

West Indian Soldiers and Discrimination

It is often said that West Indian soldiers were discriminated against during the First World War. There is little doubt that this is true - indeed, Sir Ettienne Dupuch, who served in the British West Indies Regiment during the First World War said that there had been "a consensus of opinion about discrimination"- but whether it was consistent or deliberately racist in a modern sense is not so clear cut when looked at in the wider context of the war and warfare in general. There were undoubtedly examples of discrimination on the basis of race but many things which are often perceived today to have been racist were probably either not, or were not intended to be.

When the West India Regiment (WIR) lost many of its most experienced officers in 1915 and 1916, as they were seconded to lead the new British West Indies Regiment, there was almost certainly no intention to hamstring one of the most respected bush fighting unit in the army. However, by removing experienced officers who were used to working with West Indians and replacing them with inexperienced new officers who had no experience of West Indian culture, had no rapport with their men and who sickened easily in the Equatorial African climate, many companies were left without effective leadership. This is one reason why, after a brilliant series of actions to capture most of the southern coastal area of German East Africa (modern Tanzania), the WIR spent most of the rest of the war doing boring garrison duties in the areas they had captured, instead of doing the type of fighting they excelled at. The War Office probably thought that as an experienced and long-standing regiment populated with veterans of African warfare, new officers would be broken into the regimental culture and learn how to lead it, as happened in other regiments. Too many inexperienced officers were placed in the regiment in too short a time though and not enough experienced officers remained to teach them what they needed to know. Added to that was the fact that the regiment had its own distinctive national culture. By proceeding as it did over the WIR, the War Office effectively discriminated against its soldiers and prevented them from being effective. This would never have been the intention though and it is best thought of as a destructive piece of official naivety.

The British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) attracts much greater attention for the discrimination which many feel was freely practised upon it. It is certainly the case that some senior officers held views consistent with the baseless Eugenic philosophy common at the time and did think less of its men on the basis of their skin colour and the shape of their foreheads, but these views were far from universal and where some officers tried to exclude the BWIR from normal military life, many others actively promoted them and their engagement in normal soldiering. Among the latter was the king, who personally authorised the creation of the new regiment, against the wishes of some of the senior staff.

The soldiers themselves often felt they had cause to believe they had been unfairly treated, and here we might call to mind again the statement quoted above by Sir Ettienne Dupuch. However, the soldiers' perceptions of unfairness were not always fully justified when seen in context. Many of them were disappointed not to be dressed in the colourful uniforms they had grown up seeing being worn by the men of the WIR and some probably thought it unfair. Few of them would have been conscious before that time though, of how unusual the uniform of the WIR was in the context of the army as a whole.

Transport was an area where many felt they had been unfairly treated, and indeed, the Halifax Incident, in March 1916 (where over six hundred men were affected by hypothermia [exposure] and frostbite, one hundred and six of these requiring amputations, and five died) was believed by many to underline this. However, poor as some transport may have been, soldiers from other nations

travelled just as uncomfortably on craft which had not been designed for passengers. ANZAC soldiers even found themselves travelling halfway around the world on ships which normally carried animals and in some cases had not been properly cleaned.



The soldiers of the BWIR were also disappointed to find that they would not be fighting the enemy as most had probably hoped to do, but would be doing what are known as 'second line duties' instead. In reality however, it would have been highly unusual for an almost totally inexperienced short service regiment to be put in the front line of battle. For decades it had been common practice for volunteers to be recruited to form battalions which would exist only for the duration of a campaign and whose main role was to free up experienced units from routine duties in order to allow them to be used for fighting. Guard duty, carrying wounded soldiers to dressing stations, loading and unloading supplies and digging trenches were all duties which inexperienced soldiers could easily handle and these were the duties given to volunteer units. Seen in that light, the duties given to the BWIR were consistent with the duties given to other volunteer units. They may have become frustrated with carrying and stacking artillery shells, but no-one would have expected them to be able to fire fifteen accurate shots in a minute with a bolt-action rifle as the professionals could. General Haig, who knew the value of good second line support, was very pleased with the work the BWIR had done.

It is often remarked that Australian and New Zealand soldiers were not normally put on second line duties, but both of these countries already had well trained and disciplined territorial forces who were far more capable of immediate front line duty. The fact that some battalions of the BWIR actually did fight is testament to how well their former WIR officers led them, as well as the faith many senior officers actually had in them. Equally impressive is the fact that the men had only been in the army for around a year and a half when they went onto a combat footing - about the same in fact, as the men of 'Kitchener's new army' who went into combat for the first time at the battle of the Somme.



While stacking shells and other normal second line duties cannot truly be seen as unfair treatment, even when undertaken in dangerous places subject to artillery fire, being made to work as general labourers certainly was. The West Indian men may only have been volunteers who had joined up for the duration of the war, rather than professional soldiers, but they still had the status of soldiers. It is true that in the past the army had used its soldiers as labourers, but by the late 19th Century it had become normal practice to hire civilian labourers and form them into labour battalions. These men were not given military training or weapons and were paid less than soldiers. Therefore the West Indians had a right to be angry when they were used as general labourers, implying as it did that they were no better than ordinary civilian workers.

They also had a right to be angry when were denied a pay rise late in the war, which was universal across the rest of the army. It was a blatant act of discrimination which was justified on the basis of categorising them, by skin colour alone, as 'natives'. By comparison with this view, West Indian soldiers in East Africa amazed the local African population, who had never before seen black soldiers who spoke and acted like Englishmen. They became known in East Africa as Wazungu Waeusi (black Europeans) - a sharp contrast to the 'natives' label applied by a discriminatory staff officer in Europe.

The BWIR's officers joined with their men in demanding that the soldiers of the BWIR be given the pay increase but it was only when the colonial governments in the West Indies backed their calls that the increase was granted.

The fact that, after the December 1918 mutiny at Taranto in Italy, several hundred men were refused permission to return to their homes in the West Indies, is also often justifiably held up as unfair. However, seen in the light of the time it was not a strange decision for the British government to make. In April 1916 Irish nationalists had tried to spark a revolution. The Easter Rising was a failure, but by 1918 many of those who had been arrested were back on the streets and making trouble, with the result that Ireland was steadily slipping towards a civil war. The British government did not want the same thing to happen on any of the islands of the West Indies. To the men who were prevented from going home, and for their families, it was unfair, but for the government it was a matter of security.



In conclusion, there was certainly discrimination against West Indian soldiers, and some of this was without doubt unfair. To this can also be added the innumerable taunts the men had to put up with from other soldiers. However, there does not appear to have been any consistent or institutionalised discrimination. Rather, individual officers allowed their own views and prejudices to affect policy while other officers opposed these views and supported the West Indian soldiers. Numerous experiences were also considered unfair by the men, but many of these were actually consistent with what men from other colonial forces experienced.