

## The West India Regiment (WIR)

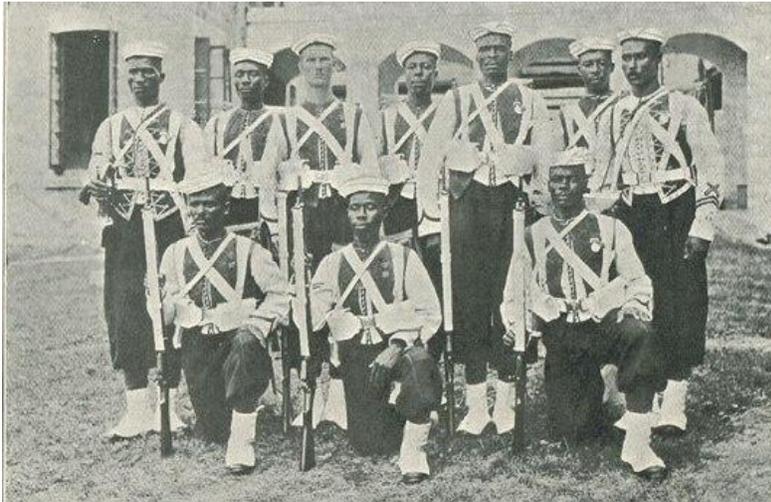
The West India Regiment was by far the oldest of our regiments and dated right back to the end of the eighteenth century. In 1795, during the Napoleonic Wars, eight regiments of black soldiers were raised in the British West Indies, followed later by four more. Many of the men who made up these regiments 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

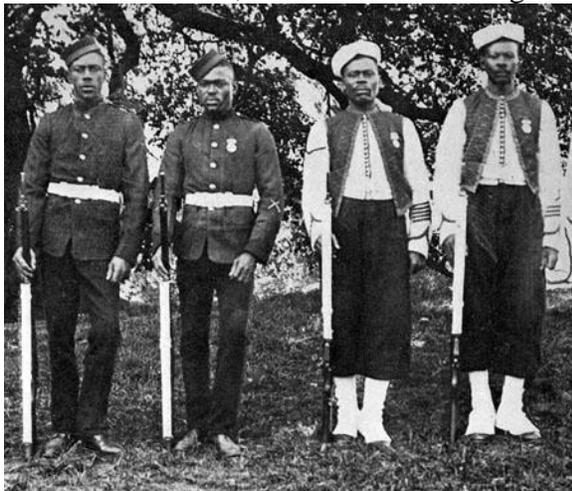
regiments were raised, although these were both disbanded again, along with one of the existing regiments, soon after. Originally the WIR wore the same uniform as the rest of the army, but in 1858 they got a brand new, much more colourful one to wear. The new uniform featured a red fez with a white turban 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 adopted in 1858 was the same as that worn today by the military bands of the Jamaica or Barbados Defence Forces. This 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 early 1860s the majority of 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 1866 Private Samuel Hodge became the first black soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest award a soldier can earn for bravery. In 1892, Lance Corporal William Gordon was also awarded the Victoria Cross. He is seen here on the right as a sergeant.



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). The WIR fought throughout the campaign to capture Kamerun (Cameroon) from the Germans during 1915 and 1916, although for much of the time only their machine gun teams were involved, while the rest of the soldiers waited nearer the coast to be called forward later, and it was only when large concentrations of infantry were required that the majority of the WIR saw combat, with other units, including French regiments, taking the lion's share of the action. At the conclusion of the Kamerun campaign, the WIR moved to join the campaign in East Africa and were employed to capture and occupy the coastal areas. Much to their disappointment though, once the coast and coastal settlements of German East Africa (modern Tanzania) had been secured, the best bush fighters in the army spent of their time doing garrison duty, while most of the fighting away from the coast was done by a host of other regiments with much less experience of warfare in Africa. Partly this was because many of the experienced WIR officers had been seconded to lead and train the new British West Indies Regiment and had been replaced by young, often inexperienced officers with no experience of working with West Indian soldiers. Many of these replacement officers were also new to Africa and quickly became sick, so by the end of the war some companies of the regiment were being commanded by sergeants. Another reason they were not used as much in the campaign as their experience would have justified was because the East African campaign was being commanded by a South African general who had already told black volunteers in South Africa that he did not need them? Although General Smuts was replaced in 1917, his successor General Van Deventer did nothing to change the WIR's duties or make better use of 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.



West India Regiment engineers and infantry.