gangs which were allotted as units to carry supplies for troops, build roads or serve as hospital porters. However, when men became sick and needed hospitalisation or were separated from their gangs, it proved difficult to return them as their gangs had often moved on to other locations. The system was therefore modified again to fix the number of men in each gang but make its membership more fluid. Depots were established in a number of locations and when gangs had lost men, the appropriate number of men was sent from the nearest depot to make up the numbers, rather than trying to get the original men back to their gangs. This worked well for rest of the war.

The men's payment proved more difficult. To begin with each man was given an identity disc showing his depot number and a pay book which recorded his name, tribe, rate of pay and the date of the latest payment. However, the majority of the men in the Labour Corps failed to understand the importance of the discs and pay books and frequently lost them or traded them with each other, meaning they could not be paid. This problem was solved by recording finger prints. From then on, each man going to the depot to receive pay was identified by his finger prints rather than items which could have been lost or traded. Depots were staffed with trained finger print analysts and the payment system worked well from then on. Food supplies were also arranged by depots and hospitals were established in a number of places to treat sick or injured labourers.

Until late 1915, the armies were almost entirely dependent on human carriers to carry their supplies, but after that, due to the equal concentration on road building, it became progressively easier to transport supplies by road. However, vast numbers of carriers were still needed right up to the end of the war. This led to depopulation of some tribal areas as farms fell into ruin due to the lack of manpower and a rebalancing of power in some tribes.



Conclusion

So now you know – soldiers from Africa and the West Indies played important roles in the war. In fact, as you now know, they did most of the fighting in the African campaigns – a major part of the war you might not have heard about until you read about it here.

Wow – Thanks! I had no idea. I wish I'd known all that before.



Well now that you know about us, go and tell your friends and let them know too. We fought and suffered as much as the soldiers on the Western Front did and we think it's fair that we should be remembered too. None of us are alive today to tell our story, so it's up to you now to do it for us.



We will!



For further information, visit our website:
<http://african-caribbeanregiments.co.uk/>

Africans and West Indians in the First World War

During and the First World War, thousands of West Indians and Africans served in colonial regiments of the British Army. Less well known than the soldiers who served on the Western Front, their appearance would surprise many today, with the exception of only one unit, who served in France. Most of the African and West Indian units were already well established when the war broke out and they went on to serve throughout the war in the African campaigns. The war lasted as long in Africa as it did in Europe and involved many thousands of soldiers, but it is now hardly remembered outside Africa. A hundred years on, it seems appropriate that these men should be more widely remembered.



Produced by Care Link West Midlands (Charity No. 119505)
For further information and resources please visit our website:
<http://african-caribbeanregiments.co.uk/>

This project is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund

