# THE WEST INDIA REGIMENTS:
# AFRICAN SOLDIERS, WAR, AND EMPIRE
# IN THE BRITISH ATLANTIC TROPICS

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**Abstract**

This dissertation reconstructs the lives and military labor of African conscripts who served in Britain's West India Regiments, formal companies of Black infantry, in the Caribbean and coastal West Africa in the nineteenth century. The Regiments, valued by their officers and the British state for their apparent resistance to the tropical "miasmas" that massacred white soldiers, occupied colonial garrisons on both sides of the Atlantic. In the Caribbean, they engaged French forces and policed enslaved and free Black populations. In West Africa, they patrolled the frontiers of nascent British settlements and subjugated coastal African states on the orders of the imperial government. Most of the soldiers who comprised the West India Regiments over the first half of the nineteenth century had been enslaved, forced into the corps upon arrival in British Atlantic colonies on slave vessels. In the army, Black soldiers endured particular military tasks and methods of discipline that were influenced by evolving imperial ideas about race. But despite the intense order under which they lived, African regulars nurtured personal relationships with chosen associates, both inside the colonial garrison and away from it, for which soldiers' African backgrounds were key facilitators. The West India Regiments reframe histories of Atlantic warfare, migration, slavery and abolition, race, and tropical disease, opening each of these themes to new connections, sources, and research methodologies.

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Introduction

# The West India Regiments and Britain's Atlantic Empire

After thirty-six years and 314 days of military service, Sergeant John Dorset, an African soldier in Great Britain's 1st West India Regiment, marked his discharge paperwork at Saint Ann's Garrison in Barbados in February 1843. Dorset's "completely worn out" frame, as the garrison medic termed it, was evidence of his long and taxing service to the British empire. His regiment had been particularly active during the early years of his career. Dorset participated in two expeditions to Guadeloupe, on one of which he was "wounded through the body," and in between, he had aided Britain's 1814 assault on New Orleans, one of the final battles of the War of 1812.[1] Sergeant Dorset had been a good soldier. After eight years rank and file, he earned a promotion from private to corporal, and to sergeant soon after that. As a non-commissioned officer, Dorset exercised some power around the garrison, leading training and drill sessions, supervising fatigue labor, and carrying out daily inspections. A few years later, a regimental court reduced him to private after he was martialed "For Gambling in the Soldiers Privy."[2] His comparatively high rank had probably saved him a few hundred lashes. It took him a decade to earn another promotion, but he completed his service with twelve additional "very good" years as a sergeant. At around fifty-five years of age, with an army medical officer confirming that he would be of little additional use to the colonial armed forces, Private Dorset departed Saint Ann's Garrison a retired veteran and disappeared from the record.

Sergeant Dorest's 1st West India Regiment had been active for nearly a half century at the time of his discharge in Barbados. In 1795, the War Office inaugurated several formal Black infantry battalions for service in the Caribbean as Britain's war with Revolutionary France

[1] Service Record for Sergeant John Dorset, WO 97/1157.
[2] Return of Regimental Courts Martial held in the 1st West India Regiment from 2nd July to 4th December 1818, enclosed in the Inspection Report, 1st West India Regiment, 1818, WO 27/145.

spilled over into the West Indies. Hundreds of Black West Indian rangers—local troops under the command of British Caribbean proprietors and colonial officials—and small numbers of white European soldiers composed the miniscule charter companies of the West India Regiments. By the turn of the nineteenth century a few years later, African conscripts like John Dorset dominated the corps. Over most of the next two decades—the eras of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars—the British army boasted eight West India Regiments, the First through the Eighth, each comprising several hundred Black rank and file soldiers.[3] Conscripts served Great Britain indefinitely—until they succumbed to illness or combat wounds, or until their bodies deteriorated beyond their use to the empire.

The West India Regiments were meant to serve in a particular kind of place and combat a specific kind of enemy. In the Caribbean, yellow fever and malaria decimated white British regiments.[4] Throughout the eighteenth century, military officials collected abundant statistical evidence that Black soldiers did not die in the tropics at the staggering rates that white troops did, and medical observations of enslaved plantation laborers had amounted to prevailing beliefs that Black people were naturally suited to toil in hot, humid climates. White European regiments also, sometimes, struggled to operate in the rocky peaks and the dense cane and brush of contested Caribbean islands. Long, violent sagas between British colonial officials and militarized maroon communities in places like Jamaica had convinced many military men that Black fighters were innately fierce and effective in rough terrain.[5] British military officials believed that Black

[3] Briefly the corps included twelve regiments. In 1798, the army incorporated four additional Caribbean ranger companies as the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th West India Regiments, but these were disbanded and folded into the original eight as part of a measured demilitarization following the Treaty of Amiens in 1802.
[4] David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 347-372; Geggus, "Yellow Fever in the 1790s: The British Army in Occupied Saint Domingue," *Medical History* 23 (1979): 38-58; Nicholas Rogers, *Blood Waters: War, Disease and Race in the Eighteenth-Century British Caribbean* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2021).
[5] White colonists were clearly consumed by maroon fighters. Robert Charles Dallas, a writer and long-time Jamaica resident, described the quintessential maroon warrior in terms that reflected both pure fright and puzzled fascination.

regiments could alleviate both of their problems, sickness and tough topography, at once. They argued that soldiers of African descent would be natural tropical warriors—resistant to the "miasmas" that wiped out white troops and efficient in the guerilla-style combat that featured heavily in Caribbean skirmishes. In the wartime Caribbean, the West India Regiments undertook a series of military expeditions, often alongside white battalions but sometimes alone. Many assignments sent them into the mountains of contested island colonies like Grenada and Saint Lucia to root out guerilla bands of French-backed fighters. Some campaigns made West India soldiers into invading and occupying forces, as the Black corps participated in amphibious British expeditions to Guadeloupe and Martinique, Puerto Rico, Saint Bartholomew, and New Orleans, amongst other places.

Britain's victory over Napoleon's France (solidified in 1815) and concomitant emergence as the dominant Atlantic empire meant a redefinition of the work of the West India Regiments. The War Office reduced the corps from eight regiments to three (and then down to two a few years later) as the British army transitioned to a peacetime establishment. But the Black companies had proven valuable enough to be kept around. Indeed, the new imperial agenda that Britain developed in the decades after Waterloo would require their service too. In the Caribbean, the "amelioration" of slavery through the 1810s and 20s and the fraught transition to free labor in the 1830s often erupted in violent clashes between enslaved or emancipated people and the colonial state. West India soldiers, along with militia and white regiments, put down multiple

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"In their person and carriage the Maroons were erect and lofty, indicating a consciousness of superiority," Dallas wrote in 1803. "[V]igour appeared upon their muscles, and their motions displayed agility. Their eyes were quick, wild, and fiery." Dallas, *The History of the Maroons, from their Origin to the Establishment of their Chief Tribe at Sierra Leone* (London: A. Strahan, 1803): I:88. See also Helen McKee, "From Violence to Alliance: Maroons and White Settlers in Jamaica, 1739-1795," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2018): 27-52; Barbara Klamon Kopytoff, "Guerilla Warfare in Eighteenth Century Jamaica," *Expedition* 19, no. 2 (1977): 20-26; John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam: Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript*, ed. Richard Price and Sally Price (New York: Open Road Distribution, 2016).

enslaved insurgencies and, after emancipation, various violent disturbances that emerged from political, economic, and labor disputes between freedpeople and white officials.

The end of the war with France also opened opportunities for Britain to engage in new global undertakings. One of these was colonial expansion in West Africa. In the years and decades after the Treaty of Paris, Britain annexed additional territories along the Atlantic littoral—and sometimes the deep interior too—in the name of new imperial priorities like antislavery and the cultivation of "legitimate commerce." As tropical West African posts were so deadly to white troops, the empire relied heavily upon West India soldiers to garrison colonial forts and outposts and punish coastal states that made Britain's West African agenda more difficult to carry out.

In between sporadic combat missions, West India soldiers occupied dozens of the British colonial garrisons that dotted the Caribbean and coastal West Africa. There, they endured the rigid drill and harsh, unforgiving discipline that characterized life in the British army. The troops frittered away countless hours on parade, taking care of chores, and completing fatigue labor assignments. In between these exacting tasks, soldiers carved out time to socialize, developing strong communities within the corps that were often constructed around shared language and culture. Such alliances sometimes crossed over the boundary between the colonial station and the world outside, as soldiers cultivated familial and communal bonds with non-military people too. While military demands and routines largely shaped their day-to-day lives, West India soldiers, on their own accord, ingrained themselves within the social structures and cultures of the colonial societies in which they lived and worked.

This dissertation reconstructs the military labor and social and cultural lives of West India Regiment soldiers like John Dorset—in the garrisons, around town, and out on campaign. It

opens with the formation of the corps in the 1790s and tracks into the 1860s, at which point the empire's methods for both recruiting and deploying the corps had changed substantially.[6] The project is predicated on the contention that colonial military service in the circum-Atlantic context reframes histories of conflict, migration, slavery and abolition, race, and disease, opening these important themes to new connections, sources, and research methodologies. In the chapters that follow, I advance three interrelated core arguments. First, the vast majority of West India soldiers conscripted over the first half of the nineteenth century had been enslaved. The transatlantic slave trade supplied thousands of infantrymen in the decade before British abolition in 1808, and afterwards, the army drew thousands more young recruits off slave vessels captured by the Royal Navy as part of Britain's global slave-trade suppression campaign. The West India Regiments relate the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition to the British military—and, in turn, the nineteenth-century British empire—in new ways. Second, European ideas about race and Blackness, and race and resistance to tropical illness, shaped the conditions of life in the West India Regiments. White officers' insistence that Black troops were comparatively unaffected by the "miasmas" that ravaged white regiments meant that West India soldiers often occupied the most pestilential colonial stations. And the army's hypothesis that Africans were naturally adept in guerilla warfare dictated military assignments and deployments for the Black corps. Third, despite the intense military discipline enforced by their officers and NCOs, West India soldiers established and nurtured personal relationships with chosen associates, both inside the colonial garrison and away from it. Soldiers' African backgrounds were often—though not

[6] By the mid-1860s, the transatlantic slave trade was over and West India officers had little choice but to develop ways to woo free Black West Indians and West Africans into joining. In addition, colonial governments had come to prefer localized African/Caribbean military and police units that they controlled themselves, over the London-operated West India Regiments. See, for a couple of summary analyses, Howard Johnson's and David Killingray's chapters in David M. Anderson and Killingray, eds., *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

always—an important facilitator in cultivating such relationships, which were frequently constructed around shared language and religion. These interpersonal connections were sources of comfort and community. In other instances, though, they facilitated organized rebellion against the British army.

These arguments build upon scholarly explorations new and old of the West India Regiments, their work, and their significance to the nineteenth-century British empire. The earliest published histories of the Regiments emerged while the corps was still active. Two British officers, Major Alfred Burdon Ellis and Colonel James Caulfield, each published centurial studies of the 1st and 2nd West India Regiments respectively.[7] Both works, which narrate the role of the troops in various colonial conflicts in the Caribbean and West Africa, memorialized the contributions of Black soldiers to the empire, highlighting their loyalty and reliability as British regulars. The books were not apolitical. Ellis, for his part, was motivated by concern about momentous power shifts in Europe that followed the unification of Germany, and advocated an expansion of Black colonial forces to serve across the empire so that white troops could return home and reinforce the metropole.

Roger Buckley's classic 1979 study, *Slaves in Red Coats*, presented a new regimental history.[8] Buckley sought to demonstrate the Regiments' critical contributions to Britain's war efforts in the Caribbean between 1795 and 1815, showing the outsized role that these African soldiers played in early nineteenth-century imperial Atlantic warfare. Buckley traces the military service of the regiments through the Napoleonic wars, analyzes the challenges and political

[7] Major A.B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885); Colonel J.E. Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment from Date of Raising 1795 to 1898* (London: Forster Groom & Co., 1899).
[8] Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

debates which surrounded their establishment, and provides a preliminary attempt to recreate the social worlds in which these soldiers lived and operated. He emphasizes the bravery, loyalty, and martial capability of West India soldiers, submitting that these men have yet to receive appropriate acknowledgement for their service to Great Britain.

Much more recent studies of the West India Regiments have harnessed the corps as a means of exploring ideas about race and colonial perceptions of African and Black West Indian people in the nineteenth-century British empire.[9] Tim Lockley, analyzing the writings of military medics who worked with the Regiments, argues that the Black infantry influenced evolving racial thought in the British world, tracing a shift from idealistic views of Black tropical laborers to negative images of Black weakness and perpetual sickness.[10] Other scholars of race and medicine have likewise pointed to the West India Regiments as a productive means of analyzing imperial theories about Blackness and tropical disease.[11] David Lambert, approaching the Black corps with a different set of questions, probes the attitudes of white planters toward the West India Regiments. He posits that the Black infantry were hypervisible subverters of the socio-racial order of the pre-emancipation Caribbean and shows how debates about their presence in British colonies—and whether white people were actually safe around them—were key factors in imperial arguments about African slavery, emancipation, and colonial security.[12]

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[9] Much of this research was completed as part of the collaborative project "Africa's Sons Under Arms," based at the University of Warwick and headed by Tim Lockley, David Lambert, and Elizabeth Cooper. This project resulted in a special issue of *Slavery & Abolition* (vol. 39, no. 3 [2018]), a series of digital publications with the British Library, and various additional print publications. See https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/research/projects/asua/ and https://www.bl.uk/west-india-regiment.

[10] Tim Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race: Life and Death in the West India Regiments, 1795-1874* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[11] Michael Joseph, "Military Officers, Tropical Medicine, and Racial Thought in the Formation of the West India Regiments, 1793-1802," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 72, no. 2 (2016): 142-165; Rana Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

[12] 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," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 4 (2018): 627-650.

These works have collectively embedded the West India Regiments within some key topics in British imperial history, leaning heavily into the theme of race and Blackness in the nineteenth century. This dissertation dialogues with this scholarship, and also poses a number of new questions: Who were the men who comprised the West India Regiments and how did they end up in the British army? What were their day-to-day lives like, and what can that tell us about the quotidian realities of British colonialism? How did their African backgrounds shape their experiences in the army? And where did they fit within the colonial societies of the British Caribbean and coastal West Africa? My answers to these questions promote new ways of thinking about slavery, antislavery, and emancipation; culture, migration, and the African diaspora; and the maintenance and expansion of the nineteenth-century British empire.

**Historiographies: Black soldiers, the African diaspora, and the British empire**

In tracing the experiences of the West India Regiment rank-and-file, this dissertation engages with Atlantic, African, and global histories of Black soldiers, colonialism, and warfare. Recent research has markedly improved our understanding of the myriad roles played by people of African descent in clashes of empire and in the day-to-day work of colonial policing. At the same time, emerging studies have demonstrated that explorations of African soldiering can help us to think about empires, and the people who worked for and populated them, in new and instructive ways.

Africanist historians have long undertaken sociocultural studies of African colonial regiments. Such research has explored why African troops fought for colonial powers, what kinds of tasks they carried out, which ethnolinguistic groups European officers preferred and

why, and what sorts of tensions existed between African troops and African civilians.[13] Collectively, these studies have clarified the significance of colonial recruitment and African soldiers to imperial projects while also helping us to understand how African troops made sense of their complex positions within the colonial apparatus. A fresh wave of scholarship emerging in the past decade or so has built upon these older social histories, asking new questions of African soldiers and regiments that emerge from a focus on individual lives and everyday happenings. Michelle Moyd brings a fresh analysis to a couple of long-discussed African military themes—the recruitment of "martial races" and the conceptualization of African soldiers as "agents" of colonialism—by illuminating the individual trajectories, cultural histories, and quotidian tasks of askari inside the garrison and across German East Africa.[14] Sarah Zimmerman, undertaking a new analysis of the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, embraces conjugality and military marriage as means of exploring some of the complex encounters, disagreements, and negotiations between African soldiers and the French colonial state.[15] Jacob Dlamini harnesses the biography of a South African soldier to unpack the complex actions and political decisions of an apartheid "collaborator."[16] This dissertation follows this recent emphasis on the individual trajectories of

[13] Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991); Nancy Lawler, *Soldiers of Misfortune: Ivorian Tirailleurs of World War Two* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992); Joe Lunn, "'Les races guerrières': Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 4 (1999): 517-536; Timothy Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999); Parsons, "'Wakamba warriors are soldiers of the queen': The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890-1970," *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 4 (1999): 671-701; Timothy Stapleton, *African Police and Soldiers in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1923-1980* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2011); Anthony Clayton and David Killingray, *Khaki and Blue: Military and Police in British Colonial Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989); Risto Marjormaa, "The Martial Spirit: Yao Soldiers in British Service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895-1939," *Journal of African History* 44, no. 3 (2003): 413-432.
[14] Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).
[15] Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).
[16] Jacob Dlamini, *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

African soldiers, bringing together microhistories of daily interactions with wider imperial processes like recruitment, deployment, and empire building. As it does, it pushes backwards in time to the nineteenth (and even late eighteenth) century and positions African colonial forces in a much different historical context.

The West India Regiments originated not in Africa, but in the violent, chaotic 1790s British Caribbean. Raised in plantation colonies, and overwhelmingly populated by Africans by the close of the century, the corps emerged out of a long tradition of enslaved and free Black soldiering and military labor in the early-modern Atlantic. Indeed, all Atlantic powers—Spain, France, Britain, Portugal, the Netherlands—incorporated men of African descent into their military establishments.[17] Enslaved people, historians have increasingly come to emphasize, were essential to European powers' ability to make war in the Americas and particularly the tropics. Many served temporarily—as part of colonial defense forces or part of an amphibious invasion of another colony—with auxiliary companies or "Black shot" units before being returned to the plantations. Free men of color served in large numbers too, in local ranger or militia companies, many of whom made careers of Caribbean soldiering and used their military

[17] Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Peter M. Voelz, *Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (New York: Garland, 1993); Matthew Restall, "Black Conquistadors: Armed Africans in Early Spanish America," *The Americas* 57, no. 2 (2000): 171-215; Ben Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Herbert S. Klein, "The Free Colored Militia of Cuba, 1568-1868," *Caribbean Studies* 6, no. 2 (1966): 17-27; Henry B. Lovejoy, *Prieto: Yoruba Kingship in Colonial Cuba during the Age of Revolutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Alex Borucki, *From Shipmates to Soldiers: Emerging Black Identities in the Río de la Plata* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015); Maria Alessandra Bollettino, "Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire: Black Soldiers, Sailors, and Rebels in the Seven Years' War," (PhD dissertation, University of Texas, 2009); Bollettino, "'Of equal or of more service': Black soldiers and the British Empire in the mid-eighteenth-century Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 3 (2017): 510-533; Bollettino, Matthew P. Dziennik, and Simon P. Newman, "'All spirited likely young lads': free men of colour, the defence of Jamaica, and subjecthood during the American War for Independence," *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 2 (2020): 187-211; Gary Sellick, "Black skin, red coats: the Carolina Corps and nationalism in the Revolutionary Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 459-478; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 222-248.

status to make material demands of the colonial state. Maria Alessandra Bollettino, for example, traces Britain's developing reliance on enslaved and free Black soldiers for both defensive and offensive purposes in the mid eighteenth-century Caribbean, concluding that by the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, Britain wouldn't have considered engaging in combat without them.[18] Sometimes, in moments of imperial crisis, colonial powers used offers of emancipation to draw enslaved people into Black regiments and ranger forces in exchange for their freedom.[19] The well-known Dunmore Proclamation, offered up by the royal governor of Virginia in 1775 at the outset of the American War for Independence, drew small numbers of enslaved people from colonial plantations to the British army's "Ethiopian Regiment."[20] And in revolutionary Saint Domingue, following Britain's invasion of the colony in 1793, British officers trekked through French plantations promising freedom to enslaved people who fled to British lines.[21] Other powers too linked emancipation with military service. The new French Republic, starting in 1794, conscripted Africans released from slavery by decree into French ranger units in the eastern Caribbean.[22] In short, throughout the eighteenth century, Atlantic empires developed an absolute reliance on Black soldiers, enslaved and free, for engagement in Atlantic warfare. The West India Regiments, for the case of the British empire, represent a coalescence of early-modern Atlantic traditions of deploying Black fighting men, as ad hoc measures of expediency morphed into a formal feature of the British colonial military establishment. In this way, the West

[18] Bollettino, "'Of equal or of more service.'"
[19] David Brion Davis observed a half-century ago that imperial warfare created certain ruptures in colonial society which opened opportunities for enslaved people to pursue freedom through enlistment. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 74.
[20] Philip D. Morgan and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, "Arming Slaves in the American Revolution," in *Arming Slaves*, ed. Brown and Morgan, 190-191.
[21] They did the same in Grenada shortly after. David Geggus, "The Arming of Slaves in the Haitian Revolution," and Laurent Dubois, "Citizen Soldiers: Emancipation and Military Service in the Revolutionary French Caribbean," in *Arming Slaves*, ed. Brown and Morgan, 225, 241.
[22] Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, 222-248; Dubois, "Citizen Soldiers."

India Regiments represent an important link between eighteenth-century histories of Black soldiers in the Americas and the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of colonial African regiments who served primarily, though not exclusively, on the African continent.

Sickness and environment propelled the shift toward, and increasing reliance upon, Black soldiers in the Atlantic tropics. Erica Charters, amongst others, has noted that the colonial disease environments which sickened white European troops were a constant concern for imperial officials who compiled masses of sickness and mortality data. Military medics' observations of white and non-white soldiers, and their relative vulnerability to diseases endemic in the tropical world, fed theories about Black (and South Asian) resistance to the "miasmas" that devastated white European regiments.[23] Britain's global colonial forces in the eighteenth century—collectively composed of people from Europe, Africa, North America, the West Indies, and India—effectively served as a test group for emerging ideas about differences between white and non-white people as measured through soldiers' comparative abilities to withstand the heat, environments, and illnesses that the empire presented.[24] Indeed, two key themes in scholarly explorations of early military medicine have been imperial observations of the impact of different environments on the bodies of soldiers and the concomitant experiments in treating tropical illness in military garrisons and aboard naval ships.[25] As military men advocated for the

[23] Erica Charters, "Making bodies modern: race, medicine and the colonial soldier in the mid-eighteenth century," *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, nos. 3-4 (2012): 214-231.
[24] Mark Harrison, "'The Tender Frame of Man': Disease, Climate, and Racial Difference in India and the West Indies, 1760-1860," *Bulletin of Historical Medicine* 70 (1996): 68-93; Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1660-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1600-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[25] J.D. Alsop, "Warfare and the Creation of British Imperial Medicine, 1600-1800," in *British Military and Naval Medicine, 1600-1830*, ed. Geoffrey L. Hudson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 23-50; Kenneth F. Kiple and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas, "Race, War and Tropical Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Caribbean," in *Warm Climates and Western Medicine: The Emergence of Tropical Medicine, 1500-1900*, ed. David Arnold (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 65-79; J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

establishment of the West India Regiments in the late eighteenth century, a number of medical theories about origin, skin color, and disease vulnerability floated around the British empire, with yellow fever, and to a lesser extent malaria, being the key point of focus for physicians trying to understand why Black people were comparatively less troubled by some of the tropical maladies that ravaged white Europeans.[26] In the West Indies, the prevailing wisdom of the moment, Michael Joseph has explained, asserted that the Caribbean air was noxious—the product of intense heat that beat down upon the local vegetation to produce putrid "miasmas" that inflicted new, unseasoned arrivals with dangerous illnesses. Commanders in the West Indies, for their part, also drew upon personal observations to argue that tropical heat and the fatigue caused by physical military activity combined to cause bouts of sickness in the garrisons.[27] As Black people were, in the minds of British officials, accustomed to the equatorial heat and its "miasmas," and had demonstrated the ability to survive intense physical labor on the plantations, Black regiments would alleviate these issues substantially, the army believed.

Military medics working across the eighteenth-century British empire created a rich cache of statistical and anecdotal evidence that supported their contention that non-white soldiers fared far better in the tropics than white troops did. And military medical historians have generally preferred to draw upon that source base in developing their explanations for the creation of non-white colonial forces like the West India Regiments.[28] But the medical history of slavery and the slave trade is just as significant to the story. Suman Seth, in *Difference and Disease*, shows that white West Indians' observations and descriptions of enslaved plantation laborers—their skin, frames, diets, clothing, and, crucially, their relative susceptibility to bouts of

[26] Harrison, "'Tender Frame of Man;'" Alsop, "Warfare and the Creation of British Imperial Medicine."
[27] Joseph, "West India Regiments," 147-148.
[28] Alsop, "Warfare and the Creation of British Imperial Medicine." On the West India Regiments specifically, see Lockley, *Military Medicine*; Joseph, "West India Regiments."

illness—were fundamental to emerging discourse on race and disease susceptibility in the eighteenth-century British empire.[29] Indeed, such ideas about Black comparative invulnerability to harsh climates and fevers propagated, thickened, and matured alongside the sugar cane, proving to be as fundamental to the growth of the British empire as any cash crop.[30] Rana Hogarth, in *Medicalizing Blackness*, traces the history of European and American assertions that Africans held natural immunity to yellow fever.[31] The idea was embraced by some, though innate immunity arguments were by no means ubiquitous.[32] Hogarth notes that the alleged fever rejection of enslaved Africans arriving on slave ships and laboring on plantations was central to the hardening of this idea. Medical publications asserting Black resistance to yellow fever, based upon these observations of enslaved Africans, exploded in the mid 1790s as the illness swept the eastern seaboard of North America. That same yellow fever epidemic, which had first emerged in the Caribbean in 1793, wrecked British regiments in the West Indies, undermining the empire's efforts to intervene in the war in Saint Domingue and leading army commanders to insist that a formal Black infantry was necessary.[33] Thus, the medical reasoning for the establishment of the West India Regiments, in addition to the well-discussed health and mortality evidence provided by the military itself, was also rooted in these long-term observations of enslaved Africans. In forwarding this point, this project asserts the significance of slavery and the slave trade to the history of military medicine. It shows how ideas about race and disease that were refined on plantations and in slave-trading ports redounded across the nineteenth-century British empire

[29] Suman Seth, *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race, and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[30] Justin Roberts, "'Corruption of the Air': Yellow Fever and Malaria in the Rise of English Caribbean Slavery," *Early American Studies* 20, no. 4 (2022): 653-672.
[31] Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness*, 17-47.
[32] Mariola Espinosa, "The Question of Racial Immunity to Yellow Fever in History and Historiography," *Social Science History* 38 (2014): 437-453.
[33] Geggus, "Yellow Fever."

with colonial land forces.

Throughout the chronological period that this dissertation covers—roughly the 1790s to the 1860s—the vast majority of West India regulars entered the corps as African conscripts who had just arrived in British Atlantic colonies on transatlantic slave vessels. The recruitment of young African men from aboard slave ships straddled British slave-trade abolition in 1808, beginning about a dozen years before and carrying on for more than a half-century after. The military experiences of those conscripted after slave-trade abolition as "liberated" men, I show, were nearly identical to those of the enslaved people enlisted before. By comparing the processes of pre- and post-1808 conscription for the West India Regiments—and the material conditions of those enlisted before and after the implementation of the Slave Trade Act, which outlawed British participation in the trade—this dissertation builds upon research which has emphasized the myriad limitations of abolition, emancipation, and "freedom" in the Caribbean and beyond as experienced by formerly-enslaved people. Natasha Lightfoot, for example, traces a chaotic emancipation in British Antigua, dissecting the various economic, legal, and social constraints which freedpeople had to navigate.[34] Ada Ferrer shows how emancipation in one place could unleash harsh intensifications of slavery elsewhere.[35] Emma Christopher's global history of British abolition demonstrates the restrictions of Black "freedom" in the nineteenth-century British empire, in part by emphasizing that the experiences of emancipated Africans often looked quite similar to, or worse than, those of white convicts being punished.[36] But fewer studies delve

[34] Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
[35] Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[36] Emma Christopher, *Freedom in White and Black: A Lost Story of the Illegal Slave Trade and Its Global Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

into substantive before-and-after comparisons of the experiences of enslaved and freedpeople.[37] The West India Regiments, and the example of their military service, facilitate a demonstration of material similarities in Black labor before and after British slave-trade abolition. In this way, I pursue a different kind of history of slavery and emancipation in the British world, revealing limitations of Black "freedom" by demonstrating the continuity of West India soldiers' experiences before and after abolition.

Beyond its forbiddance of the participation of British nationals in the transatlantic slave trade, the Slave Trade Act incentivized the Royal Navy to capture slave ships at sea. The enslaved Africans aboard those captured vessels were subsequently placed under British colonial control and either bound to apprentice labor or enlisted into colonial land or sea forces.[38] Seizing upon the enlistment clause, West India officers interpreted the Slave Trade Act as a mandate to fill their ranks and impressed thousands of Africans into the military. This project situates West India soldiers within the voluminous recent research on the groups of Africans removed from slave vessels captured by the Royal Navy, first labeled "captured negroes," and then "Liberated Africans" in the nineteenth-century British empire. Scholarship on Liberated Africans has been global, revealing and comparing the experiences of people released from slavery in disparate locales: the Caribbean, Sierra Leone, Cape Colony, Saint Helena, Brazil, the East African coast, and Indian Ocean islands.[39] Such research, though, has focused primarily on colonial settlement

[37] Rebecca Scott's analyses of emancipation in the Spanish and French Caribbean offer a helpful guide for tracing gradual and inconsistent processes of emancipation with careful attention to the lives and work of enslaved Africans undergoing—and influencing—the transition to freedom. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985); Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Scott, "Paper Thin: Freedom and Re-enslavement in the Diaspora of the Haitian Revolution," *Law and History Review* 29, no. 4 (2011): 1061-1087.
[38] 47 George III, Session 1, Cap. XXXVI, "An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade," section vii.
[39] Richard Anderson and Henry B. Lovejoy, eds., *Liberated African and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807-1896* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020); Richard Peter Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone: Re-Building Lives and Identities in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Maeve Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance and a British Antislavery World System* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

schemes and apprentice labor. The military conscription of Liberated Africans, despite this being a pillar of the empire's plans for "recaptured" African people, has garnered considerably less attention.[40] This dissertation fills this aperture in Liberated Africans research while also emphasizing underexplored long-term connections between British abolition and the British military.

Historians of British abolition and Liberated Africans have also explored questions of culture, community formation, and ethnogenesis amongst those who were released from captured slave vessels and made to settle in colonial cities and villages. Roseanne Adderley, comparing Liberated African settlements in Trinidad and the Bahamas, and Richard Anderson, looking at the colonial villages of the Sierra Leone peninsula, have asked how ethnicity, language, and religion facilitated the emergence of new communities and identities.[41] And many historians of the African diaspora, analyzing enslaved populations across the Americas, have taken up the same challenge. Paul Lovejoy, for example, has argued that common language and religion were

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2022); Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Rosanne Marion Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa": Slave Trade Abolition and Free African Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Henry B. Lovejoy, "The Registers of Liberated Africans of the Havana Slave Trade Commission: Implementation and Policy, 1824-1841," *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 1 (2016): 23-44; Beatriz Mamigonian, "In the Name of Freedom: Slave Trade Abolition, the Law and the Brazilian Branch of the African Emigration Scheme (Brazil-British West Indies, 1830s-1850s)," *Slavery & Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009): 41-66; Walter Hawthorne, "'Being now, as it were, one family': Shipmate bonding on the slave vessel *Emilia*, in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the Atlantic world," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45, no. 1 (2008): 53-77; Samuël Coghe, "The Problem of Freedom in a Mid-Nineteenth Century Atlantic Slave Society: The Liberated Africans of the Anglo-Portuguese Mixed Commission in Angola (1844-1870)," *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 3 (2012): 479-500; Andrew Pearson, *Distant Freedom: St. Helena and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1840-1872* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016); Christopher Saunders, "Liberated Africans in Cape Colony in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18 (1985): 223-239; Matthew S. Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[40] Maeve Ryan's recent work on the global imperial effects of the Slave Trade Act has provided the most thorough analysis yet. Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*. Padraic Scanlan and Emma Christopher have explored "captured negro" conscription in Sierra Leone during the later stages of the Napoleonic wars. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*; Christopher, *Freedom in White and Black*.

[41] Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa"*; Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*. See also David Northrup, "Becoming African: Identity Formation among Liberated Slaves in Nineteenth-Century Sierra Leone," *Slavery & Abolition* 27, no. 1 (2006): 1-21.

two essential pillars in the fashioning of communities and political identities in the diaspora.[42] Walter Rucker, tracing the history of Coromantee ethnogenesis in the British Atlantic, shows how African cultural practices and political ideologies functioned to establish a group identity that meant something to those subsumed by that colonial label.[43] West India soldiers in Atlantic garrisons found similar methods of formulating meaningful identities and social bonds during their time together in the British army, which means that this well-documented group of Africans can help us to probe these key themes in African diaspora history. Evidence from the corps indicates that mutual adherence to African cultures and religions, as well as shared African origins and linguistic abilities, all served to facilitate community amongst West India regulars. In this way, I posit that soldiers' African backgrounds were essential to the unique culture of the West India Regiments and contextualize the emergence of Black regulars' social relationships within wider processes of community formation in the African diaspora.

West India soldiers' cultural practices and ethnolinguistic affiliations also facilitated social bonds beyond the porous station walls that ingrained the troops within wider colonial society. Exploring these associations between African regulars and non-military people collapses African diaspora historiography into the "war and society" wing of military historiography. Military historians, in recent years, have committed to exploring how soldiers and regiments fit

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[42] Paul E. Lovejoy, "Trans-Atlantic Transformations: The Origins and Identity of Africans in the Americas," in *The Atlantic World: Essays on Slavery, Migration, and Imagination*, 2nd edition, ed. Willem Klooster and Alfred Padula (New York: Routledge, 2018), 126-146. Joseph Miller argues that Africans in diaspora constructed a "creative, fluid series of identities … to replace the ties disrupted by their enslavement." Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering: Restoring Identities through Enslavement in Angola and under Slavery in Brazil," in *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery*, ed. José C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004), 87. Other explorations of the transformation of African identities in the diaspora include Philip D. Morgan, "Cultural Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade: African Regional Origins, American Destinations and New World Developments," *Slavery & Abolition* 18, no. 1 (1997): 122-145; Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
[43] Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

into the spaces in which they operated while also showing how the sociopolitical backgrounds and beliefs of rank-and-file troops impacted their experiences.[44] Matthew Dziennik, for example, locates Scottish Highlands soldiers within the sociocultural structures and economies of British North America and analyzes their encounters with non-military people too.[45] Jonathan Fennell presents a new history of the Second World War that highlights the ways in which British Commonwealth soldiers interacted with those around them and how their diverse cultures and political beliefs affected how they made sense of the war and the wider world.[46] Drawing together these African diaspora and military historiographies to analyze these aspects of West India soldiers' lives and social relationships not only helps us to better understand the West India Regiments and the world in which they operated, but also reframes social and cultural histories of the British Atlantic. The lives of West India soldiers reveal wide cultural, religious, and familial networks shaped by African cultures and incorporating both colonial state actors (soldiers) and non-military/non-state actors too.

In addition to serving some of the empire's various needs, the British army was meant to "civilize" its soldiers. White and Black troops alike endured brutal torment at the hands of officers who saw the rank-and-file as lowly, unsophisticated, "uncivilized" dregs in need of strident correction. As Linda Colley rightly points out, military service in Britain's regiments of foot probably reveals more similarities in the experiences of white and Black people than differences.[47] Excessive marching, exhausting physical labor, and corporal punishment structured

[44] Robert M. Citino, "Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (2007): 1070-1090.
[45] Matthew P. Dziennik, *The Fatal Land: War, Empire, and the Highland Soldier in British America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
[46] Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[47] Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600-1850* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

the days of all infantrymen across the empire.[48] But the reality that West India soldiers were Black men, and often formerly enslaved people, still mattered and shaped life in the corps. The Black infantry, in the eyes of the army, were the least "civilized" of the lot, subjected to specific methods of discipline and punishment that their officers tailored to them. This is not a new observation; historians of sepoy and African colonial regiments have long emphasized that non-white soldiers were subjected to particular kinds of treatment that the army believed would be most effective on people of a certain race and "caste."[49] British officers approached the West India Regiments with ideas about race and Blackness forged on the plantations and through Europe's long contact with Africa via the transatlantic slave trade.[50] Assumptions about African "savagery" and "ferocity" factored into daily lives of West India soldiers.[51] Corporal punishments doled out in British garrisons, for instance, were often modified for the maximally "uncivil" African. White planters' concerns about musket-carrying imperial African soldiers in the pre-emancipation British Caribbean, to take another example, meant that army officers mandated especially tight order in the Black corps.

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[48] Peter Way, "Militarizing the Atlantic World: Army discipline, coerced labor, and Britain's Atlantic empire," *Atlantic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2016): 345-369.

[49] Douglas M. Peers, "Sepoys, Soldiers and the Lash: Race, Caste and Army Discipline in India, 1820-1850," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23, no. 2 (1995): 211-247; Channa Wickremesekera, *"Best Black Troops in the World": British Perceptions and the Making of the Sepoy, 1746-1805* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002); David Killingray, "The 'Rod of Empire': The Debate of Corporal Punishment in the British African Colonial Forces, 1888-1946," *Journal of African History* 35, no. 2 (1994): 201-216.

[50] Contemporary published observations of African people abounded in the eighteenth-century British world. See, for example, Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica. Or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of the Island*, 3 vols. (London: T. Lowndes, 1774); William Beckford, *Remarks upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica* (London: T. and J. Egerton, 1788); Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (London: Peter Parker, 1673). Jennifer L. Morgan has analyzed accounts such as these with attention to how they shaped European ideologies about race and Blackness. Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 167-192.

[51] The white Jamaican writer and historian, Edward Long, infamously wrote: "The Africans, first imported, were wild and savage to an extreme: intractable and ferocious tempers naturally provoked their masters to rule them with a rod of iron; and the earliest laws enacted to affect them are therefore rigid and inclement, even to a degree of inhumanity." Long, *History of Jamaica*, II:497. More than six decades later, a Saint Lucia newspaper described newly-conscripted African soldiers as "ferocious" men who need "to be broken in and tamed." *The Palladium*, 1 December 1838.

The West India Regiments thus bring approaches to disciplining soldiers and approaches to disciplining the enslaved into conversation with one another. Tim Lockley makes an explicit link between methods of punishing enslaved people and West India regulars, showing how plantation-rooted theories that Black people had thicker skin, and thus required more intense corporal retribution, made their way into the stations occupied by the West India Regiments.[52] Vincent Brown and Randy Browne have recently highlighted the quotidian terror and grotesque punishments that were fundamental to racialized slavery, and Dawn Harris has shown that white people's obsessions with, and methods of, disciplining Black people extended beyond the boundaries of the plantations and beyond slave emancipation in the British empire too.[53] This project follows Harris out of the sugar estates of the British West Indies and beyond slavery altogether, demonstrating how colonial ideologies of Blackness, order, and discipline diffused outward from Caribbean cane fields and across the Atlantic tropics via the West India Regiments.

And yet, much of what Black soldiers endured was still pretty close to the daily experiences of white soldiers, especially those stationed outside of Europe. Again, the "incivility" of line infantrymen, and the army's plans to combat it, cut across "racial" and color lines and shaped army life everywhere. It is probable, I suggest, that ideologies of discipline developed on Caribbean plantations came to impact the brutal experiences of white troops too. Emma Christopher has shown that white and Black soldiers in British forces were similarly degraded by their officers, and Padraic Scanlan has demonstrated that white troops in nascent British West Africa were subjected to outrageous abuse and grotesque physical punishment that

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[52] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 73. Jennifer Morgan, in her much-celebrated article, "'Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder,'" has traced the long history of European theories that Black people did not feel pain.
[53] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Justin Roberts, "The Whip and the Hoe: Violence, Work and Productivity on Anglo-American Plantations," *Journal of Global Slavery* 6 (2021): 108-130; Dawn P. Harris, *Punishing the Black Body: Marking Social and Racial Structures in Barbados and Jamaica* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

was sometimes *worse* than what their African comrades endured.[54] Soldiers of all colors were colonial laborers subordinate to, and at the mercy of, the British state. The British army thus represents a diverse underclass of colonial workers whose lives were shaped by metropolitan beliefs about "incivility" and the ability of the military to promote discipline. Taking all of this into account, this project does two things. First, it nuances some of the comparisons between white European and Black African colonial soldiering, acknowledging the many similarities while also unpacking some important distinctions. And second, through the example of Black infantry and the West India Regiments, this dissertation calls for—and hopefully provides an example of—a reexamination of *all* British soldiering as a means of exploring the overlapping themes of labor, discipline, and "civilization" in the nineteenth-century British empire.

Atlanticist, imperial, and world historians have lately embraced the trans-regional, even global, study of people on the move. Scholarly interest in "imperial careering" is one example, though this would probably speak more to some of the West India officers than the infantry.[55] Others, like Marcus Rediker, Peter Linebaugh, and Alexander Byrd, have shown that poor white laborers, enslaved and free Black people, pirates, sailors, and soldiers (and there is certainly plenty of overlap amongst these groups) formed a commoner underbelly of circum-Atlantic migrants whose lives reveal a specific experience of labor and mobility while also drawing links between different parts of the Atlantic world.[56] Military individuals have featured in this research, as armies and navies are inherently mobile. And within this focus on mobile military subjects have been substantive examinations of soldiers and sailors of African descent that

[54] Christopher, *Freedom in White and Black*; Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*.
[55] David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[56] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Alexander X. Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants Across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

remind us that inter-regional migration was a common, if still underexplored, pillar of the Black Atlantic experience.[57] Kristin Mann has pointed directly to the West India Regiments as an instructive example of the multidirectionality of the African diaspora, one that reveals "a complex web of multilateral and intersecting networks that linked different parts of the black Atlantic world."[58] This dissertation builds on Mann's comment by both reconstructing the circum-Atlantic migrations of West India soldiers and exploring how their "multilateral" paths bring disparate parts of the Atlantic together in conversation.

**Sources and methods**

As British regulars, the Black rank and file became "legible people," as Charlotte Macdonald and Rebecca Lenihan have termed British servicemembers, known to the state via written record and tracked by the extraordinary military bureaucracy within the stone palace walls of Horse Guards in Westminster.[59] Like most military units, the West India Regiments generated a vast paper trail, one which today spans numerous archives and libraries from London to Jamaica to Sierra Leone.[60] In researching the lives and experiences of soldiers in the West India Regiments, I use a broad cache of sources including military and colonial correspondence, British military manuals,

[57] Ray Costello, *Black Salt: Seafarers of African Descent on British Ships* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); Charles R. Foy, "The Royal Navy's employment of black mariners and maritime workers, 1754-1783," *International Journal of Maritime History* 28, no. 1 (2016): 6-35; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Douglas Hamilton, "'A most active, enterprising officer': Captain John Perkins, the Royal Navy, and the boundaries of slavery and liberty in the Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2018): 80-100.
[58] Kristin Mann, "Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora and of Atlantic History and Culture," in *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil*, ed. Mann and Edna G. Bay (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 11-12.
[59] Charlotte Macdonald and Rebecca Lenihan, "Paper Soldiers: the life, death and reincarnation of nineteenth-century military files across the British Empire," *Rethinking History* 22, no. 3 (2018): 377.
[60] Despite generally good record keeping, various troves of the West India Regiments' history have not survived. Records of the 1st West India were somehow lost during an expedition to New Orleans in 1815. And early documentation for the 2nd Regiment was infamously forgotten and subsequently misplaced when several companies left Sierra Leone for the Bahamas in 1825. Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 6.

officers' letterbooks and inspection reports, regimental service records, missionary journals, contemporary observer and traveler accounts, and colonial newspapers. Collectively, these sources offer plentiful details about soldiers' day-to-day military lives and quotidian interactions.

The most significant problem posed by the archive is the complete lack of memoirs or other testimonies composed by West India Regiment soldiers. Virtually all of the rank and file were illiterate, as were many of the non-commissioned officers. The rigid structures and harsh routines of military life left little time for this kind of reflection anyway. While many histories of twentieth-century African colonial soldiers rely upon memoirs, recorded oral testimonies, and other personal writings, far fewer records exist for the nineteenth century.[61] But by using British military and colonial sources, it is possible, following Ann Laura Stoler, to read both along and against the archival grain to reconstruct soldiers' lives and experiences, at least in broad strokes.[62] I have combined this approach to reading documents with a method of layering different sources on top of one another. Setting, for example, regimental inspection reports on top of British military training manuals, or written descriptions of colonial garrisons on top of officers' daily orders, creates a more detailed picture of soldiers' experiences than any one document would reveal on its own.

Granular details about West India soldiers' military lives across the British Atlantic come to us through military and colonial records that must be read across geographical, ministerial, and archival divides.[63] The written correspondence of military officers and colonial officials have

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[61] Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999); Lunn, "Kande Kamara Speaks: An Oral History of the West African Experience in France, 1914-18," in *Africa and the First World War*, ed. Melvin E. Page (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 28-53; David Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2010).
[62] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 87-109; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). For a discussion of how to approach military sources in this manner, see Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 24.
[63] Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage*, 19.

provided a steady foundation of essential information regarding the rough trajectories and activities of the West India Regiments. The quantity of despatches, and the level of detail that they provide, fluctuate according to imperial context; they tend to be quick and nondescript when little is happening, and then suddenly rich and voluminous in moments of crisis—a rumored attack on a British settlement or a soldiers' mutiny, for instance.[64] On top of these records, which are generally top-down in perspective and lacking in granular detail, I have used a wide collection of sources that bring me to ground level, so to speak, allowing for microhistorical reconstructions of soldiers' lives in specific places at particular times. Regimental officers' Orderly Books—brief, daily records of orders often scribbled in a hand-held notebook—chronicle the hourly happenings inside the garrison, providing both a baseline for a standard day in the army while also revealing spontaneous developments: an extra drill session to punish the company, an argument between a couple of NCOs, an unusual fatigue labor assignment.[65] Furthermore, twice annually, high-ranking officers visited British garrisons and filed a formal inspection report with the War Office. These snapshot sources describe the condition of soldiers and stations in a given place at a moment in time, adding localized specificity to African regulars' military experiences which can, when appropriate, also be extrapolated to describe comparable situations.

These kinds of sources lend themselves well to the method of layering documents on top of one another. Reading at the same time the Order Book and the inspection report for the same regiment in the same garrison can open both manuscripts to better interpretations, and I take

[64] Historians accustomed to reading colonial archives have remarked before on the power of "crises" to generate flurries of documentation. See Martin A. Klein, "Looking for slavery in colonial archives: French West Africa," in *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade, Vol. 2: Sources and Methods*, ed. Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, and Klein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 125-128.
[65] On some of the challenges of using these kinds of sources, see G.A. Steppler, "Regimental Records in the Late Eighteenth Century and the Social History of the British Soldier," *Archivaria* 26 (1988): 7-17.

advantage when the opportunity presents itself. But in other instances, I have zoomed in on one source with the intention of creating a rich story out of a single page, paragraph, or phrase. For example, a terse receipt for the purchase of a couple hundred enslaved Africans in Jamaica for the 5th and 6th West India Regiments, when read against the grain, illuminates a trying, weeks-long odyssey of conscription, cramped confinement, and re-embarkation for the lonely garrisons at British Honduras.[66] A chaplain's offhand remark about African soldiers filling church pews in Sierra Leone facilitates rich discussion about the relationship between the West India Regiments and the mission to evangelize.[67] This kind of evidence open possibilities for instructive anecdotes that elucidate some of the experiences of West India soldiers rarely discussed in the much more voluminous despatches continuously received and filed away in bureaucratic offices in London.

Military sources also provide an abundance of information on thousands of individual soldiers. Regimental *Description Books* (bound muster books alphabetized by soldiers' surname) and discharge packets help us to piece together some of the likely specifics of West India regulars' military lives.[68] These records largely served financial accounting purposes for the military. They told the War Office how many soldiers needed to be paid and provided for, and also kept track of who might qualify for a pension.[69] But read against the grain, these kinds of records—which provide names, ranks, physical descriptions, ethnolinguistic origins as officers could best approximate them, dates of enlistment, and other details of service—offer intimate details about who West India soldiers were and what kinds of experiences they had in the British

[66] "Particular Account No. 2," Jamaica, 31 March 1801, Balcarres Papers, NAM 1975/08/55/3.
[67] George Thompson, *Thompson in Africa: or An Account of the Missionary Labors, Sufferings, Travels, and Observations of George Thompson. In Western Africa, at the Mendi Mission*, 2nd ed. (New York: S.W. Benedict, 1852), 87.
[68] Description Books, West India Regiments, WO 25/644-656; Royal Hospital Chelsea Soldiers' Service Documents, West India Regiments, WO 97/1155-1162.
[69] Macdonald and Lenihan, "Paper Soldiers," 381, 383.

army.[70] And the discharge packets specifically, as requests for additional funding from the British government in the form of a pension, include a brief summary of service and various notes on a soldier's personal conduct—honors, promotions, reductions, courts martial, and other details. I have used these sources in a few different ways, but their greatest purpose is the addition of a few "characters" to the processes, activities, and events that this dissertation describes. The injection of names and people into the mix grounds this story in human experience and individual trajectories that show how African soldiers lived with and related to British colonialism.[71]

Clare Anderson's work on "subaltern lives" points toward substantive biographies, if often only partial "snapshots," of those generally dispossessed by the state—convicts, sailors, soldiers, Indigenous people, the enslaved, and poor whites.[72] Through my use of various sources to reconstruct West India soldiers' experiences in the garrisons and beyond, I have embraced the pursuit of the representative "snapshot" of the subaltern life as a method of diversifying our understanding of who populated the British empire. In doing so, I also follow Lara Putnam's advice that the "fragments" of life histories that we uncover in the archives must be discussed in

[70] Scholars have generally used the *Description Books* for their ethnolinguistic data. See Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 115; Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 29. Others, much more recently, have created a few skeletal biographies of West India soldiers using the discharge packets. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas*, 1-5; Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*, 196-228.

[71] Here I draw inspiration from the now well-established subfield of Black Atlantic biography. See Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet, eds., *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Paul E. Lovejoy, "'Freedom Narratives' of Transatlantic Slavery," *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 1 (2011): 91-107; Jerome S. Handler, "Survivors of the Middle Passage: Life Histories of Enslaved Africans in British America," *Slavery & Abolition* 23, no. 1 (2002): 25-56.

[72] Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

a way that tells us something about the "whole" of the empire.[73] Indeed, to paraphrase Heather Streets-Salter, local happenings rarely lack wider implications.[74] In other words, this dissertation aims to root each of the granular encounters and experiences it describes within the wider machinations of both the African diaspora and nineteenth-century British imperialism. It is equally committed to the fragments and the whole.

My efforts to reconstruct lives and experiences sometimes require moments of conjecture on my part that fill in missing details or otherwise add depth and specificity to the narrative. I have, in some instances, deployed Natalie Zemon Davis' concept of "historical imagination"—where sources are lacking, I turn my attention toward building the contemporary world around these historical actors. I seek to fill gaps in the record by considering other people and institutions with whom these men were acquainted, the places in which they lived, and the things they were likely to see, hear, and do in those places. These are my efforts to assemble a "plausible … story from the materials of the time."[75] Occasionally, when I believe the sources place me on solid ground, I even forward an educated guess about the thoughts that West India soldiers may have thought and the feelings they may have felt. This often requires drawing from the entirety of my source base—thinking holistically about what I have read in the archives about the Regiments and the world(s) in which they lived and operated. I hope that these instances of "historical imagination," which are rooted in a careful reading of the manuscripts I have gathered, add helpful detail to the pages that follow.

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[73] Lara Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 615-630.
[74] Heather Streets-Salter, "The Local Was Global: The Singapore Mutiny of 1915," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 3 (2013): 539-576.
[75] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 13, 18-19.

**Chapter summaries**

The following chapters discuss some of the wider macrohistorical processes and localized microhistorical dramas that structured the lives of soldiers in the West India Regiments. Each centers a particular piece of the military experience: conscription, training and discipline, social and leisure time, campaigns, and resistance and mutiny. The first chapter undertakes a circum-Atlantic analysis of conscription for the West India Regiments. It demonstrates that the corps was thoroughly dependent on the transatlantic slave trade to supply its soldiers, even after British slave-trade abolition in 1808. Early on, officers purchased thousands of enslaved people arriving in Caribbean ports to fill the ranks of the corps. British abolition in 1808 eliminated this method of conscription but immediately replaced it with another. West India officers, for more than a half-century after abolition, collaborated with colonial officials to conscript thousands more Africans off slave vessels seized by the Royal Navy as part of Britain's militarized slave-trade suppression campaign. This chapter argues that British officials molded the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition to funnel able-bodied Africans into the West India Regiments. It demonstrates an underexplored significance of the slave trade, and Britain's campaign to suppress it, to British land forces and by extension the British empire.

The second and third chapters probe quotidian experiences of West India soldiers in and near the Atlantic garrisons they occupied. Chapter Two explores the process of training and disciplining the majority-African conscripts and reconstructs some of the day-to-day station activities the troops were made to carry out. It argues that British officials' assumptions about race and Blackness, and beliefs about race and health in the tropics, shaped these processes in specific, discernable ways. But at the same time, it is careful not to overdetermine its arguments, providing steady reminders that Black soldiers' experiences were still in many ways standard to

the British army writ large and comparable to what white troops endured. In this way, the chapter also presses for more granular studies of colonial military lives as a means of analyzing the difficult experience of working for the British empire.

Chapter Three undertakes a sociocultural exploration of station life and seeks to ingrain West India soldiers within colonial social structures. It begins by explaining why Black troops tended to be assigned to certain garrisons and describing the surroundings that shaped military life in those stations. The remainder of the chapter examines the troops' conjugal relationships, religious practices, and leisure time. It argues that West India regulars embedded themselves within the towns, cities, and colonies in which they lived and worked in ways that influenced the wider cultures of colonial society. The chapter also explores African soldiers' encounters with the colonial mission to evangelize, locating Black troops within wider imperial machinations to reshape the cultures and values of the people of the British empire.

As with most military forces, West India soldiers spent the majority of their time in the garrison. As such, Chapters Two and Three—as well as the fifth and final chapter—are "set," so to speak, in tropical military stations and their immediate vicinities. That said, West India troops did see combat from time to time, and Chapter Four analyzes some of the military missions undertaken by the corps. In the early decades of the Regiments' existence, the eras of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, the corps' primary purpose was combating French forces in the Caribbean. In the postwar decades, West India soldiers carried out different tasks that reflected the evolving ambitions and agendas of the British empire in the Caribbean and coastal West Africa. This chapter argues that the shifting combat assignments of the West India Regiments evidence the wide geographical coverage, the malleability, and, most importantly, the long-term significance of the corps to the success of Britain's nineteenth-century agendas.

The final chapter offers a microhistorical analysis of a deadly rebellion undertaken by several new West African recruits in Trinidad in 1837 that relates soldiers' ethnolinguistic backgrounds to their methods of resistance against the British army. It walks through a period of several months from the conscription of the insurgents to the aftermath of the courts martial and executions that followed the deadly event. This chapter considers how African soldiers' ethnolinguistic backgrounds and identities, as well as their prior experiences in Africa and along the middle passage, influenced their reactions to colonial military service thrust upon them. It argues that the mutineers were predominantly Yoruba speakers enslaved in the wars that collapsed the Oyo empire in the mid 1830s and posits that their similar ethnolinguistic backgrounds and their shared experiences of warfare in the Yoruba states were essential factors in facilitating their collective rebellion. In doing so, it also relates the garrison uprising to other Yoruba-led insurgencies happening around the same time in Cuba and Bahia. This chapter aims to broaden our understanding of what British army mutinies looked like and what motivated them, while also providing a detailed image of discontent and organized resistance in the West India Regiments.

The epilogue presents a very brief discussion of demobilization and the post-military experiences of some of those released from the West India Regiments on account of age, illness, or disability. Afterwards, it zooms out to reflect upon some of the ways in which African soldiers have influenced major developments across the British empire in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a whole, this dissertation presents a new history of the slave trade and abolition, tropical warfare and disease, and British imperial expansion in the chaotic nineteenth-century world.

Chapter One

# Putting on the Red Coat: African Conscription in the British Atlantic World

Nathaniel Beckford stood in a room with twenty-five comrades and several strangers in early May of 1804. Men in scarlet jackets inspected him carefully—measuring his height, asking his age, and studying his body. Several weeks before, Beckford and his compatriots had been forced aboard the British slave ship *Ann* at Cape Mount on the Windward Coast and shackled in its cargo hold. The vessel lifted anchor soon after and departed for the West Indies. The ship was bound for Jamaica, Britain's most valuable Atlantic colony. The island's brutal sugar industry consumed thousands of enslaved Africans each year. Indeed, that was the likely fate of most of the 214 women, men, and children who survived the vessel's transatlantic passage. But neither Beckford nor his twenty-five comrades would be chopping and boiling sugar cane. The Kingston merchants brokering the sale of the *Ann*'s human cargo had partnered with the British military, agreeing to deliver a specific number of "prime" African men fit for armed service. Beckford and his compatriots fit the bill, and after the inspection they were sold to the recruiting officers and conscripted into His Majesty's 2nd West India Regiment.[1]

The officers who examined Beckford and his shipmates had come to port from a local military garrison, most likely Fort Augusta, the isolated, mosquito-infested station just west of Kingston where the army often housed Black soldiers. The recruiting party believed the man whom they re-named Nathaniel Beckford to be around 24 years old and measured him at five feet six inches tall—precisely within the age and height range by which the military described

[1] Description Roll, 2nd West India Regiment, WO 25/644; "Return of the Names, Age, Size, Country, and from whom purchased, of 26 Recruits, from on board the Guinea Ship Ann," WO 40/20; "Receipt for Twenty Six new Negroe Men … from Cape Mount," 9 May 1804, NMM, MGS/8; *Voyages*, ID #80278. In the Description Roll and the War Office return, Beckford and his shipmates are erroneously recorded as "Angola" Africans. The vessel having arrived in Jamaica from Cape Mount on the Windward Coast means that the "Angola" designation cannot be correct.

their ideal recruit. The African non-commissioned officers, if they were able to communicate with the new conscripts, offered a few words of instruction before leading Beckford and the others off to the garrison. Their service to the king had begun.

**Private, 8th West India Regiment, c. 1803**

*Source: NAM 2018/7/13/1, National Army Museum, London.*

This chapter reconstructs contexts and processes of conscription for the West India Regiments from the corps' founding in 1795 to the mid nineteenth century. Tracking through wartime and peacetime—and through major imperial legislation pertaining to the military, slavery, and abolition—it demonstrates the close connection between the West India Regiments and the transatlantic slave trade. In doing so, it also traces some individual paths into Britain's Black battalions, revealing debilitating odysseys endured by those enlisted for the corps. Very few people volunteered to serve in the West India Regiments over the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the British army as a whole struggled to attract soldiers, especially when deployment to the "torrid zones" of the empire was likely.[2] Military officers in the West Indies and, a bit later, in Sierra Leone too, recognized that Africans arriving in British colonies on slave ships, like Nathaniel Beckford and his compatriots, presented the path of least resistance for constructing and maintaining the West India Regiments. Commanders partnered at various times with slave traders, colonial officials, and court magistrates to funnel able-bodied Africans directly from slave ships into colonial companies. For those targeted by British military officers, the experience of conscription was painful, violating, and sometimes fatal.

While the coerced enlistment of Africans into the West India Regiments has been widely acknowledged by historians, an extended, transatlantic analysis of the process has yet to be undertaken.[3] Roger Buckley has provided the most thorough examination of recruitment by purchase, though his study is Jamaica-centric and more or less concludes with British slave-trade abolition.[4] More recently, scholars of British antislavery like Padraic Scanlan and Maeve Ryan

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[2] Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 58-59.
[3] That said, my recent article opens this line of questioning and analysis. See "'Saving an extraordinary expense to the nation': African recruitment for the West India Regiments in the British Atlantic world," *Atlantic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2021): 149-171.
[4] Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

have analyzed the conscription of "captured negroes" in Sierra Leone—those removed from slave ships taken as prizes of war by the Royal Navy—in the context of early slave-trade suppression, the Napoleonic wars, and nascent British colonialism in West Africa.[5] Building on these more localized studies of African enlistment, this chapter undertakes a comparative, Atlantic-wide examination of this enduring and geographically expansive recruitment project. It shows that the British slave trade and naval suppression were each deliberately made to direct able-bodied Africans into the British army.

This chapter proceeds chronologically. Its early sections examine the creation of the West India Regiments, the corps' charter draftees, and the processes of purchasing enslaved Africans for conscription. The latter sections analyze the impact of British slave-trade abolition on a colonial force so reliant on the transatlantic slave trade for manpower and traces the circum-Atlantic process of "captured negro"/Liberated African recruitment for the West India Regiments. Alongside these points of focus, this chapter also analyzes the ethnolinguistic origins of African soldiers and reconstructs some of the experiences of conscription in multiple colonial contexts.

**Origins of the corps and charter recruits: West Indian rangers, and others**

From his post in Martinique in 1794, General John Vaughan surveyed the carnage that the wars in the Caribbean had inflicted upon the British army. Tropical illness, yellow fever in particular, had caused enormous casualties amongst white troops, tearing through the ranks of occupying forces in Saint Domingue over the previous year and costing the British army some ten percent

[5] Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Maeve Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance and the British Antislavery World System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

of its garrison each month.[6] British officers in Grenada, Dominica, Saint Kitts, Jamaica, and elsewhere reported tremendous losses, the vast majority of the deceased being "unseasoned" white soldiers having recently arrived in the West Indies from Europe. At the same time, armed combat weakened British regiments in the Caribbean too. Toussaint Louverture's forces scored major victories against British (and Spanish) troops across Saint Domingue. In Guadeloupe, British occupying regiments were routed by French Republicans and their army of formerly-enslaved Africans who had been emancipated by French decree and subsequently armed and deployed.[7] Disease and, to a lesser extent, conflict had created a massive drain on the colonial military in the Caribbean. Not long after, the Speaker of the Commons, Henry Addington, would declare that the West Indies had destroyed the British army.[8]

The soldiers who died in the Caribbean were not easy to replace, especially in any short span of time. At home in Britain, it was no secret that men deployed to the West Indies often did not come back. And those who did survive long enough to earn a discharge returned home with wounded bodies and harrowing tales of death and disease. Churches across Britain were sites of remembrance for the young men who had perished an ocean away, hosting memorials and posting plaques and other monuments in honor of those who did not return. Knowing well what might await them in the Caribbean, white troops serving in Britain tried various methods of avoiding deployment to the West Indies. Upon hearing rumbling that they might be shipped off,

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[6] David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 347-372; Geggus, "Yellow Fever in the 1790s: The British Army in Occupied Saint Domingue," *Medical History* 23 (1979): 38-58; Tim Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race: Life and Death in the West India Regiments, 1795-1874* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 36-37.
[7] Laurent Dubois, "Citizen Soldiers: Emancipation and Military Service in the Revolutionary French Caribbean," in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, ed. Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 233-254; Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 222-248.
[8] Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 327.

many feigned illness, some ran away, and others chose to self-mutilate. When the War Office declared that all regiments numbered above 100 would be sent to the West Indies, soldiers across Britain met Henry Dundas' declaration with outcries and violence. In Dublin, the men of the 104th and 111th took to the streets in demonstration, arguing that they had enlisted on the condition that they would never be made to leave the British Isles. In Cork, the men of the 105th and 113th Regiments mutinied upon hearing that they were to prepare to voyage across the Atlantic. And in Essex, the men of the 133rd refused to sign their muster books. In the mid 1790s, the British army in the West Indies reported a deficit of 50,000 men.[9]

Of course, soldiers could be made to enlist. British convicts were often conscripted by court officials without consultation.[10] In the desperation of the French wars, officers drafted thousands of orphans into British regiments, and "man-stealers" kidnapped young men and sold them to recruiters.[11] Tens of thousands were faced with the frightening reality that they had been condemned to "that West Indian grave." "The fearful farewell … is every day," remarked an English army doctor in Southampton preparing to board a transport ship bound for Barbados. He and the local regiment about to be shipped off drew both pity and jeers from Britons milling about the town. "Poor fellows, goodbye, farewell! We shall never see you back again!" their neighbors mused in the days and hours prior to their departure.[12]

Addressing War Secretary Henry Dundas in London, General Vaughan referenced these extraordinary challenges, and argued that raising formal—and scrupulously trained—Black infantry regiments would "save them in a thousand situations."[13] Without such reinforcements,

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[9] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 57-60; Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower*, 173.
[10] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 105.
[11] Scott Hughes Myerly, *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars through the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 55–56.
[12] George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies, including observations relative to the Creoles and Slaves of the Western Colonies* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), I:15-16.
[13] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 25 December 1794, WO 1/83.

General Vaughan argued, "the Army of Great Britain is inadequate to supply a sufficient Force to defend these Colonies." Indeed, the victorious French army in Guadeloupe had defeated British forces with the aid of thousands of Black troops, a reality that led Vaughan to insist that Britain was "overlooking the support, which … may be derived from opposing Blacks to Blacks." The general had thought his proposal through, and provided specific suggestions for how this corps would be raised. He advised Secretary Dundas to issue "strong and pressing recommendations" to Britain's West Indian colonies, advising them to grant a certain number of the "ablest and most robust Negroes" to army officers. If these "grants" did not provide enough soldiers to fill the corps, Vaughan also suggested issuing a small bounty to any free Black men willing to volunteer. If neither plan succeeded, General Vaughan noted that the army could purchase and conscript enslaved men upon their arrival in the Caribbean from Africa, though he acknowledged that this option would be the most expensive and least expedient. He closed his Christmas Day letter with a plea that the War Office consider the remarkable toll that the war in the West Indies had levied on British lives. "I am convinced," he appealed to his superiors, "that every thinking person will be struck with the great necessity that exists for the preservation of [white British] soldiers," and agree that Black regiments would relieve Great Britain of this "extraordinary expense."[14]

The general awaited Secretary Dundas' reply, and in the meantime he worked on the Duke of Portland. To the Home Secretary Vaughan argued for the evident necessity of Black regiments and suggested that Portland consider the great relief that a large force of Black troops would provide for dying white soldiers.[15] While he waited for approval from London, General Vaughan went ahead and began the preliminary steps of raising the force. In January 1795, he asked Major Robert Malcolm of the 34th Regiment, part of the British force occupying

[14] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 25 December 1794, WO 1/83.
[15] John Vaughan to the Duke of Portland, 26 January 1795, WO 1/31.

Martinique, to begin raising "a considerable number" of Black troops. He also activated the Black Carolina Corps—an imperial ranger force composed of Black soldiers who had previously served with Britain in the latter years of the American War for Independence before being evacuated to the British Caribbean—and dispatched them to Saint Lucia to join Britain's invasion of the island.[16]

But while Vaughan was enthusiastic, the War Office was unsure. In mid-February, Secretary Dundas ordered Vaughan to halt all preliminary recruitment while his office continued to mull over the proposition. Dundas had likely been soured on the proposal by London lobbyists employed by West Indian proprietors who had expressed major concerns about masses of armed and trained Black soldiers over whom they would have no control.[17] Vaughan was livid, and fired back a rebuttal admonishing Dundas for caving to the interests of West India planters at the expense of the condition of the military.[18] The army needed men, and sending additional European soldiers to the region, Vaughan pleaded, would fill military hospitals rather than garrisons.[19] Several weeks later, Dundas changed his mind and approved two Black regiments of 1,000 rank and file each.[20]

It seems that it was the continued downturn of British military affairs in the Caribbean that pushed Dundas into supporting the Black corps, as well as pressure mounting from various British military officials and politicians. Vaughan had already flooded the War and Home Offices with paperwork. And in February, on the floor of the House of Commons, William Wilberforce

[16] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 11 January 1795, 31 January 1795, WO 1/83. On the Carolina Corps, see Gary Sellick, "Black skin, red coats: the Carolina corps and nationalism in the revolutionary British Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 459-478.
[17] Henry Dundas to John Vaughan, 17 April 1795, WO 1/83. Dundas' February letter seems to have been misplaced, but its contents are referenced in the April despatch. Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 41 fn. 90.
[18] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 18 April 1795, WO 1/83.
[19] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 28 April 1795, WO 1/83.
[20] Henry Dundas to John Vaughan, 17 April 1795, WO 1/83.

complained publicly about the weak state of British forces in the Caribbean and acknowledged the great success that the French had found in arming and deploying emancipated men.[21] Then, in early March, near-simultaneous insurgencies rocked the eastern Caribbean. Free men of color, joined by several thousand enslaved people, launched an attack on British occupiers in Grenada. And in Saint Vincent, Black Caribs undertook a violent struggle to oust the British from the island.[22] Tropical fevers continued to rage too. In May, only 3,562 of 5,996 (59.4%) British troops in the Windward and Leeward Islands were considered to be fit for duty, and officers reported that three to five percent of their force died each month.[23] The British empire in the Caribbean was coming further undone by the day.

Dundas ultimately embraced much of what General Vaughan had proposed, and by the fall he had decided that Britain needed not two, but eight regiments of Black infantry.[24] The War Secretary urged colonial officials in the Caribbean "to contribute a proportionate quota of Negroes" to the army. Further, he authorized Vaughan to purchase enslaved men from proprietors willing to sell and approved the offer of a "moderate bounty" to any free man willing to enlist. Dundas anticipated pushback from West Indian planters and tried to nip some of it in the bud right away. He stressed to Vaughan the importance of not leading enslaved recruits, however they may be procured, to believe that they would be guaranteed freedom through service in the Black corps. The War Secretary's decision to make this so explicit suggests that the planter lobby in

[21] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 11 January 1795, 31 January 1795, 25 February 1795, 18 April 1795, 28 April 1795, WO 1/83; John Vaughan to the Duke of Portland, 26 January 1795, WO 1/31; Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 43.
[22] On the wars in Grenada and Saint Vincent, see Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009 [1982]), 180-194; Edward Cox, "Fedon's Rebellion, 1795-96: Causes and Consequences," *Journal of Negro History* 67 (1982): 7-19; Kit Candlin, "The Role of the Enslaved in the 'Fedon Rebellion' of 1795," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 4 (2018): 685-707; Christopher Taylor, *The Black Carib Wars: Freedom, Survival, and the Making of the Garifuna* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012).
[23] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 42.
[24] Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 21.

London had been in his ear with concerns about mass flight from the plantations, as well as their apprehension regarding what would become of Black troops who had been discharged from the army. Such promises made to enslaved men, Dundas feared, would excite "great alarm" amongst the planter class. The War Secretary also expressed concern that offering emancipation would make Britain look weak in the eyes of the enslaved, an acknowledgment perhaps of the empire's dire position.[25] General Vaughan was certainly relieved by Dundas' decision, though he did not live to put his plans into action, succumbing to yellow fever just a few months later.[26] It would be up to his successor at the Windward and Leeward Island command, General Charles Leigh, to undertake the challenging task of building the West India Regiments.

British officers on the ground in the Caribbean began various efforts to populate the Black corps. But progress proved to be glacial and frustrating. Major General John Whyte, who had been appointed to head the 1st West India Regiment, managed to bring the Carolina Corps under his command, but made little progress otherwise.[27] In Saint Vincent, General William Myers, who had been tapped to command the 2nd West India, negotiated the release of 247 island rangers from colonial control and drafted them into his regiment.[28] But this was the extent of the army's minimal progress for the time being. Throughout the summer and fall of 1795, the climate, and the French army, continued to devastate British forces in the West Indies. Charles Leigh in Martinique was growing frustrated. In December, he informed the War Office that he and his officers had "in no way succeeded" in developing the West India Regiments into a functional military force.[29]

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[25] Henry Dundas to John Vaughan, 17 April 1795, WO 1/83.
[26] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 16 June 1795, WO 1/83.
[27] Major A.B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), 81-82.
[28] Colonel J.E. Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment from Date of Raising 1795 to 1898* (London: Forster Groom & Co., 1899), 6, 8.
[29] Charles Leigh to Henry Dundas, 5 December 1795, WO 1/85.

The hostile rebuke from West Indian assemblies was the most significant factor that stalled early recruitment for the Black regiments.[30] For one, Caribbean planters showed little interest in offering up their fittest and healthiest enslaved men to the army. But white West Indians had more fundamental issues with the corps. Their concerns primarily manifested through apocalyptic visions of "ferocious" African troops laying waste to the colonies—destroying plantations and uniting with enslaved people, and perhaps the French too, in anti-colonial revolution. The powerful Jamaica Assembly immediately expressed its "universal disapprobation" for the measure, and later followed up with their insistence that Black colonial soldiers would "endeavor to poison the minds of such slaves as they might have communication with, and instill principals [sic] tending to disseminate rebellion."[31] Similarly, one Barbados resident argued that "these faithless blacks, in conjunction with the national foe, or colonial traitors, will employ the arms, unwisely put into their hands, in murdering their officers; subverting the power of Britain in this hemisphere; and erecting the savage despotism of Africa on the ruins of English liberty."[32]

The ongoing war in Saint Domingue, in which Britain's attempted military intervention had been catastrophic, was assuredly a driving force behind planter anxieties. Revolutionary and abolitionist ideas blew across the Atlantic in every which way, and accounts of insurgency and rumors of emancipation excited the enslaved as they worried the enslavers.[33] The Haitian

[30] The military had clashed with colonial officials before over the issue of enslaved recruitment for British expeditions in the West Indies. See Daniel E. Brown, "Colony versus Crown: Raising Black Troops for the British Siege of Havana, 1762," *Journal of Caribbean History* 33, no. 1 (1999): 74-83.
[31] Committee to Robert Sewell, 1 September 1795, 15 May 1797, JA, Committee of Correspondence, Out-Letter Book, 1B/5/13/1.
[32] John Poyer, *The History of Barbados from the First Discovery of the Island, 1605, till the Accession of Lord Seaforth, 1801* (London: J. Mawman, 1808), 647.
[33] Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 44-82.

Revolution, as well as the numerous concomitant examples of enslaved, maroon, and Indigenous insurgencies unfolding across the Caribbean, reinforced white West Indians' assumptions that Africans were innately dangerous and violent. But visions of Haiti loomed the largest. Planters expressed concerns that British officers in the West Indies would draft into the nascent regiments the Black rangers whom they had raised for service in Saint Domingue, thus bringing into Jamaica, Barbados, and other British islands armed Black soldiers infected with a contagious "Jacobin" ideology.[34]

It is, however, essential to note that this was not a blanket opposition to the arming of Black people. To the contrary, planters and colonial governments armed men of African descent often, many of whom being enslaved men borrowed from plantations, for local militias and ranger companies.[35] But these small-scale colonial corps were composed of "loyal" enslaved people and free Blacks whom white proprietors knew and trusted. They were also under the total and uncontested authority of local colonial officials who could disarm and disband them at any time. The West India Regiments were different. The Black infantry, operated by the War Office in London, would be entirely out of the control of local authorities. West Indies officials expressed immediate concern about the foreign Black soldiers who might be unilaterally thrust upon them and quartered among them. And even worse, as *imperial* soldiers, these Black troops might even wield some power over them.[36]

The war in the Caribbean raged on as West Indies commanders struggled to raise their

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[34] 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," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 4 (2018): 634.
[35] Amongst numerous scholarly explorations, see Brown and Morgan, eds., *Arming Slaves*; Peter M. Voelz, *Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (New York: Garland, 1993).
[36] Lambert, "'[A] Mere Cloak,'" 634. Christopher Leslie Brown has rightfully observed that these concerns "tell more about the anxieties and needs of the slaveholding class in the Americas than about the likely behavior of enslaved men." Brown, "The Arming of Slaves in Comparative Perspective," in *Arming Slaves*, ed. Brown and Morgan, 346.

Black battalions. In the meantime, military officials in London were working to orchestrate their "great push" in the Caribbean, aiming to turn the war in Britain's favor. The War Office appointed the Scottish general Ralph Abercromby to lead an expedition to the West Indies, primarily focused on Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia, and Saint Domingue. After much delay and severe recruitment problems in Britain, General Abercromby set sail for Barbados in February 1796 with just over 15,000 infantry under his command, a massive force to be sure, but still fewer than the general and Secretary Dundas had envisioned.[37] Officers on the ground in the Windward and Leeward Islands were supposed to have a substantial corps of Black soldiers ready to join Abercromby upon his arrival in Bridgetown. The West India Regiments were in no usable shape, but the Quartermaster General in Barbados came through to some extent, having gathered 758 Black rangers for the expeditions.[38] General Leigh, from Martinique, managed to arrange for a few more to be sent to Bridgetown too.[39] Many of the men Leigh collected had comprised French ranger companies commanded by Royalist officers who had allied with British forces during invasions and occupations. The Royalist colonel Gaudin de Soter, for example, brought his Island Rangers (Martinique) into the British military establishment during Britain's occupation of the island. Louis Druault's Guadeloupe Rangers underwent the same evolution, leaving with British forces as they evacuated Guadeloupe.[40] The French officers de Soter and

[37] Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*, 179.
[38] "Preparations made by the Quarter Master General for the Army," n.d. [early 1796], WO 1/85; Notably, the quartermaster had also assembled some 3,000 pioneers, but these were military laborers, not soldiers, and thus could not replace white regulars.
[39] Charles Leigh to Henry Dundas, 5 December 1795, WO 1/85; "Return of a Brigade of Black Troops," Barbados, 10 March 1796, WO 1/85.
[40] De Soter's Island Rangers were later re-styled as the 10th West India Regiment and Druault's Rangers as the 9th. René Chartrand, "Black Corps in the British West Indies, 1793-1815," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 76, no. 308 (1998): 248-254. Roger Buckley (*Slaves in Red Coats*, 36) states that these men were enlisted into the 7th West India Regiment in December 1795. He draws this conclusion from the Description Roll of the 7th West India Regiment (WO 25/662) which does show 395 men enlisted from Guadeloupe, Martinique, Dominica, and other French islands on 25 December. I suspect, however, that many of these men had first served in short-lived 9th, 10th, and 12th West India Regiments—drawn from Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Dominica ranger companies—until their disbandment in 1802, at which point they were folded into the 7th Regiment. Regimental record keepers

Drault stuck with their men and commanded their regiments, joining their troops on the British army payroll.

Even with the Black ranger reinforcements, British foot soldiers remained overwhelmingly white, and continued to be destroyed by yellow fever throughout the 1796 campaigns. In Saint Lucia, for example, the reinforcements sent to join General John Moore were rapidly decimated by the disease. Before long, the general was reporting sixty to seventy deaths per week, noting that he had barely enough men to stand guard at Fort Charlotte, much less engage enemy forces in battle. By the end of the year only a small fraction of the British force remained, and most of the few still fit for duty on the island were Black troops.[41] The devastation was certainly not limited to Saint Lucia. In Saint Vincent, 811 of 3,699 (22%) of British soldiers were reported sick in their quarters or in the hospital. In Grenada, 968 of 2,480 (39%) reported infirm. Perhaps struck the hardest were the men of the 60th Battalion stationed at Tobago, reporting only half of its rank and file to be fit for duty.[42] In Saint Domingue—where British regiments continued to engage African, French, and Spanish forces—thousands of white reinforcements sent by Secretary Dundas in 1796 contracted yellow fever on arrival. Many died in coastal garrisons or even on army transport ships in the harbor without ever setting foot in the colony.[43] Recapitulations of West Indian casualties across the Windward and Leeward Islands, Saint Domingue, and Jamaica indicate that some 14,000 white soldiers died in the Caribbean in 1796, and many more were infirm and unfit for service.[44]

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likely recorded their original enlistment date from when they were first drafted by British officers years before. A close examination of an additional regimental Description Roll (WO 25/661) would seem to support this suggestion, as soldiers enlisted from Druault's, de Soter's, and Malcolm's ranger companies are recorded with December 1795 enlistment dates.

[41] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 45-46.

[42] "Distribution of the Forces in the Windward & Leeward Charibee Islands," Martinique, 13 November 1796, WO 1/86.

[43] Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 192-193.

[44] Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*, 256-257.

The expeditions had again laid bare the enormous gulf in mortality rates between Black and white soldiers in the West Indies. General Abercromby and his colleagues recognized that Black soldiers were far less likely to fall ill or die than their white counterparts, and British officials who pored over casualty returns back in London understood this too.[45] And beyond the issue of disease and mortality, Black troops performed well in combat, moving ably through rugged terrain and demonstrating refined skirmishing skills. "In this country much may be made of black corps," General John Moore scribbled from Fort Charlotte in Saint Lucia in September 1796. "I have had occasion to observe them of late; they possess, I think, many excellent qualities as soldiers, and may with proper attention become equal to anything. Even as they are at present they are for the West Indies invaluable."[46] Many of the Black troops who fought with the British army were ultimately drafted into the West India Regiments and went on to have long military careers. St. Pierre Germain of Pointe-á-Pitre, a former Guadeloupe Ranger under Louis Druault, served twenty-two years and sixty days in the 9th, 7th, 5th, and 2nd West India Regiments, spending most of that time as a sergeant. John Black of Castries, Saint Lucia joined the British forces in 1794 upon their invasion of that island, serving with Robert Malcolm's Royal Rangers before the corps' drafting into the 1st West India Regiment. Black too spent most of his twenty-four years of military service as a non-commissioned officer.[47]

By early 1797, the War Office was distributing further, and slightly looser, instructions to military officers across the Windward and Leeward Islands regarding recruitment methods for West India Regiment soldiers. The instructions still leaned toward "seasoned" Black West Indians, particularly "English Blacks or coloured People," but the War Office also codified their

[45] To be sure, these were not new realizations. Military mortality rates had for decades revealed that Black troops fared better than whites in the Atlantic tropics. See Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 19-53.
[46] J.F. Maurice, ed., *The Diary of Sir John Moore* (London: Edward Arnold, 1904), 240.
[47] Service Record for St. Pierre Germain, WO 97/1158; Service Record for John Black, WO 97/1155.

support for the purchase of "new negroes"—Africans who had just arrived in the Caribbean on slave ships. Officers were instructed to enlist young men of "sound body, and in all respects able to carry Arms." Military officials, certainly drawing the fury of white proprietors, also clarified their approval of the conscription of enslaved men from French plantations on the promise that they would not be forced to return to their enslavers, though British officers were to ensure that they had never been "in Arms with the Enemy."[48] In short, officers on the spot in the West Indies would be fairly unrestricted in enlisting any man whom they could buy or who could be persuaded to volunteer. Over the next several months, the West India Regiments grew notably larger.

Officers of the 2nd West India Regiment conscripted 99 men in a day in March 1797, of whom nearly all were Africans most likely purchased off arriving slave ships.[49] Officers of the 4th at Saint Kitts made nearly 250 enlistments throughout the year. The majority of these men were Africans newly-arrived in the Caribbean, but officers also attested numerous West Indians from Saint Kitts and various neighboring islands.[50] The corps also drew small groups of Black and Indian sailors who had been impressed by predatory recruiters at English port cities. Military officers in London conscripted John Phair of Saint Kitts and John Manuel of Saint Croix, amongst many other Black West Indians, and bound them to indefinite service with the 6th West India Regiment.[51] Recruiters at English docks also targeted Black Americans, men like Henry Davies, a maritime laborer from New York, who was also forced to join the 6th Regiment while

[48] Instructions to Major-General Hunter, 26 January 1797, WO 1/86; Instructions to Brigadier-General Moore, 26 January 1797, WO 1/86; Instructions for the Officers and Medical Staff appointed by the Commander in Chief, 1797, WO 1/86; Conditions agreed upon between the Commander in Chief … and James Bontein, Esq., 1797, WO 1/86.
[49] Description Book, 2nd West India Regiment, WO 25/644.
[50] Description Book, 4th West India Regiment, WO 25/653.
[51] Service Records for John Phair and John Manuel, WO 97/1160.

his ship was docked in London.[52] On various occasions, recruiters kidnapped men from East India Company ships and forced them to join British forces. While the army drew the scorn of EIC directors, multiple West India Regiments drew numerous Indian-born recruits in 1797 and early 1798.[53] In Chatham, a military and maritime town in the southeast of England, impressment was especially common. In January 1798, for example, one officer conscripted twelve men at the docks in a single day, including three from Martinique, two from India, one from Grenada, one from Guadeloupe, and a man from Philadelphia.[54] Likely all had been crew members on merchant ships. The corps absorbed a few white soldiers in the early going as well, probably convict transfers from other British regiments stationed in the Caribbean.[55]

The charter recruits for the West India Regiments had been a diverse group. British army officers had enlisted hundreds of Black West Indians on numerous islands—from Saint Vincent to Saint Kitts to Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, and elsewhere. Hundreds more enslaved Africans conscripted by purchase were made to join the ranks upon arrival in the British Caribbean too. And smaller numbers of Black Americans, South Asians, and white Europeans were impressed in England by army officers and sent across the Atlantic to join the nascent force. This was progress, but the corps still stood far below its intended establishment three years after Dundas granted his approval in 1795. One enlistment method, though, had worked much more expediently than the others: the purchase of enslaved Africans on arrival in the Caribbean. The army chose to lean into it. British commanders commenced mass purchase in earnest around the beginning of 1798, and over the ensuing decade they procured over 13,000 enslaved Africans for

[52] Description Book, 6th West India Regiment, WO 25/657, f. 9.
[53] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 47; Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 52-53; Description Book, 4th West India Regiment, WO 25/653, f. 30; Description Book, 6th West India Regiment, WO 25/657, f. 7.
[54] Description Book, 4th West India Regiment, WO 25/653, f. 30.
[55] Service records for a handful of soldiers from England, Scotland, and Ireland are included with the West India Regiment files, WO 97/1155-1162. These men were some of the earliest draftees, essentially all of them having entered the corps between about 1795 and 1797.

conscription into the West India Regiments.[56]

**Buying soldiers in the British Caribbean**

Across the British Caribbean, army recruiters and slave traders intertwined the West India Regiments with the transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved young men found themselves in the sights of military officers soon after they arrived in West Indian plantation colonies from the Atlantic coast of Africa. The army forced its way into the slave market by partnering with local West Indian merchants—traders often known as "Guinea factors"—who brokered the sales of captive cargoes on arrival.[57] Guinea factors operated firms in port towns all over the Caribbean, receiving incoming slave vessels and working with the ship's captain to sell the enslaved. The army drew up contracts with numerous slave trading firms in Jamaica, Barbados, Dominica, Martinique, and various other islands, preordering hundreds of enslaved young men at a time to be set aside and sold to the military as they came available. Army officers turned over bills drawn upon the British Treasury in exchange, cast iron compared to the promissory notes offered by planters, who sometimes defaulted on their debts on account of poor crop yields and natural disasters that destroyed farms and canefields. Their strong bills—and their penchant for purchasing enslaved men in especially large numbers—allowed the army to push past planters and take priority selection of "prime" African men fit for armed service.

Copies of written contracts between West Indies commanders and Guinea factors survive

[56] Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 54-55; "Account of Negroes Purchased for Government from 25 March 1798," CO 318/31.
[57] Nicholas Radburn, "Guinea Factors, Slave Sales, and the Profits of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Late Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: The Case of John Tailyour," *William & Mary Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2015): 245-286; Radburn, "Keeping 'the wheel in motion': Trans-Atlantic Credit Terms, Slave Prices, and the Geography of Slavery in the British Americas, 1755-1807," *Journal of Economic History* 75, no. 3 (2015): 660-689; Kenneth Morgan, "Merchant networks, the guarantee system and the British slave trade to Jamaica in the 1790s," *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 2 (2016): 334–352.

in the archives and demonstrate the military's exorbitant demand for enslaved Africans. In 1799, for example, West Indies commander Thomas Trigge commissioned merchant Charles Rance of St. Pierre, Martinique to supply 450 "new Negroe Slaves" for the 1st, 7th, and 8th West India Regiments. Trigge signed another agreement with Anthony Wharton White, also of St. Pierre, to furnish the 3rd West India Regiment with 350 men. In Barbados in 1804, commander William Myers contracted merchants James Maxwell and John Gordon to furnish 1,000 men each for various regiments over twelve months.[58] The military became such a significant buyer of enslaved people in the British Caribbean that some slave traders in Britain advised their captains to acquire men who appeared to be well suited for military service when loading their vessels on the African coast. In their instructions to captain James Macdonald, the British slave trading firm Thomas Lumley & Co. requested the captain to purchase some "Stout fine Men proper for soldiers," believing that Macdonald would "be able to sell them to Government at any of the Islands."[59]

The army demanded that every soldier purchased for the West India Regiments fit a particular physical description which was stipulated in their contracts with Guinea factors. Officers required young men at least sixteen years old, though often unable to determine the precise ages of enslaved people, buyers and sellers relied upon height and other physical attributes to estimate age. African conscripts had to be at least five feet-five inches if they were considered to be "full grown men." Those a bit shorter were passable too if they appeared young enough to still be growing. Officers specified the need for "stout, able bodied healthy men, capable of bearing Arms," and ruled ineligible any man who was "deformed, maimed, or

[58] Copies of these contracts are enclosed in Henry Bowyer to William Windham, 21 November 1806, CO 318/30.
[59] Thomas Lumley & Co to Captain James Macdonald, 30 December 1806, C 114/1. Thanks to Nick Radburn for this citation.

injured."[60]

As the contracted Guinea factors received and unloaded incoming slave ships, dozens of young men who fit the army's description followed one of the merchants into a separate area, probably a small warehouse near the docks. The selected group waited, held captive by the slave traders, while one of the merchants sent word to the local garrison that a group of potential conscripts was ready for review. The merchant probably also informed military officials from which port in Africa the ship had come, so that the appropriate African non-commissioned officers and trusted veteran soldiers could be brought along to translate. Military officials made their way over within a few days for inspection and selection. Recruiting parties were composed of various people—British officers, African NCOs, a military doctor to perform medical examinations, and an agent of the commander to sign the paperwork. It is unclear where the examinations and subsequent enlistments took place, but it was likely to have been in a quiet walled compound, perhaps even the local auction yard if it was available. The examination and purchase of an enslaved person was an intense and meticulous process. Prospective buyers, through their translators, interrogated enslaved people about their personal histories and their character. They studied their heads, limbs, and torsos, twisted their joints, squeezed their muscles, and probed their bodies for scars or other blemishes. As Walter Johnson has explained, buyers had to understand "how to read black bodies for their suitability for slavery."[61] Military officers learned how to read Black bodies for their suitability for armed service.

Potential conscripts held still while officers measured their height and medics conducted their exams. It is difficult to imagine that many Africans appeared strong and "soldierly" upon

[60] See the contracts enclosed in Henry Bowyer to William Windham, 21 November 1806, CO 318/30.
[61] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 149.

landing in the West Indies. Countless survivors of the voyage from Africa arrived in port barely alive, and some of those inspected by the military party must have struggled to stay upright. Post-enlistment mortality rates are flimsy, but a comparison of enlistment records and troop returns suggests that hundreds of West India conscripts died soon after joining the army.[62] Officers passed on some of those whom the merchants had set aside for them, finding them too sickly or otherwise lacking the body and mind of a good soldier.[63] But recruiters clearly found enough men who looked capable; in various instances, recruiting parties returned to the garrison with twenty, thirty, sometimes fifty or more men.[64]

Some enslaved African conscripts joined West India Regiment companies stationed locally, on the island on which they had been forced into the army. But many others were enlisted to be stationed elsewhere and thus endured periods of detention before transportation to another colony. Major ports of enlistment-by-purchase—particularly Kingston and Bridgetown—served as hubs of conscription and subsequent re-embarkation. In March of 1801, for example, officers purchased 272 enslaved men for the 5th and 6th West India Regiments from four different slave-trading firms over the span of two weeks. The new conscripts were immediately earmarked to be sent off to British Honduras, a new colonial settlement for which Britain was still struggling to raise a garrison force that could survive in the swampy, mosquito-infested wetlands. Knowing that the group was soon to be re-embarked, officers in Jamaica didn't bother to lead the conscripts to Fort Augusta or any other Kingston-area garrison. Rather, they forced most of the

[62] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 49.
[63] There is some evidence that Guinea factors and army officers and medics did not always agree on which men were fit for service. In 1798, for example, Martinique slave trader Samuel Chollet complained to General Cornelius Cuyler that the colonel sent to pay for the new recruits had only agreed to purchase thirty-seven of the 104 "grown men" that Chollet had set aside for the West India Regiments. Chollet suggested that the army's preferred qualifications for new recruits were too strict and warned that he might struggle to hold up his end of the agreement. Samuel Chollet to Cornelius Cuyler, 21 March 1798, WO 1/86.
[64] "Account of Negroes Purchased for Government from 25 March 1798," CO 318/31.

men to live temporarily aboard two slave ships docked in the harbor—the *John and James* and the *Blanchard*, probably the vessels on which much of the group had arrived from Africa—while they awaited a military convoy to sail them to the Central American main. The army went ahead and had an army medic inoculate the new recruits for smallpox, leaving the men to suffer the chills and cold sweats of immunization in the discomfort of a cramped, rocking slave ship.[65]

In other instances, conscripts awaiting re-embarkation did manage a brief respite from the awful conditions of an ocean brig. A group of 141 men enlisted in Kingston in March 1802 for service in Honduras were escorted to Fort Augusta for a few weeks while they awaited a transport vessel. Refusing to waste the downtime, officers and sergeants put the new recruits through a course in military discipline, instilling army routines and teaching the basics of British line infantry drill.[66] From Bridgetown, Barbados, officers undertook a similar operation of conscription and regional distribution. Hundreds of enslaved Africans conscripted on the island were subsequently embarked for nearby colonies like Saint Vincent and Saint Lucia where they reinforced British control over unstable, contested islands that had been the settings of violent anti-British insurgencies encouraged and supported by French Republicans.[67]

Enslaved African recruits quickly outnumbered the modest groups of Black West Indian, South Asian, and white European draftees who had initially populated the West India Regiments. Conscripts-by-purchase originated in various parts of west and west-central Africa, and brought a variety of languages, cultures, and identities to the corps. British officers did prefer people of certain ethnolinguistic groups over others; they generally requested in writing that their merchant

[65] "Particular Account No. 2," Jamaica, 31 March 1801, Balcarres Papers, NAM 1975/08/55/3.
[66] "Account of Purchases made by Agent General Matthew Atkinson," 31 March 1802, Nugent Papers, NLJ, MS 72. Another large group of recruits endured the same treatment a couple years later. George Nugent to Calvert, 6 March 1804, Nugent Papers, NAM 6807/183/3/66.
[67] 17 December 1805, 18 March 1806, General Orders, West India Regiment Headquarters, Barbados, NLJ, MS 200.

suppliers provide enslaved Africans of particular origin, specifically "Coromantee" men from the Gold Coast and "Congo" or "Angola" people from the Loango Coast.[68] In India, army officers had developed ideas about "martial castes" by which the East India Company identified preferred recruits and organized its regiments.[69] West India commanders imported the practice from southern Asia to the Caribbean, where it melded with planters' ideologies about "militant" groups of enslaved Africans.

Officers and planters alike believed Coromantee and Congo Africans—but especially Coromantee—to have innate martial qualities that made them natural soldiers. In the British Atlantic, the term "Coromantee" referred broadly to Africans from the Gold Coast, though many traders and planters recognized regional and linguistic differences among them. The Coromantee presence in the Americas had long been a source of anxiety and disagreement amongst white proprietors in the Caribbean. Some believed Gold Coast Africans to be exceedingly smart and strapping; others found them to be dangerous, "warlike" people prone to rebellion. Indeed, various insurgencies in the Caribbean and British North America had been attributed to enslaved Coromantee, and numerous militarized maroon communities across the region were linked to Gold Coast peoples too.[70] Many of those termed Coromantee in the African diaspora had participated in successive eighteenth-century wars between Gold Coast polities, and thus arrived in the Americas familiar with the duties and lifestyle of a soldier, albeit in the West African

[68] The army specified their demand for "Coromantee" and "Congo"/"Angola" recruits in their contracts with Guinea factors. See the enclosures in Henry Bowyer to William Windham, 21 November 1806, CO 318/30.
[69] Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern Indian Military Culture, 1770-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Douglas M. Peers, "'The Habitual Nobility of Being': British Officers and the Social Construction of the Bengal Army in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Modern Asian Studies* 25, no. 3 (1991): 545-569; G.J. Bryant, "Indigenous Mercenaries in the Service of European Imperialists: The Case of the Sepoys in the Early British Indian Army, 1750-1800," *War in History* 7, no. 1 (2000): 2-28.
[70] Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); John K. Thornton, "The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean," *Journal of Caribbean History* 32 (1998): 161-178.

context. British military officers embraced assumptions of Coromantee martial prowess, and hoped to take advantage of an opportunity to make soldiers of those who supposedly possessed such attributes. Brigadier General Thomas Hislop pronounced Coromantee people "intrepid & hardy, being trained form their Infancy to War." Similarly, Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, the military governor of Dominica who had helped to raise the 8th West India Regiment, described the Coromantee as a "warlike Nation and particularly fond of Fire Arms."[71]

**Regimental Color, 4th West India Regiment, c. 1800**

*Source: NAM 1956/8/74/1, National Army Museum, London.*

[71] Thomas Hislop, "Remarks on the Establishment of the West India Regiments. Written in the Year 1801," enclosed in Hislop to the Duke of York, 22 July 1804, WO 1/95; Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone to Henry Dundas, 7 June 1798, WO 1/88. Other non-military observers made similar comments. Jamaican planter and historian Edward Long noted the "martial ferocity" of Coromantee people, and Robert Charles Dallas described Coromantee men as "a people inured to war." Long, *The History of Jamaica. Or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of the Island* (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), II:446; Dallas, *The History of the Maroons, from their Origin to the Establishment of their Chief Tribe at Sierra Leone* (London: A. Strahan, 1803), I:29.

"Congo" or "Angola" men were not ascribed the same mythology as the Coromantee, though Europeans in the Americas often insisted that these west-central Africans were natural warriors too. A large proportion of the enslaved people transported from the Loango Coast to the Americas in the eighteenth century had been captured in the intermittent, decades-long Kongo civil wars, and most slave traders and planters were at least familiar with the region's history of political strife and warfare. Probably most forward in the minds of British military officials around the turn of the nineteenth century was that people from the fragmented Kongo polities had been major participants in the war in the Saint Domingue, and thousands of enslaved men from that area must have served in British ranger forces in the French colony during the mid 1790s.[72]

West India Regiment officers succeeded in purchasing a few thousand enslaved Africans whom they categorized as "Congo" or "Angola." But this was not an effect of commanders' preferences as much as it was a matter of availability. The Loango Coast was a major supplier of enslaved people to the British Caribbean throughout the decade in which the British army was buying soldiers—roughly 1797 to 1808. In this instance, military preferences matched supply to facilitate the large-scale conscription of Congo/Angola soldiers. Enslaved Africans from the Gold Coast arrived in British colonies in substantial numbers too during this time, but not nearly at the rate that people from the Loango Coast did. This resulted in notable minorities of Gold Coast recruits, but certainly nothing that resembled British officers' ambitions for creating a formidable Coromantee force. The West India Regiments, perhaps to the chagrin of commanders who had others in mind, also took in large numbers of Igbo speakers arriving from Biafran ports.

[72] John K. Thornton, "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of Caribbean History* 25 (1991): 58-80; Thornton, "'I Am the Subject of the King of Congo': African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of World History* 4, no. 2 (1993): 181-214.

"Eboe" soldiers—as they were recorded in regimental records—were probably the most populous ethnolinguistic group in the early years of the West India Regiments. The Bight of Biafra was exceedingly active in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and thousands of people forced onto slave ships along this coastline arrived in the British Caribbean each year. The preponderance of Igbo-speaking soldiers shows that officers' desire for recruits of certain backgrounds were often unmet. Health and availability could be the only firm qualifications for African conscripts, and British officers ultimately embraced pragmatism in building and replenishing the Black corps.[73]

The policy of African conscription by purchase was efficient and effective, and, as later chapters will show, delivered essential manpower that helped turn the war in the West Indies in Britain's favor. But despite its success, the purchase and forced enlistment of enslaved Africans was undeniably in contradiction to Britons' growing opposition to the transatlantic slave trade. By the late 1790s, as officers began buying many hundreds of enslaved people annually, the antislavery movement in Britain was powerful. At Sunday morning sermons, English evangelicals pummeled the African trade as a barbaric, disgraceful practice for which God would judge all Britons. And people throughout England signed and sent hundreds of antislavery petitions to Parliament demanding the introduction of abolitionist legislature.[74] The British

[73] Sorting out the ethnolinguistic origins of enslaved recruits is challenging, as sources are imperfect and incomplete. Two muster books, one for the 2nd West India (WO 26/644) and one for the 5th West India (WO 25/656) offer particularly consistent and specific ethnolinguistic details for soldiers in those corps, data which can probably be extrapolated to other regiments. Purchase records sometimes include origins details too. For example: "Return of the Names, Age, Size, Country and Prices for 178 Recruits procured for His Majesty's 2nd West India Regiment, and from whom purchased, on the 4th and 9th July 1804," Jamaica, WO 40/20; "Particular Account No. 2," Jamaica, 31 March 1801, Balcarres Papers, NAM 1975/08/55/3.

[74] The literature on British abolitionism is voluminous. See, amongst numerous other titles, Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Boyd Hilton, "1807 and All That: Why Britain Outlawed Her Slave Trade," in *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa and the Atlantic*, ed. Derek R. Peterson (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 63–83.

army's staggering consumption of enslaved Africans surely would have appalled many in the metropole. For this reason, the policy was largely kept secret from the British public and many British officials. Leading abolitionist William Wilberforce was stunned when he learned of the military's purchase policy in 1804, several years after its quiet implementation. Wilberforce complained privately to William Pitt over the issue, but ultimately chose pragmatism over the public humiliation of the Prime Minister. Pitt was, still, an ally of the abolitionist cause and his cooperation was required for the success of the antislavery agenda.[75]

But the pro-slave-trade MP (and military officer about to be appointed colonel in the 7th West India Regiment) Isaac Gascoyne learned and divulged the secret, resulting in a series of arguments on the floor of Parliament. Opponents of abolition scolded abolitionists like Pitt and Wilberforce for their duplicity and ran with the argument that ending Britain's slave trade would leave commanders in the West Indies high and dry.[76] The West India Regiments could suddenly be harnessed to formulate a powerful (and patriotic) argument against slave-trade abolition. Around the same time, Sir William Young, a former Cornwall MP and incoming governor of Tobago, was compiling troop mortality statistics for the West Indies. Presenting a series of datasets that illustrated the comparative mortality of white and Black soldiers, Young demonstrated once again the debilitating effects of the tropical climate upon "unseasoned" white regulars and pressed for further commitment to "the better preservation of health and life" in the Caribbean.[77] Slave-trade abolition had hit a practical snag, and its implementation would require

[75] Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 56-62. Buckley has suggested that the military's purchase policy delayed British slave-trade abolition because imperial officials who knew about this method of African conscription did not want to eliminate—or perhaps more accurately, did not want to be held responsible for eliminating—such an important source of soldiers for the Caribbean garrison.
[76] Roger N. Buckley, "Slave or Freedman: The Question of the Legal Status of the British West India Soldier, 1795-1807," *Caribbean Studies* 17, no. 3-4 (1977): 105; Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 61-62, 171 fn. 60.
[77] Sir William Young, *The West-India Common-Place Book: compiled from Parliamentary and Official Documents; shewing the Interest of Great Britain in its Sugar Colonies* (London: R. Phillips, 1807), 217-221.

careful consideration of the military needs of an empire fighting a global war.

**Wartime abolition, wartime conscription**

Regardless of the military's dependence on the slave trade to maintain an effective fighting force in the Caribbean, British antislavery moved forward. By 1806, slave-trade abolition seemed imminent, and frantic officers scrambled to augment the West India Regiments as best they could before their source of recruits was cut off. Military Secretary James Willoughby Gordon expressed the importance of "tak[ing] every advantage of the time allowed before the act takes effect," and secretly tried to commission a Liverpool slave trader to provide over 2,000 men—preferably from the Gold Coast, he indicated—for enlistment.[78] The Slave Trade Act, however, was crafted and implemented with astute attention to Britain's wartime interests.[79] The legislation stipulated that enemy (and allied) nations' slave ships could be seized as prizes of war, and provided financial incentives to Royal Navy officers to track and capture slavers at sea. The enslaved people aboard captured vessels were to be taken under the control of British civil and military officials and, by stipulations of the Slave Trade Act, either bound to apprenticeships of up to fourteen years or enlisted into "His Majesty's Land or Sea Service, as Soldiers, Seamen, or Marines."[80] In the era of the Napoleonic Wars, enlistment could certainly take precedence.

The Slave Trade Act was, as Anita Rupprecht had described it, a "blunt instrument" by which colonial and military officials "recalibrated the identities and lives of those rescued

[78] James Willoughby Gordon's Memorandum, 8 April 1807, WO 1/634. The Slave Trade Act still allowed slave ships departing from Britain on or before 1 May 1807 and arriving in the West Indies by 1 March 1808 to complete their voyages and deliver their enslaved cargoes as planned. 47 George III, Session 1, Cap. XXXVI, "An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade," section vi.
[79] Padraic Scanlan calls the Slave Trade Act "a condominium between elite antislavery and the British military." Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, 13.
[80] 47 George III, Session 1, Cap. XXXVI, "An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade," section vii.

specifically in the service of British imperial and wartime interests."[81] It was also a foundational part of a new political discourse in which Great Britain assumed the right to demand labor from Africans removed from intercepted slave ships—termed "captured negroes" in most early nineteenth-century British circles—in exchange for the sacrifice of its slave trade.[82] It was left rather vague how exactly the enlistment clause would be carried out—who decided who was fit for conscription, into which corps they would be sent, and what chain of command would govern the operation. But it was a clear path forward for West India Regiment officers in need of recruits.

As it impacted the British army in the Atlantic tropics, slave-trade abolition worked in tandem with another piece of legislation: the Mutiny Act of 1807, an order in council passed just two days prior to the Slave Trade Act. While the Mutiny Act has generally been left out of scholarship on abolition and "captured negro" conscription, the legislation served an important role in solidifying the long-term future of the West India Regiments and softening the blow of slave-trade abolition on the British military. Up until the Act's passage, the terms of enlistment for Black soldiers—and African conscripts-by-purchase in particular—remained ill-defined. How long Britain's Black troops were mandated to serve, and if and when their military terms expired, had not been made clear. As Britain prepared to abolish its slave trade, Parliament made a point to clarify the terms and conditions of service for Black soldiers serving in the Caribbean to ensure that these men would be bound to the army indefinitely. With the Mutiny Act, British officials elected to legally emancipate "all Negroes purchased by or on Account of His Majesty … and serving in any of His Majesty's Forces," and to declare them, as free men, volunteers for

[81] Anita Rupprecht, "'When he gets among his Countrymen, they tell him that he is free': Slave Trade Abolition, Indentured Africans and a Royal Commission," *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 3 (2012): 438.
[82] Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*; Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*.

the colonial service. The Act also decreed that the usual term of service for a white soldier in the British army—twenty-one years—did not apply to Black troops, who would instead serve an unlimited term.[83] In short, the Mutiny Act made certain that the African conscripts already serving in the West India Regiments would indeed serve indefinitely. It was a calculated and carefully measured resolution designed to shore up the army in the Caribbean as it entered a period of uncertainty.

The "Black soldiers" clauses in the Mutiny Act also tied up various legal loose ends that had resulted in arguments between military officers and colonial officials in the Caribbean who were largely hostile to the West India Regiments.[84] One consistent flashpoint was the question of the legal status of injured or chronically ill soldiers who were released from the corps into West Indian slave society. The military sent (or was supposed to send) discharged men off with paperwork stating that they were free, but former soldiers often failed to present any such documentation when colonial officials—or fugitive slave trackers—asked for it.[85] Further, Black soldiers' ambiguous legal status meant that on various occasions, colonial officials in the Caribbean asserted that African troops could be held to local slave codes. This caused headaches

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[83] 47 George III, Session 1, Cap. XXXII, "An Act for Punishing Mutiny and Desertion," sections cii and ciii. The Mutiny Act also revised the terms of enlistment for white troops in a manner designed to make the army, and specifically military service in the Caribbean, more palatable. The twenty-one-year term of service was to be split into three seven-year terms. After seven years, white troops would have the option to leave the army or to re-up for a second term for higher wages and a better pension, and again after fourteen years. In addition, two years in the West Indies would count for three, and the army was to make a greater effort not to leave white regiments in the Caribbean for too long, and instead commit to transporting them elsewhere after a couple of years. See John W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), V:302; Young, *West-India Common-Place Book*, 232-245. British officials believed, or at least hoped, that few men would actually choose to quit the army after their first seven-year term expired. William Young argued that such a decision would be "a kind of desertion, and a disgrace, in the eye of comrade-soldiers."

[84] Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 60-62, 78-81; Buckley, "Slave or Freedman." Buckley recognizes the predatory nature of the Mutiny Act in binding Black troops to the army for life, but he ultimately judges the bill to be "a victory for the African" borne of a wider reformist political agenda that included slave-trade abolition and Catholic emancipation. Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 80. Michael Craton cuts to the core of the legislation, placing the bill's primary significance with the exigencies of imperial warfare, specifically in maintaining the strength of the West India Regiments in the long term. Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 170.

[85] For a template copy of a West India soldier's "freedom papers," for lack of a better term, see the enclosure dated 23 November 1805 in George Beckwith to James Willoughby Gordon, 10 December 1805, WO 1/632.

for army officers and made it potentially difficult for colonial soldiers to carry out certain military orders—killing a white man, for example, was an offense that mandated execution.[86] The Mutiny Act put these issues to rest. In clarifying Black colonial troops to be free volunteers, the Act trampled colonial governments' prior claims to any meaningful authority over the West India Regiments. It affirmed instead that the War and Colonial Offices exerted unquestioned control over imperial Black soldiers. The 1807 Mutiny Act and the Slave Trade Act, therefore, should be recognized as companion pieces of military legislation. The former solidified the long-term future of the West India Regiments by binding to an unlimited term of service those already enrolled; the latter built into law a policy of impressing "captured negroes" into the colonial service under those same conditions.[87]

In the wake of these imperial actions, British officers in the Caribbean received prompt instructions to begin enlisting able-bodied Africans released from slave ships seized by Royal Navy officers as prizes of war. The War Office sent identical orders to commanders William Villettes in Jamaica and Henry Bowyer in Barbados to conscript for military service "all such Negroes, as often as any shall be reported to be condemned or forfeited." General Bowyer passed the instructions forward, distributing a circular to officers throughout the Windward and Leeward Islands encouraging them to conscript "captured negroes" whenever the opportunity arose.[88]

The remainder of this section traces the reorganization of a pathway into the British army for Africans disembarking slave ships in British Atlantic colonies. Its foci are Antigua and Sierra Leone, which emerged as the two major centers of wartime conscription for the West India

[86] Buckley, "Slave or Freedman," 96-97, 103-104.
[87] Note that while the Slave Trade Act's terms of apprenticeship were limited to fourteen years, there were no limits on terms of enlistment.
[88] Lord Castlereagh to William Villettes, 11 April 1808, CO 137/123; Lord Castlereagh to Henry Bowyer, 11 April 1808, CO 318/33; Henry Bowyer's Circular to Commanders, 28 May 1808, CO 318/33.

Regiments. Sorting out the process of African enlistment as vaguely outlined in the Slave Trade Act posed a challenge to British officials, but ultimately resulted in the fashioning of a clear channel between the Vice-Admiralty courts (which adjudicated and formally condemned captured slave ships) and the military, facilitated by colonial bureaucrats on the ground.[89] Anti-slave-trade law settled concerns about the future of the West India Regiments and, by extension, the war in the Caribbean. It also turned the procurement of African soldiers for the Black corps into a transatlantic project.

*Antigua (and the northern Caribbean)*

Wartime Antigua was a bustling center for "captured negro" conscription. This was a factor of both geography and Britain's robust military presence on the island, as well as the essential presence of a Vice-Admiralty Court in Saint John's to condemn the seized slave ships. Naval officers patrolled the waters off Antigua and intercepted Cuba-bound slave ships as they passed by and swung west for the Spanish island.[90] As multiple West India Regiments were based around Saint John's, recaptives could easily be passed off to the army for enlistment. Few sources describe the process of conscription as it was experienced by recaptives in the wartime West Indies. But it is clear that "captured negro" conscription worked in much the same way as pre-abolition recruitment-by-purchase. The major differences were that colonial bureaucrats and

[89] As various scholars have noted, London offered little direction as to how the process of enlistment (and apprenticeship) would actually work. Colonial bureaucrats, governors, military officers, and court magistrates on the ground in British colonial centers stumbled through the particulars of sorting out the practical execution of a grandiose policy. The process varied according to place and cast of imperial officials. See Sean M. Kelley, "Precedents: The 'Captured Negroes' of Tortola, 1807-22," in *Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807-1896*, ed. Richard Anderson and Henry B. Lovejoy (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020), 25-44; Rosanne Marion Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa": Slave Trade Abolition and Free African Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*; Richard Peter Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone: Re-Building Lives and Identities in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*.

[90] Howard Johnson, "The Liberated Africans in the Bahamas, 1811-1860," *Immigrants & Minorities* 7 (1988): 17.

magistrates had replaced Caribbean slave traders, and the military no longer had to pay for soldiers. Upon arrival in Saint John's, "captured negroes" were likely housed temporarily in warehouses or other walled compounds in or near the city—old slave auction yards may have been used as well.[91] Local officials arranged an inspection, and army officers selected from amongst the new arrivals and herded off to the nearest garrison those who looked like they would make capable soldiers. In the years that followed British slave-trade abolition, West India Regiment officers conscripted over 1,000 "captured negroes" in Antigua, with roughly two-thirds of those released from slave ships on the island forced into the corps.[92]

Colonial officials kept thorough records of those released from condemned slave ships in the British Atlantic, and such documentation offers fairly detailed physical descriptions of African recruits, certainly more so than pre-abolition purchase records did. Amongst those forced to join the 3rd West India in Antigua, for example, were "Cochrane," a man of "pleasing countenance" who appeared to be in his mid-twenties, "Collins," an exceedingly tall young man with "handsome features" and a scar on his left temple, and "Nanton," a young boy under ten years of age whom the army probably planned to train as a drummer. Exhausted and traumatized from a transatlantic crossing from the Gambia River to Antigua, Nanton's tired face was what struck the customs officer. The clerk scribbled "sunk eyes" in the descriptor column.[93] Captives became conscripts in other British Caribbean colonies too. Tortola and the Bahamas emerged as

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[91] As Manuel Barcia has noted, these "reception centers" were often improvised, with recaptives kept in crowded, ramshackle public buildings, and sometimes on private property if it could be arranged. Barcia, *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 133.

[92] Between March 1811 and October 1815, 1,107 of 1,535 "captured negroes" arriving in Antigua were forced into British armed service. Notably, this group included 233 women and girls who were attached to the army as "wives" and "servants." Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *1826-27 (355) Papers Relating to Captured Negroes*, XXII, 3–5.

[93] Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *1821 (61) Returns of Collectors of Customs in W. Indian Islands of Condition of Negroes Apprenticed under Order in Council for Abolition of Slave Trade, 1811-19*, XXIII, 6. The three recruits crossed the Atlantic on the Spanish slave vessel, *San José y Animas*. *Voyages*, ID #7951.

important locations of recruitment as well, with colonial officials and military officers collaborating to enlist hundreds of Africans from aboard captured slave ships.[94] The islands housed their own Vice-Admiralty Courts, and, like Antigua, they sat along the "Turnpike Road to the market of Cuba" which facilitated the arrivals of eligible recruits.[95]

The army drew women and girls from condemned slave ships too, and the records of "captured negro" conscription in Antigua and elsewhere offer rare, tangible evidence of the origins and recruitment of some of the African women who lived and worked in tropical garrisons.[96] Female conscripts were usually registered in enlistment returns as wives of the soldiers. In Antigua in 1814, for example, two recaptive women listed only by surname as "Andrews" and "Andre" were selected to join the 3rd West India Regiment, each "Accompanied her husband, who was selected for the Army."[97] And the following year, after Naval officers steered the captured French brig *Hermione* into port at Saint John's, the army enlisted fifteen women and girls who were "Married to Men selected as Recruits to West India Regiments."[98] While perhaps a bit ambiguous, the language of the records suggests that recruiting officers recognized a prior relationship of some sort, and that the African women went along because their "husbands" had been selected by recruiting officers. Evidence from Sierra Leone around the same time reveals that the army allowed, at least sometimes, "a man and woman [who] have

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[94] Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *1821 (61) Returns of Collectors of Customs in W. Indian Islands of Condition of Negroes Apprenticed under Order in Council for Abolition of Slave Trade, 1811-19*, XXIII, 40-53; Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *1825 (114) Papers Relating to Captured Negroes,* XXV, 118, 182, 236, 324.
[95] Johnson, "Liberated Africans in the Bahamas," 17.
[96] Pre-1808 conscription records make no mention of officers purchasing enslaved women along with the men, while post-abolition colonial documents relating to recaptive recruitment do tend to clarify when officers are claiming women and girls for the army. While it is difficult to say for sure, I suspect that this is more likely an issue of source material than it is evidence that the enlistment of women began after slave-trade abolition.
[97] Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *1821 (61) Return of Customs in W. Indian Islands of Condition of Negroes Apprentices under Order in Council for Abolition of Slave Trade, 1811-1819*, XXIII, 10.
[98] Markus S. Weise, "A Social History of the West India Regiments, 1795-1838," (PhD dissertation, Howard University, 2017), 89.

formed an attachment" to remain together, and it appears this happened in the Caribbean too.[99] Of course, it's unlikely that officers were just being kind. As the third chapter will show, military wives did an excessive amount of work around colonial stations. We can only speculate as to how frequently these apparent "attachments" were honored by the army and why officers chose to enlist certain women and not others.

Other "unattached" women and girls were apprenticed to white officers and labored around tropical garrisons under that arrangement. A sixteen-year-old recaptive girl named Koody ("Bella" in the army), for example, was officially an apprentice of Captain McPherson of the 2nd West India Regiment at Fort Charlotte in Nassau, New Providence.[100] In this way, the apprenticeship clause of the Slave Trade Act could be made to support the British army too. Some of the women and girls serving military apprenticeships were, later on, married off to a Black soldier as a reward for his good behavior.[101] African and Caribbean women were surely drawn into the West India Regiments by other means too. Some may have been enslaved and purchased by British officers off slave ships (pre-1808) or from local planters. Others may have been free and working for a meager salary.

*Sierra Leone*

The British military also expanded "captured negro" conscription for the West India Regiments across the ocean to the coast of West Africa. Sierra Leone—once a fledgling Atlantic peninsular settlement run by abolitionist, evangelical businessmen—had transferred over to the Crown in

[99] African Institution, *Ninth Report of the Directors of the African Institution, read at the Annual General Meeting held on the 12th of April, 1815* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1815), 54-55. Maeve Ryan notes that in the case of apprenticeship in Sierra Leone, colonial officials were supposed to try to honor these kinds of familial relationships. It seems that this (unofficial) policy extended to the military. Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*, 170.
[100] Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *1821 (61) Return of Customs in W. Indian Islands of Condition of Negroes Apprentices under Order in Council for Abolition of Slave Trade, 1811-1819*, XXIII, 45.
[101] David Turnbull to Lord Stanley, 29 June 1842, CO 318/157.

1808. When the Slave Trade Act went into effect a few months later, the colony became a natural epicenter for slave-trade suppression along the West African littoral. Royal Navy ships based at Sierra Leone patrolled the rivers and ports to the north and south of the colony and began escorting captured slave vessels into Freetown harbor. West India Regiment officers recognized opportunity for African conscription in Sierra Leone. Over the few years that followed the passage of the Slave Trade Act they pressed for permission to open a recruiting depot in the colony. They probably also learned that the local colonial force—the Royal African Corps, originally a white convict regiment first stationed at British Gorée in 1800—had already begun conscripting "captured negroes" for the service to form a couple of African companies.[102] The War Office approved the West India Regiments' proposal in 1811, and soon after, a group of recruiting officers and NCOs traveled to Sierra Leone. From Freetown, West India officers began shipping "captured negro" conscripts across the Atlantic to join companies in the Caribbean. The colony was quickly intertwined with the fortunes of the Black corps as the maintenance of the Regiments developed into a circum-Atlantic enterprise.[103]

In wartime Freetown, recruiting for the West India companies was a challenge. Officers were made to wait until the local Royal African Corps, favored by Sierra Leone governor Charles Maxwell who insisted on controlling the whole operation, got first pick of new arrivals. West

[102] Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, 115.

[103] "Captured negro" conscription in wartime Freetown is fairly well-trodden ground for historians of British abolition in West Africa. Emma Christopher and Maeve Ryan emphasize the aggressiveness of recruiting officers upon the arrival of captured slave ships in the harbor, revealing the rapid and deliberate fashioning of a slave ship-to-colonial garrison pipeline in Sierra Leone. Emma Christopher, *Freedom in White and Black: A Lost Story of the Illegal Slave Trade and Its Global Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018); Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*. Padraic Scanlan describes the troubled undertaking of West India Regiment conscription in the colony, explicating the fierce disagreements between Governor Charles Maxwell—who insisted that incoming "captured negroes" were his to conscript for the local Royal African Corps—and Major Wingfield of the 8th West India Regiment, who had his own orders to collect soldiers for tropical Caribbean stations. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, 145-153.

India officers moved in afterwards.[104] Those selected for service in the Caribbean were immediately removed from town—led onto little riverboats and rowed out to the Regiments' holding center on Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone River estuary. The island was a painfully ironic site for "captured negro" conscription. Having served for well over a century as a major British slave trading factory, it was again, and after only a few years dormant, an embarkation point for Africans forcibly transported to the Americas.[105] The fort had once been a dazzling sight, a well-kept and well-funded center for lucrative business along the African coast, replete with elegant lodgings for visiting traders, a conference hall and a gallery, all reinforced by hefty harbor-facing cannons.[106] But by the time the West India Regiments had moved in, the structures had fallen into disrepair, leaving the soldiers to make due amongst the stone ruins.[107]

"Captured negro" recruits arrived on Bunce Island in bunches, unloaded from the riverboats and sent up for registration with the army clerks. Archival sources offer little more than a glimpse of what recruits did on the island. War Office files contain no correspondence from the depot other than that which accompanied recruitment returns, and outsiders had little reason to visit.[108] New recruits probably slept in huts or under the leaky roofs of the old factory buildings and barracoons. During the day, the sergeants and corporals may have led them through rudimentary drill exercise, hoping to send them off to the Caribbean adept in simple

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[104] Robert Thorpe, *A Reply "Point by Point" to the Special Report of the Directors of the African Institution* (London: F.C. and J. Rivington, 1815), 84; Christopher, *Freedom in White and Black*, 116-120.
[105] David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 172-220. The island and fort were still the property of British (former) slave traders when Governor Maxwell earmarked the place for army use. George Barnes to Henry Bathurst, 25 November 1813, CO 267/37.
[106] Christopher, *Freedom in White and Black*, 119-120. For a contemporary description of Bunce Island, see "Account of Bance Island, in Sierra-Leone River," *The Monthly Magazine* xxxix, no. 296 (London: Richard Phillips, 1815), 385-388.
[107] "A considerable part of one of the principal buildings gave way last year; and without repairs, the whole will soon be in ruins," Maxwell wrote. Other structures suffered from "total neglect" too. Charles Maxwell to Lord Bathurst, 9 March 1813, CO 267/36. Maxwell does, in this despatch, refer to the decrepit structures at Bunce Island as a "temporary occupancy" for the army, so perhaps he had grander plans.
[108] WO 17/1164.

infantry maneuvers.

Recaptive conscripts' main task at Bunce Island was to recuperate from the debilitating slave-ship voyage to Freetown and prepare for a military transport to the West Indies. Indeed, the army depot was only a brief stop in the midst of a trying transatlantic odyssey. Once a transport convoy arrived in Sierra Leone, officers loaded onto the vessels as many "captured negro" recruits as they could fit and embarked them for Barbados—southern Caribbean command. Military middle passages could be harrowing, and new recruits often arrived in the West Indies in poor health. Upon seeing the first fifty Sierra Leone conscripts to arrive in Bridgetown, General George Beckwith lodged an immediate complaint with the Colonial Office regarding the condition of the new arrivals, who were clearly suffering from various maladies along with physical and emotional exhaustion.[109]

A few years later, a catastrophic military voyage from Freetown to Bridgetown decimated recaptive conscripts and roiled military officials in Barbados and London. In July 1815, officers in Freetown embarked a whopping 793 men, sixty-two women, and fifteen children on a four-ship convoy bound for Bridgetown.[110] One of these vessels, the military transport *Regalia*, was the site of a human catastrophe comparable to some of the deadliest slave ship voyages. Soon after the *Regalia*'s departure, numerous recruits took violently ill. Military surgeon Joseph Ollier was called upon to attempt to treat the men, but sickness and death ravaged the African conscripts (and the crew) for the entirety of the voyage. Infirm recruits on board, the surgeon reported, appeared despondent and sometimes unable to move. The men suffered from

[109] Lord Bathurst to Charles Maxwell, 1 July 1812, SLPA, Secretary of State Despatches 3 April 1809–24 Nov 1812; Robert Jackson, *A Sketch of the History and Cure of Febrile Diseases; More Particularly as They Appear in the West Indies among Soldiers of the British Army* (Stockton: T. and H. Eeles, 1817), 591–592.
[110] "Embarkation Return of Detachment of African Recruits on Board Transports under the Command of Cap. Schoedde, 2nd W.I. Regiment," enclosed in Charles MacCarthy to Lord Bathurst, 22 July 1815, CO 267/40.

dehydration, nausea, dysentery, and body aches amongst many other ailments.[111] Medical reports indicate a disastrous fifty-two deaths in passage—perhaps around twenty-five percent of those on board. Upon arrival in Bridgetown, 114 African recruits required immediate hospitalization, seventy of whom died over the following two months. A colonial enquiry revealed that gravely infirm men had been forced aboard the vessel, and their condition must have facilitated the spread of disease in passage.[112] This may have been, at least in part, a result of Governor Maxwell's insistence on claiming the healthiest recruits for the Royal African Corps, leaving the ill and weak for the West India Regiments.

The wartime conscription of "captured negroes," primarily in Antigua and Sierra Leone, only lasted a few years. Before long, Britain and France signed peace agreements—the 1814 and 1815 Treaties of Paris—that ended the war and effectively shifted recruitment into unofficial hiatus. The need for new soldiers—and the military budget—naturally fell as Britain vanquished its imperial rival, and London commanders began to make plans for demobilizations. Amongst an empire-wide reorganization of land forces, the War Office disbanded the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th West India Regiments over the following few years, leaving only the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments active. Military officials settled a few thousand retired Black veterans in colonial villages established on Crown lands in Trinidad, British Honduras, and Sierra Leone.[113] The Black corps shifted into a small, peacetime tropical garrison force whose primary day-to-day purpose, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, was to occupy strategic stations and police colonial populations. Indeed, the first post-war engagement involving the West India Regiments

[111] Joseph Ollier to the Transport Board, 11 December 1815, WL, RAMC, MS 212.
[112] William Fergusson, "An Inquiry into the Origin and Nature of the Yellow Fever, as it has Lately Appeared in the West Indies," *Medico Chirurgical Transactions* 8 (1817): 109-113; Rana A. Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 48-77; Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 60-61.
[113] On post-war disbandments and the disbanded soldier villages, see the Epilogue.

would be the squashing of Bussa's Rebellion in Barbados in 1816. The end of the war also meant that the Royal Navy no longer had a pass to seize slave ships at sea; in peacetime this was not legal.

Wartime "captured negro" recruitment had been brief, but the implementation of the practice and the vigor with which it was pursued by colonial officials and military officers confirmed that the transatlantic slave trade could still buttress the British army. With the war over and demobilizations underway, the future of West India Regiments looked uncertain in the years that followed the Paris treaties. But the precedent of turning recaptive Africans into colonial soldiers had been well established, and this ensured that the policy, or one similar, would be considered again.

**Recaptive recruitment: experiences from Sierra Leone**

In Freetown in the summer of 1823, Charles MacCarthy—governor of Sierra Leone and all of Britain's West African territories, and commander-in-chief of British forces in West Africa—was preparing for war. MacCarthy planned to lead an expedition into Asante, a powerful West African state located in the interior of the Gold Coast. British-Asante relations had long been troubled, and the execution of a Black British constable after an argument with an Asante trader at Annamaboe sparked a consequential clash between the two powers. The military governor seized the opportunity to "pacify" Asante and shore up British imperial authority on the Gold Coast.[114] A few months later, MacCarthy was killed by an Asante sharpshooter. But the governor's troop mobilizations in tropical West Africa convinced colonial and military officials in London to revitalize African conscription for British colonial forces.

[114] Charles MacCarthy to Earl Bathurst, 14 August 1823, CO 267/58; Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, 212-214.

By the early 1820s, the West India Regiments were a much smaller force than they had been a few years before, but they also covered more ground. In the postwar military reorganizations, the War Office had elected to demobilize the Royal African Corps and move several companies of the 2nd West India Regiment from the northern Caribbean to the coast of West Africa in its place, consolidating many of the empire's tropical Atlantic stations under one corp. The outbreak of war with Asante, though, triggered an about-face in London and in Sierra Leone. MacCarthy and the War Office reconstituted the RAC—this time as the Royal African *Colonial* Corps—and ordered an augmentation of the 2nd West India's companies in West Africa.[115] In the summer of 1824, Lieutenant Colonel Sutherland in Sierra Leone received orders to direct his "utmost exertions towards Recruiting, as expeditiously as possible the men required to complete the 2nd West India Regt. and the Colonial African Corps."[116]

Britain had, by this time, signed a series of bilateral anti-slave-trade treaties with Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, and set up international Courts of Mixed Commission in Havana, Rio de Janeiro, Suriname, and Freetown to process captured slave ships. The treaties afforded the British Navy permission again, albeit with some restrictions, to seize foreign slavers at sea. Naval cruisers patrolling the coast of West Africa, and particularly the Bights of Benin and Biafra escorted their prizes to Sierra Leone for condemnation and the subsequent apprenticeship or enlistment of the enslaved Africans on board.[117] British military officers in Freetown again found those released from captured slave vessels—by this time termed "Liberated Africans"—to be the most plausible pool of potential recruits.[118]

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[115] Lord Bathurst to Charles MacCarthy, 28 February 1823, 4 January 1824, CO 268/20.
[116] Herbert Taylor to Lieutenant-Colonel Sutherland, 6 May 1824, CO 267/62.
[117] See Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, and Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*, for the most recent and thorough analyses of naval suppression and its human consequences in West Africa.
[118] They briefly tried other methods too. The army offered a bounty to anyone who volunteered—they had actually tried this before, until then-governor Maxwell halted the practice—and made appeals both to locals in the Sierra Leone region and to recaptives who had already been settled in colonial villages. Charles Turner to Herbert Taylor,

This section outlines the postwar conscription of recaptives for the West India Regiments from the 1820s to the 1840s, an enterprise generally based in Sierra Leone.[119] Recaptive conscription, initially a Napoleonic wartime undertaking, endured for decades after, as military and colonial officials maintained a tight connection between slave-trade suppression and enlistment. This section aims to reconstruct the conscription process in a specific place: the Sierra Leone Liberated African Yard. It analyzes a series of mass enlistments of Liberated Africans who were cornered in the urban compound by British military officials, and, in doing so, also takes advantage of the rich documentation on recaptive enlistment in Freetown to explore questions of force, volition, and resistance.

In Sierra Leone, by the 1820s, the newly-minted Liberated African Department had assumed much of the responsibility for processing recaptives and deciding what would be done with them. West India Regiment officers in the colony, from this point forward, usually made their appeals to the Department when they wished to enlist Liberated Africans. Recaptives arriving in Freetown were locked in a waterfront compound called the Liberated African Yard, constructed by the colonial government for this purpose in 1817 as Britain signed its first anti-slave-trade treaty with Spain. The yard was small, only 150 by 103 feet, but colonial officials made it fit up to 900 people.[120] Recaptured Africans languished in the compound, packed tightly

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24 November 1825, CO 267/62; Joseph Reffell to village superintendents, 12 July 1824, SLPA, Liberated African Department Letter Book 1820–1826; Paul Mmegha Mbaeyi, *British Military and Naval Forces in West African History, 1807-1874* (London: NOK Publishers, 1978), 67. But few men came forward for the West India Regiments. An opportunity to serve locally with companies stationed in the colony was fairly unappealing already, and on top of it, joining the transatlantic corps would have likely meant transportation to the Caribbean at some point, with no guarantee of return to West Africa. Before long, Sutherland reported back to London that "not one Native of this part of Africa" had been willing to volunteer. The exasperated officer couldn't understand why; citing old tropes about African bellicosity, he scoffed that "it can scarcely be any objection to the profession." Lieutenant Colonel Sutherland to Herbert Taylor, 17 November 1823, CO 267/62. Emphasis in original.

[119] Colonial Office records also confirm sporadic enlistments in the Bahamas, Jamaica, Grenada, and Dominica during this period. See Prochnow, "'Saving an extraordinary expense to the nation.'"

[120] Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 87.

together in a manner that facilitated the continued spread of illness and made physical recovery from the middle passage difficult.[121] Military officers, once they had received permission from the Department to conscript from amongst the new arrivals, entered the yard and began choosing recruits. As the army had been doing for decades, officers sent African NCOs and privates deliberately chosen for their ability to speak the language of the newly-arrived recaptives. When the captured Brazilian schooner *Nova Viagem* arrived in Freetown in August 1828, for example, the head of the Liberated African Department, Thomas Cole, learned that the ship carried recaptives "of the Ackoo Nation, and the greater part of the men would be desirable recruits for the West India Regiments." Cole advised military officials to gather "a few men of their own country" at the garrison and make their way to the Liberated African Yard to meet and conscript from amongst the men and boys.[122] Those singled out by the recruiters spoke to the African NCOs if they were able, before being led off "under strong escort, to the barracks, to learn regimental discipline."[123]

Evidence from Sierra Leone emphasizes the coercive nature of the conscription of nominally free Africans and the deliberate misunderstandings sewn by the regimental parties sent out to the Liberated African Yard to make selections. Thomas Cole of the Liberated African Department admitted his belief that the men "do not comprehend the engagement they are about to enter into."[124] Another observer noted that the enlistment of Liberated Africans was "done as soon as possible, because otherwise their countrymen would get among them and prejudice their minds against becoming soldiers," admitting that it was crucial to limit the information that

[121] Barcia, *Yellow Demon of Fever*, 132-133.
[122] Thomas Cole to Samuel Smart, 23 August 1828, SLPA, Liberated African Department Letter Book 1828-1830.
[123] F. Harrison Rankin, *The White Man's Grave: A Visit to Sierra Leone in 1834* (London: R. Bentley, 1836), II:107.
[124] Evidence of Mr. [Thomas] Cole, 28 February 1828, CO 267/92, Appendix 9B.

potential troops had about the West India Regiments.[125] British officer Alfred Burdon Ellis claimed that Liberated Africans drawn from the Yard, "pleased with the brilliant uniform, and talked over by the recruiting party, … offered themselves as recruits." But Ellis went on to confirm that the men "could not possibly have had any idea of the nature of the engagement they were entering."[126]

**The Colonial Hospital in Freetown, Built on the Site of the Liberated African Yard**

*Source: CO 1069/88, The National Archives, London.*

Still, British officers argued that they were doing right by everyone, including the conscripts whether they realized it or not. The towering abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, making a case for the "civilizing" effects of the army, argued in 1823 that colonial forces were an ideal "preparatory school" which taught Liberated African recruits how to "mak[e] good use of their

[125] Robert Clarke, *Sketches of the Colony of Sierra Leone and its Inhabitants* (London: T. Richards, 1863), 19.
[126] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 16.

liberty."[127] Colonial officials agreed, reasoning that enlistment was "most conducive to [recaptives'] welfare."[128]

Anything that African recruits knew about the West India Regiments upon enlistment would almost certainly have come from the African non-commissioned sergeants and corporals who were part of the recruiting parties. African NCOs were crucial cogs in the enlistment process. First and foremost, they worked as translators who served the obvious purpose of communicating with the men targeted for enlistment, as the non-commissioned officers collectively spoke several languages. But beyond this more obvious function, African NCOs were responsible for making the military sound appealing and, ideally, providing some level of comfort to new recruits. Officers and non-military onlookers alike recognized the significant sway that the African NCOs had over potential conscripts. Having been enslaved and taken far from their communities of origin, to encounter a man with whom they could communicate must have been a source of some relief for some conscripts. One Trinidad observer noted that Liberated Africans are "guided [into the army] by their countrymen, who are the recruiting serjeants [sic]."[129] We do not know what the sergeants and corporals said to these men, but we can be sure that they talked up the West India Regiments as the best situation for those pursued by the military. Perhaps they even sought to connect with potential conscripts by sharing their own experiences of enslavement, displacement, and conscription. The NCOs assuredly made potential recruits aware of certain benefits of military service—pay, food, leisure time, and shelter—though they presumably glossed over various hardships that British colonial troops

[127] Thomas Clarkson, *Thoughts on the Necessity of Improving the Condition of Slaves in the British Colonies, with a View to their Ultimate Emancipation; and on the Practicality, Safety and the Advantages of the Latter Measure* (London: Richard Taylor, 1823), 17.
[128] Colonial Office to Evan John Murray Macgregor, 20 November 1836, CO 101/82.
[129] William Hardin Burnley, *Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad, and the Actual State of the Experiment of Negro Emancipation* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842), 74; "Liberated Africans in Dominica," 24 January 1840, *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter* (Feb. 1840), 38.

endured.

It was, to be sure, not only African soldiers who were victimized by such predatory enlistment practices. Historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British imperial forces emphasize that trickery, dishonesty, and outright force were staples of the recruitment process in Britain and across the empire.[130] Thus, the point here is not that Africans released from condemned slave ships experienced a particularly unique form of pressure and cajolement at the hands of regimental officers and NCOs. Rather, the encounters between recaptives and regimental recruiters extend our understanding of imperial recruitment to regions and contexts in which this process remains underexplored.[131] They also help us to parse out about what colonial conscripts did and did not know going in, which allows for more credible speculation regarding the ways in which West India soldiers understood and reacted to their coerced enlistments.

Regimental officers did, on rare occasion, offer Liberated Africans the opportunity to refuse enlistment. In these instances, numerous recaptives thumbed their noses at the service. During the administration of Governor MacCarthy, which spanned much of the decade between the Treaty of Paris and the reopening of large-scale recruitment in 1824, officers had apparently tried a less coercive approach to recruitment. Instead of forcing immediate conscription, they led Liberated Africans to the Freetown garrison for a several-week trial period before formally asking the men if they would enlist. Many apparently chose to return to the Liberated African Yard, presumably to be apprenticed instead.[132] While MacCarthy's regime was lengthy, it spanned a period of demobilization and relative peace, and as such few recaptured Africans

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[130] Peter Way, "'The scum of every county, the refuse of mankind': Recruiting the British army in the eighteenth century," in *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour, 1500-2000*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 291-329; Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).
[131] Matthew Dziennik's forthcoming book promises to help fill this aperture in the scholarship.
[132] Statement of Joseph Reffell, 22 May 1826, CO 267/92, Appendix 10B.

would have been courted in this manner. Still, it is telling that even when British officials offered potential recruits a choice, recaptives were still being directed toward the military. The men did not choose to serve; they had to choose *not* to serve. Trial periods such as these were the exception, not the norm, and it is notable that MacCarthy's successor, Major General Charles Turner, abandoned this approach as Britain's violent conflict with Asante raged. Far more commonplace was a group of officers cornering fit Liberated Africans in the yard and leading them back to the garrison where they would mark their enlistment paperwork immediately.[133] Before long, West India Regiment recruiters began asking to bypass the Liberated African Yard altogether. In 1826, a regimental officer requested permission from the Liberated African Department to send a recruiting party directly aboard a captured slave vessel which had docked in the harbor the day before.[134] This would have meant conscription before the vessel had even been adjudicated and formally condemned.[135] While this request was denied, it is a clear indication of the aggressiveness of West India Regiment recruiters and their lack of interest in offering much option to able-bodied recaptives.

Africans targeted by army officers did occasionally succeed in resisting enlistment. In Freetown in the 1840s, as they followed the recruiting party from the Liberated African Yard to the barracks, a group of new Aku conscripts suddenly scattered when a woman passing by shouted "something in the Ackoo language." After being rounded up by colonial officials, the group forcefully refused the garrison.[136] Purchasing an immediate release from the army could be

[133] Some of the original attestation forms survive in the soldiers' discharge packets. Royal Hospital Chelsea Soldiers Service Documents, West India Regiments, WO 97/1155–1162.
[134] Thomas Cole to W. Morgan, 10 June 1826, SLPA, Liberated African Department Letter Book 1820–1826. And just hours after the arrival of the Spanish schooner *Emilia* in Freetown harbor, an officer requested the Department's permission to enlist 100 men and boys from aboard the ship. Dixon Denham to Neil Campbell, 8 March 1827, SLPA, Liberated African Department Letter Book 1827–1828.
[135] Richard Anderson, "The Diaspora of Sierra Leone's Liberated Africans: Enlistment, Forced Migration, and 'Liberation' at Freetown, 1808-1863," *African Economic History* 41 (2013): 109.
[136] Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance*, 209.

an option, though it took considerable fortune to make that happen. In at least one instance, though, it did. In Sierra Leone, a new conscript for the 1st West India Regiment was pulled by his brother, who had hustled over to the military barracks upon hearing that the newest recruits had come in on a Lagos ship with "many boys, lately come from Abbeokuta." Madarikan, about fifteen years of age and assigned to the CMS Grammar School, found his (presumably older) brother Aja, renamed "Horace Lonsdale" by British officers, working out on the parade ground. After the reunion, Madarikan and other "countrymen" living in the colony pooled the requisite cash to secure Aja's release from the army. Officers passed Aja to the Church Missionary Society, which organized the return of both young men to their father, a chief at Abeokuta.[137]

The tales of the scattering Aku and the group of recruits from Abeokuta also demonstrate an ethnolinguistic shift in the origins of recaptive conscripts. In the 1820s and 30s, the Royal Navy's West Africa squadron was largely focusing its attention on the busy Benin and Biafra coastlines, which meant that the majority of incoming Liberated African conscripts originated in those regions, having embarked at bustling ports like Lagos, Ouidah, and Old Calabar. As earlier sections of this chapter noted, the West India Regiments—despite their ethnolinguistic diversity—comprised clear pluralities of soldiers who originated in particular parts of Atlantic Africa. In the era of conscription-by-purchase in the British Caribbean, the geography of the British slave trade had made substantial numbers of Igbo, Calabar, Congo, and Coromantee men available to regimental officers. Military officials in Sierra Leone, though, worked with a different pool of potential conscripts. The parameters of British slave-trade suppression forbade the Royal Navy from crossing the equator, so few Congo captives arrived in Sierra Leone. And the transatlantic slave trade from the Gold Coast, which had brought numerous Coromantee

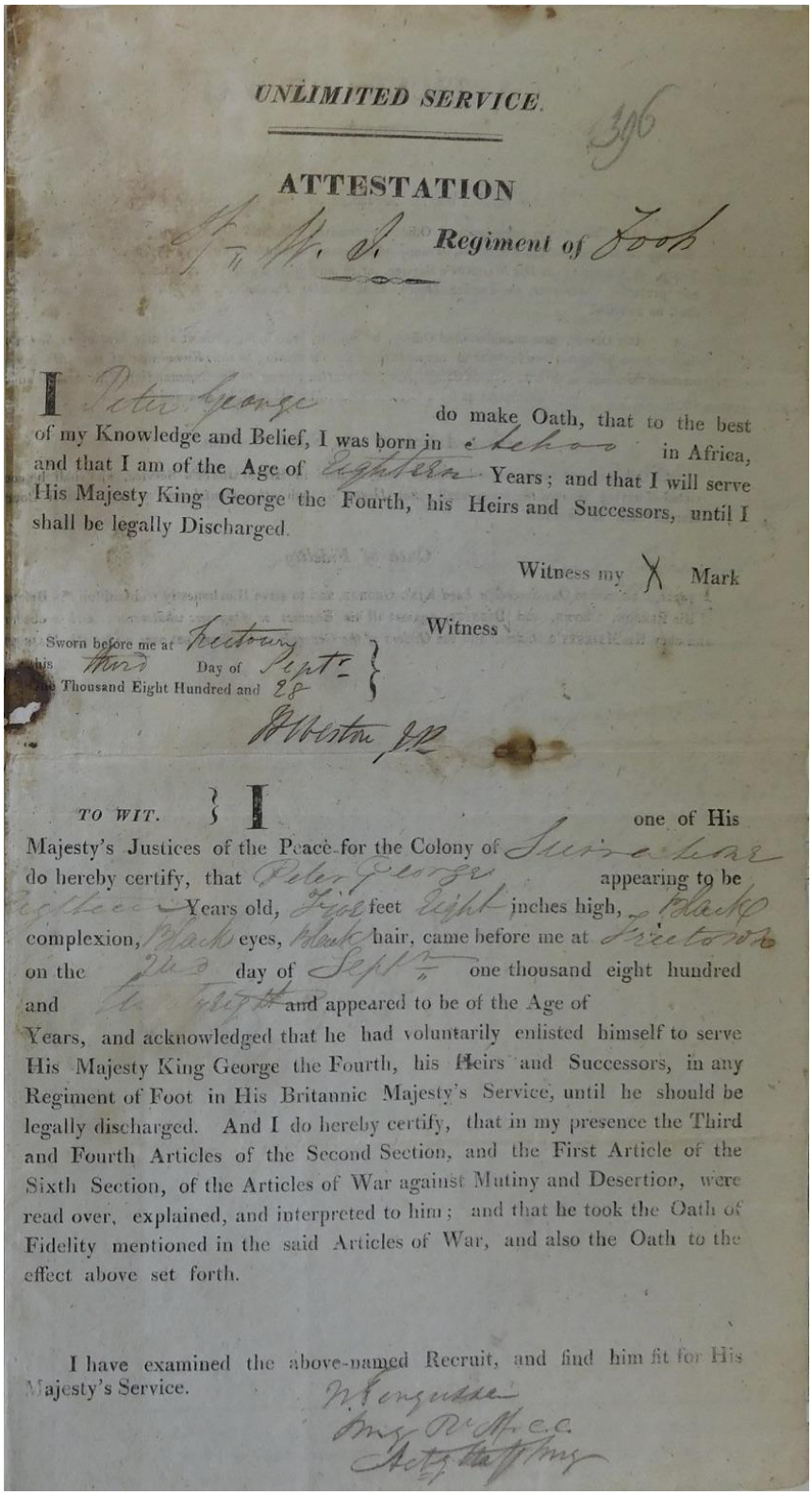
[137] Journal of Rev. T. Peyton, entry 25 December 1848, *Church Missionary Intelligencer* 1 (May 1849), 4-5.

recruits to the British Caribbean, largely collapsed after 1808. On the other hand, Biafran ports—the origin points for the army's Igbo and Calabar conscripts—continued to boom under Spanish slave traders purchasing enslaved laborers for Cuban plantations, and thousands of Igbo and Efik speakers forced aboard Spanish slave ships ultimately disembarked in Freetown. The increased patrol of Bight of Benin ports like Lagos and Ouidah accounted for the arrival of large numbers of Yoruba speakers, and others, in Sierra Leone. As the geography of the transatlantic slave trade to the British Caribbean had shaped the early demographic make-up of the West India Regiments, the geography of British slave-trade suppression impacted the ethnolinguistic composition of the corps in much the same way.

With Igbo and Efik speakers already making up a substantial proportion of West India Regiment soldiers, the most impactful demographic change was the emergence of what likely became, by the late 1830s, a Yoruba-speaking plurality in the corps. As Richard Anderson has shown, Sierra Leone's influx of Yoruba speakers in the 1820s and 1830s was a product of multiple developments happening at once—the naval squadron's aforementioned targeting of Bight of Benin ports as well as the waves of enslavement in the hinterland caused by the successive wars that collapsed the Oyo empire.[138] Thousands of victims of the Yoruba wars were captured and forced aboard slave ships at Lagos, Ouidah, Porto Novo, and elsewhere, only to be intercepted on embarkation and escorted to Freetown for condemnation. Colonial and military records each attest to the large-scale conscription of young men known as Aku, the prevailing British colonial term for Yoruba speakers in Sierra Leone. Regimental clerks scribbled "Ackoo" into the space allotted for place of birth on many dozens of surviving enlistment forms.[139] And the Sierra Leone Liberated African Department accounts for the recruitment of hundreds of

[138] Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 51.
[139] Royal Hospital Chelsea Soldiers Service Documents, West India Regiments, WO 97/1155-1162.

**Enlistment Record for Private Peter George, "Ackoo" Recruit, Sierra Leone, 1828**



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**ATTESTATION**

*Regiment of Foot*

I Peter George do make Oath, that to the best of my Knowledge and Belief, I was born in Ackoo in Africa, and that I am of the Age of Eighteen Years; and that I will serve His Majesty King George the Fourth, his Heirs and Successors, until I shall be legally Discharged.

Witness my X Mark

Witness

Sworn before me at Freetown this third Day of Sept^r One Thousand Eight Hundred and 28

TO WIT. I one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the Colony of Sierra Leone do hereby certify, that Peter George appearing to be Eighteen Years old, Five feet Eight inches high, Black complexion, Black eyes, Black hair, came before me at Freetown on the 2nd day of Sept^r one thousand eight hundred and ~~Eighteen~~ and appeared to be of the Age of Years, and acknowledged that he had voluntarily enlisted himself to serve His Majesty King George the Fourth, his Heirs and Successors, in any Regiment of Foot in His Britannic Majesty's Service, until he should be legally discharged. And I do hereby certify, that in my presence the Third and Fourth Articles of the Second Section, and the First Article of the Sixth Section, of the Articles of War against Mutiny and Desertion, were read over, explained, and interpreted to him; and that he took the Oath of Fidelity mentioned in the said Articles of War, and also the Oath to the effect above set forth.

I have examined the above-named Recruit, and find him fit for His Majesty's Service.

Insp^r R^t M.C.C.
Act^g Staff Surg^n

*Source: WO 97/1158, The National Archives, London.*

people from Bight of Benin slave ships in the mid-to-late 1820s, the most staggering example being the conscription of 133 people from the Brazilian slave ship *Vingador*, which had loaded its human cargo at Lagos.[140]

Many of the British army's Aku recruits must have brought with them from the Yoruba-speaking regions a familiarity with warfare and military service.[141] Indeed, their experiences with military conflict in West Africa compared well to what regimental officers had previously imagined of the Coromantee and Congo conscripts they had coveted in the past. But there is no record of military officials commenting one way or another on this. Certainly by this time, at least in the case of the West India Regiments, the army had conceded that it had little power to demand soldiers of any particular background. And the corps had done well enough with soldiers of diverse origins anyway, so presumably it had become less important to recruiting officers to assure that they were drawing supposedly "warlike" men into the corps.

Instances of recaptive conscription in Sierra Leone demonstrate the endurance of the slave-ship-to-colonial-army pathway established and maintained over several decades by British officials in the Atlantic tropics. They also highlight how little had changed, at least from the perspective of African troops targeted by the military officials tasked with keeping the West India Regiments up to strength. Enlistment anecdotes from the Liberated African Yard in Freetown demonstrate the coercive nature of conscription and the fallacies of the "volunteerism" espoused by officers. Reliable information about the corps was clearly in short supply for conscripts, and the postwar loosening of enlistment measures was soon abandoned when Britain again grew desperate for Black tropical soldiers. This kind of coercion was not necessarily unique to the

[140] Liberated African Department Statement of Disposals 1821-1833, SLPA; *Voyages*, ID #3012.
[141] See Manuel Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807-1844* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Also see Chapter 5.

West India Regiments, but still enriches our understanding of the experience.

**Conclusion: mid-century transitions**

A spurt of slave ship condemnations in Freetown in the 1840s facilitated a final burst in recaptive conscription for the West India Regiments.[142] Between 1845 and 1848, the Liberated African Department recorded the enlistment of 648 men off eighteen different slave vessels, and it is probable that more enlistments went unrecorded.[143] West India officers clung tightly to the slave trade to provide able-bodied Africans who lacked the ability to resist enlistment. Sierra Leone governor Norman William Macdonald commented in 1852 that West India Regiment recruiters depended "so wholly on the number of captured Africans sent up by Her Majesty's cruisers for emancipation, that if none arrive, no recruits can be obtained."[144]

Throughout the 1850s, Naval officers captured fewer and fewer slave ships as the transatlantic slave trade neared its end. Perhaps the final Liberated African conscripts entered the British army on the island of Saint Helena, which Britain had been using as a base for slave-trade suppression in the south Atlantic. There, in 1863, military officers forced over 300 young men released on the island into the service.[145] The end of the transatlantic slave trade, though, did not end the West India Regiments. Around the same time that commanders on Saint Helena reported their haul of recaptive recruits, officers in Barbados recorded some early success in attracting

[142] In response to both the high volume of recaptives arriving in Sierra Leone and the need for plantation laborers in the post-emancipation British Caribbean, colonial officials adopted aggressive military and labor recruitment policies that redirected hundreds of Liberated Africans away from the recaptive villages of the Sierra Leone peninsula and instead into the army or off to work on West Indian plantations. See Monica Schuler, *"Alas, Alas, Kongo": A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 26.
[143] Liberated African Register 75,357–84,420, SLPA. The Liberated African Department did not record "disposal" details for many of the Africans entered in the register, thus the enlistment totals are likely higher.
[144] Norman William Macdonald to Lord Pakington, 9 August 1852, WO 1/573.
[145] Andrew Pearson, *Distant Freedom: St. Helena and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1840-1872* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 239.

free Black men to the corps. The army had sent recruiting parties out to nearby islands like Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, and Trinidad to draw "volunteers." Though, with officers this time making commission on each new soldier, and with the added pressure that the end of the slave trade had caused the West India Regiments, recruitment tactics must have been exceedingly aggressive.[146]

This chapter has outlined the contexts and circumstances by which thousands of Africans came to serve in Britain's West India Regiments. Across the British Atlantic, military officers, colonial officials, slave traders, and court magistrates collaborated to force displaced Africans into the service. The initial plans of the mid 1790s to raise the West India Regiments through free Black recruitment and contributions from West Indian planters in the Caribbean yielded little success. This pushed the army toward the slave market instead, and over the span of a decade, military officers purchased over 13,000 enslaved Africans for the Black corps. At numerous West Indian port cities, enslaved young men stepping off slave vessels were immediately earmarked for the military by Caribbean slave traders and conscripted to aid Britain's war against the French Republic in the West Indies. British slave-trade abolition in 1808 caused some very brief disruption in regimental recruitment. But imperial officials collaborated to make the legislation work for the West India Regiments, as many of those released from slave ships captured by the Royal Navy were turned over to the army for enlistment on an unlimited term of service. The conscription of "recaptured" Africans sustained the West India Regiments through the mid nineteenth century.

For African recruits, the moment of conscription was the simultaneous endpoint of one journey and the beginning of another. In British port cities around the Atlantic basin, chaotic and painful forced migrations endured by enslaved young men morphed into the circum-Atlantic

[146] "Numerical Return of Recruits raised at Head Quarters and the Out Stations from 1 January 1862—3 December 1863," enclosed in E.B. Brooke to James Walker, 22 January 1864, CO 28/198.

odysseys of colonial infantrymen tasked with protecting the British empire. The next chapter will examine the process of military training and socialization that turned young African recruits into able British soldiers.

Chapter Two
**Regimenting African Soldiers:**
**Drill and Discipline in the Black Corps**

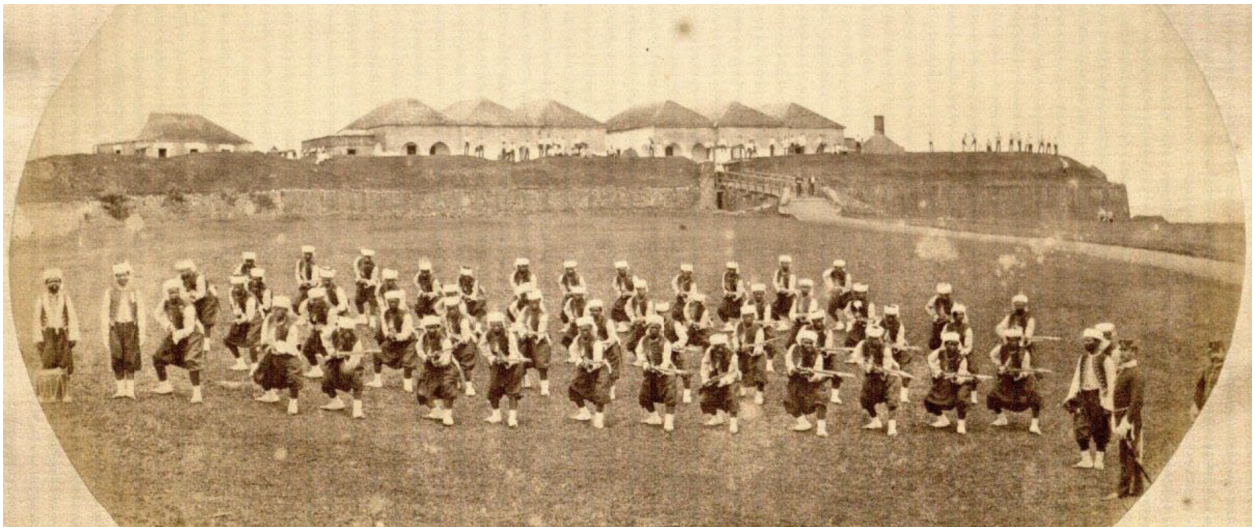
In October of 1812, a senior officer made a visit to the Orange Grove Barracks outside Port of Spain in Trinidad. There he inspected the facilities, officers, NCOs, and 590 privates of the 1st West India Regiment stationed at the garrison. The general found the books in order, the storage rooms well stocked and organized, and the officers generally healthy and capable. He then stood off to the side to observe the Regiment on parade. In front of their honorable guest, the rank and file were mustered and marched, their officers cycling the men through the standard eighteen maneuvers of British line infantry exercise, and perhaps a few extraneous exercises if the troops could execute them reliably. The inspector was impressed. In his report, he commented on the "clean and soldierlike" appearance of these "fine young men." "[T]hey surpassed my most sanguine expectations," he concluded.[1]

Soldiers in the West India Regiments generally earned favorable reviews from the traveling army inspectors who submitted to army headquarters in London numerous positive reports of "active," "obedient," "respectful," and "fine bodies of men."[2] A detachment in Antigua, another officer relayed to commanders in the metropole, "went through the manual and Platoon Exercise very well," and companies of the 3rd West India stationed at Barbados were "well drilled, attentive, very sober, and well behaved."[3] For many British officials, good performance on parade was evidence that the military was teaching and "civilizing" its Black

[1] Inspection Report, 1st West India Regiment, Trinidad, 1812, WO 27/113.
[2] Tim Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race: Life and Death in the West India Regiments, 1795-1874* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020). 63. That said, this wasn't always the case. On various occasions, officers criticized West India soldiers for poor marching and various habits deemed unsatisfactory. See, for example, Inspection Report, 1st West India Regiment, Barbados, 1819, WO 27/147; Hugh Lyle Carmichael to George Nugent, 28 July 1804, Nugent Papers, NAM 6807/183/3/303.
[3] Inspection Report, 1st West India Regiment, Antigua, 1817, WO 27/142; Inspection Report, 3rd West India Regiment, Barbados, 1812, WO 27/113.

infantry. The governor of the Bahamas commented after observing the 2nd West India drilling at Fort Charlotte that "The high state of discipline … shews [sic] what can be made of African soldiers under good officers."[4]

**1st West India Soldiers Demonstrate Bayonet Skills, Fort Charlotte, Nassau, c. 1860**



*Source: GEN MSS 887, folder 62, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

A good performance for the inspecting officer was the product of harsh physical training, unforgiving order, and violent punishment. The manual maneuvers that the troops performed had been practiced relentlessly, and always under the threat of severe corporal harm. And in between lengthy rehearsal sessions, the infantry were kept busy with routine chores and exhausting fatigue work. This chapter analyzes the process of training and disciplining the Black regulars who made up the West India Regiments. It asks how commandants, captains, and sergeants approached the project of regimenting the troops, both in theory and in practice. Furthermore, through granular readings of sources, it analyzes various clues about soldiers' interpretations of the process.

[4] General Orders, Nassau, 17 March 1830, quoted in Colonel J.E. Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment from Date of Raising 1795 to 1898* (London: Forster Groom & Co., 1899), 60.

Discipline imposed by drill and punishment was standard practice in any British regiment.[5] In many ways, this chapter demonstrates, soldiers in the West India Regiments experienced standard British military methods of transforming raw recruits into able, obedient, and reliable soldiers, albeit with some modifications to work around communication challenges and other issues. In this way, this chapter points toward granular reconstructions of life in the British army writ large that elucidate some of the day-to-day experiences of people bound to work for the British empire. But at the same time, imperial ideologies about race and Blackness—and the reality that African soldiers were so often stationed in British colonies organized around slavery and white supremacy—shaped the training and disciplining of West India soldiers in particular ways. In analyzing processes of regimenting African troops in the British army, this chapter considers which parts of the process were standard British military practice and which parts were adjusted and specifically tailored to Black soldiers.

The richest archival sources for the regimentation and disciplining of West India regulars describe how these processes unfolded in particular parts of the British Caribbean. Drawing primarily upon half-yearly inspection reports from West Indian garrisons—which were not systematically kept for West African stations at the time—and extant Order Books from Jamaica and British Honduras, much of this chapter leans toward select Caribbean stations. Its final section crosses the Atlantic for the coast of West Africa and undertakes some comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between Caribbean and African service.

The previous chapter has reconstructed various instances and contexts of African conscription for the West India Regiments. This chapter picks up shortly after enlistment, first

[5] Peter Way, "Militarizing the Atlantic World: Army discipline, coerced labor, and Britain's Atlantic empire," *Atlantic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2016): 345-369; Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600-1850* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 314, 328-334.

analyzing the intense training process that characterized soldiers' first several months in the British army. Its discussion aims to bridge scholarship on the regimentation of British soldiers with research on Atlantic slavery, race, and the British empire while offering fresh ideas and approaches to each line of historiography. Military historians have investigated the process and the purpose of line infantry training, showing that young soldiers endured harsh preparation regimens directed by officers aiming to mold their men into docile, spirited, and physically capable soldiers.[6] But such scholarship, which generally focuses on white regiments, rarely takes into account the ways in which race, language, and the origins of new recruits shaped the training and disciplining of soldiers in the British army. The case of the West India Regiments complicates understandings of how British officers molded their soldiers. Furthermore, this chapter extends into the British army scholarship on race and the disciplining of Black people in colonial spaces, especially in the context of Atlantic slavery. Historians have demonstrated that tropical plantations were spaces in which white Europeans developed theories about how to discipline and punish people of African descent most effectively.[7] The experiences of West India soldiers show that such ideas affected the British army in very tangible ways.

**Regiments of the line**

British commanders organized, outfitted, and trained West India Regiment soldiers like standard line infantry. In tropical Atlantic garrisons, new recruits for the Black corps learned the plodding,

[6] Classic studies for the British army include J.A. Houlding, *Fit for Service: The Training of the British Army, 1715-1795* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Scott Hughes Myerly, *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars through the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c.1870-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[7] Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Dawn P. Harris, *Punishing the Black Body: Marking Social and Racial Structures in Barbados and Jamaica* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

synchronized platoon marching patterns that had long been standard military tactics in early-modern Europe. The West India Regiments, however, were not meant to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in traditional combat and exchange line volleys with Britain's rivals in France or Spain. Rather, they were initially raised for service in the rugged Caribbean, where, in the early years of the corps' existence, they tracked and skirmished with French-backed guerilla fighters in the canefields and craggy mountains of Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, Martinique, and elsewhere. The realities of warfare in the revolutionary Caribbean left some military personnel puzzled by the army's decision to classify the West India Regiments as line battalions. At least a few pragmatic officers suggested that all of the Black troops be trained and clothed like irregular scouts and skirmishers instead. Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, the military governor of Dominica who helped raise the 8th West India in the late 1790s, argued that Black soldiers "ought to all be riflemen," light infantry sharpshooters who embraced a free-flowing and improvisational combat style that was sure to prove infinitely more useful in the West Indies.[8] Brigadier General Thomas Hislop, who served for several years in Trinidad and British-occupied Demerara, thought similarly. Like Cochrane-Johnstone, Hislop mooted the light infantry classification for the Regiments, and also proposed that the army consider inconspicuous dark green uniforms for the corps, far more conducive to surprise-and-ambush guerilla warfare than the bold crimson jackets standard to British regiments of the line.[9] But the War Office made no such adjustments. British commanders stuck to the letter of line infantry preparations, and the West India Regiments clunked through thick cane and brush in tight trousers, heavy boots, and red woolen jackets.

Military records offer little in the way of official explanation for the incongruencies

[8] Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone to Henry Dundas, 7 June 1798, WO 1/86.
[9] Thomas Hislop, "Remarks on the Establishment of West India Regiments. Written in the Year 1801," enclosed in Hislop to the Duke of York, 22 July 1804, WO 1/95.

between the classification of the West India Regiments and the combat tactics the troops were likely to use in the Atlantic tropics. One interpretation lies in the unlikelihood that the War Office would have allowed Black, often formerly-enslaved, regulars to be anything but bottom-rung foot soldiers by designation.[10] Light infantry were considered to be elite brigades and carried high-grade, expensive weaponry. To classify Black soldiers in this manner, and place them above most of the army's white regiments, would have upset traditional military hierarchies, for one. Furthermore, the distribution of pricey Baker Rifles and other high-caliber flintlocks to the lowly West India Regiments would have undoubtedly left many military officials livid. But perhaps even more fundamental was the issue of discipline. Stringent line infantry training and drill was just as much about enforcing discipline as it was about teaching combat skills.[11] While light regiments and rifle brigades prioritized spontaneity and independence in the field, the assiduously organized regiments of the line enforced scrupulous order and unquestioning obedience to commands.[12] British military officials insisted upon the latter for conscripted African regulars.

The wide objections of white proprietors to the existence of the West India Regiments probably affected the organization of the corps too. African soldiers, dressed in imperial garb and adorned with bayoneted firelocks, visibly subverted the racial hierarchies of the British Caribbean in a manner that was disconcerting to estate-owning whites in plantation societies constructed upon a strict racial order. Paranoid planters who lived with apocalyptic nightmares of maroon attacks and the war in Saint Domingue were revolted by the idea of an African army

[10] Ryan Patterson, "Keeping them in Line: The West Indian Regiments, Light Infantry, and the British Military Social System at the turn of the Nineteenth Century," (MA thesis, York University, 2009).
[11] Houlding, *Fit for Service*; Harold Kleinschmidt, "Using the Gun: Manual Drill and the Proliferation of Portable Firearms," *Journal of Military History* 63, no. 3 (1999): 601-630.
[12] David Gates, *The British Light Infantry Arm, 1790-1815: Its Creation, Training and Operational Role* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1987).

forced upon them and stationed among them, and insisted that the troops would seize any opportunity to turn their army-issued muskets against white people.[13] While military officers were not nearly as concerned as planters were about the supposed dangers of the West India Regiments, strict line infantry training was one way that British officials might assuage the concerns of white proprietors and colonial assemblymen. If the West India Regiments would disturb the racial hierarchy of the British Caribbean, they would at least obey the strictest iterations of the military hierarchy. Turning to the process of training African conscripts, then, it is helpful to keep in mind that the basic line infantry training prescribed by their officers served minimal tactical value. Rather, their military training was all about the inculcation of draconian order and discipline.

Arriving at the colonial garrison, new recruits had little time for recovery from their traumatizing journeys into the West India Regiments, most of which, as the previous chapter showed, had begun with enslavement in Africa and a harrowing middle passage. Soldiers had undergone a medical examination before conscription and the army had bypassed the woefully infirm, but new recruits still arrived emaciated and exhausted at British military stations. Many fell seriously ill soon after. One officer noted in 1800 that each new recruit "rarely escapes an attack of illness, almost immediately on, or very shortly after, his arrival."[14] And while statistics are hard to come by, an unspecified but surely significant number died in the days and weeks after their forcible enlistment.[15] Officers arranged smallpox immunizations for the men, particularly important for soldiers given that they spent so much time in the close quarters of the

[13] 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," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 4 (2018): 627-650.
[14] Thomas Trigge to Henry Dundas, 20 November 1800, WO 1/90.
[15] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 49.

military garrison.[16] Physical illness aside, the men were surely aching in other ways too, longing for the friends and family from whom they had been taken and mourning those who had expired in their company in the belly of a slave ship.

**Private, 5th West India Regiment, 1812**

*Source: NAM 1982/4/203/46, National Army Museum, London.*

[16] George Nugent to Henry Calvert, 6 March 1804, Nugent Papers, NAM 6807/183/3/66; "Particular Account No. 2," Jamaica, 31 March 1801, Balcarres Papers, NAM 1975/8/55/33.

Regimental officers wasted no time in beginning to mold the men into colonial soldiers. The captains assigned new recruits to specific companies, and the sergeants and corporals rummaged through supply rooms for uniforms and accoutrements to be handed out. The army issued the men armfuls of heavy clothing—a thick woolen coat that would quickly become sweat-logged and smelly; a shirt with a high, stiff collar; tight white, black, or blue trousers; and a tall felt cap decorated with white and red lace and a small brass plate in front. This was the formal dress. The men also received looser all-white uniforms for drill and fatigue duty. The clothing was probably not new, as British manufacturers often struggled to keep up with the army's exorbitant demand for uniforms.[17] The sergeants passed around various eating utensils: knives, forks, and spoons, small tin dishes, and pint-sized drinking cups.[18] The new recruits were warned to keep track of all their items; inspections of their accoutrements and necessaries would be frequent, and those who misplaced them risked excruciating punishment.

Conscripts for the West India Regiments endured strict, repetitious, and often physically violent training sessions as officers and sergeants forced British military structure and discipline upon new regulars. Dragged out onto the garrison parade pitch before sunrise, young soldiers practiced the requisite habits and maneuvers that British soldiers were expected to master. The physical settings of the exercise varied; Saint Ann's Garrison in Barbados, for example, hosted a "large, open plain sufficiently so for the exercise of two thousand men," while soldiers stationed at the small battery on the Bay of Honduras sloshed through wet sand and mud for much of the year.[19] Non-commissioned sergeants and corporals—often Africans and Black West Indians—led

[17] Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 121-123; Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 120.
[18] 2 June 1804, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[19] Jerome Handler, ed., "'Memoirs of an Old Army Officer': Richard A. Wyvill's Visits to Barbados in 1796 and 1806-7," *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 35, no. 1 (1975): 23; "Fifth West India Regiment Confidential Report as inspected by Brig. Gen. Balfour at Belize, Honduras Bay," 21 November 1808, WO 1/95.

the military inculcations, though higher-ranking white officials watched periodically.[20] Basic training began without arms. The NCOs showed the men how to stand, face, and step, and what to do with their eyes, arms, and hands. The sergeants and corporals adjusted the men one by one, squaring their shoulders and straightening their chins. As the recruits progressed, they moved onto small-group exercise and rehearsed their steps and maneuvers together, practicing file marching, wheeling, and pivoting. Later on, the sergeants introduced the muskets and taught the men how to carry and sling, kneel and fire.[21]

Of course, the meticulously ordered and illustrated training syllabi laid out in British military manuals were often followed only loosely, and it is important not to overstate the organization and sophistication of the training regimens to which West India recruits, or any British soldier, were subjected. The relative organization of the operation was heavily dependent on the skill of the officers and sergeants leading the sessions. Many were inexperienced and poorly-trained themselves, resulting in largely ad hoc, improvised, and incomplete practice sessions. This was not an issue exclusive to the West India Regiments by any stretch, but rather one that plagued countless British battalions.[22] Considering the reality of rough and unorganized practice, how long it took to train a West India Regiment infantryman is difficult to say, and certainly varied. General Samuel Ford Whittingham, commander-in-chief of British forces in the Windward and Leeward Islands in the late 1830s, stated confidently that the infantry-in-training needed a solid eighteen months of preparation in order to master the army's essential platoon

[20] 31 October 1802, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1; 8 April 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.
[21] [David Dundas], *Rules and Regulations for the Formations, Field-Exercise, and Movements, of His Majesty's Forces* (London: War Office, 1792); War Office, *Abstract of the Field Exercise and Evolutions of the Army* (London: William Clowes, 1834).
[22] Matthew P. Dziennik, *The Fatal Land: War, Empire, and the Highland Soldier in British America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 64.

maneuvers.[23] But how this all shook out on the training ground is not clear. Perhaps the most likely scenario is that impatient NCOs of dubious skill worked new conscripts in the facings, postures, and rudimentary maneuvers just until they could perform them well enough not to interrupt platoon drill sessions or embarrass the officers at the public parade. There was no "graduation" from infantry training anyway; rather, after a period of months the sessions unceremoniously morphed into the endless, repetitious rehearsal of the same marching patterns over and over again.[24]

Through it all, the sergeants and officers observed the men closely. All movements were to be deliberate and steady; chins and limbs in place, backs straight, shoulders forward. The NCOs leading the exercise took a variety of verbal and tonal approaches to instruction, oscillating between scolding and encouraging, demanding and reasoning.[25] The sergeants were formally ordered to treat the regulars "civilly but with not too much intimacy, they are to explain to them the nature and necessity of discipline, and the necessity of practice." Soldiers in training were to be taught to obey all commands "with promptness" and to be informed of the harsh consequences of any failure in guard, exercise, or inspection.[26] NCOs could be ruthlessly rough on new recruits. Observing a training session for a group of Black soldiers in Barbados in 1796, the medical officer George Pinckard noticed that the drill sergeants devoted ample time to "pushing, pulling, and cuffing them about." Growing frustrated by the recruits' failure to pick up the steps, the NCOs in charge stepped in with violent corrections. The man who put out the wrong leg earned a strike across the shin, the man caught looking down at his feet took an

[23] If "elementary Drill be hurried or neglected," the officer wrote, "no after exertion will recover the lost ground." Lieutenant General Samuel F. Wittingham to the Secretary at War, 25 January 1838, CO 318/132. Dziennik notes that "Most senior officers agreed that it took a year to discipline an infantryman." Dziennik, *Fatal Land*, 65.
[24] Houlding, *Fit for Service*.
[25] George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies: Written During the Expedition Under the Command of the Late General Sir Ralph Abercromby* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), III:193.
[26] 1 May 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1. Emphasis in original.

uppercut below the chin, and the man whose arm lagged behind his torso endured "a thrust that might put out the shoulder."[27] The NCOs, of course, had a stake in the men's success too, and risked their own punishment if the young regulars did not make steady progress. These particulars, we must note, are not unique to Black soldiers or the West India Regiments; rather, they clarify the intimate brutality of standard British army training sessions.

**NCOs Pose for a Portrait, 1st West India, Up Park Camp, Kingston, c. 1865**

*Source: GEN MSS 887, folder 82, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

Regimental officers also hoped to shape the attitudes of African recruits. Here, the army's approach to regimentation and the cultivation of discipline and loyalty differs in some ways from how officers might have treated white regulars. A crucial pillar of British infantry training was

[27] Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies*, III:190-191.

the inculcation of a military identity through which the soldier felt status, honor, and a certain superiority.[28] The army certainly tried this with the West India Regiments, though the extent to which conscripts felt much esteem or distinction is not clear. In the pre-emancipation Caribbean, officers' main talking point, it seems, was the argument that soldiers in the West India Regiments were superior to the enslaved people around whom they lived and worked. Brigadier General Thomas Hislop was convinced that once a recruit "discovers the superiority of his situation above the slave," he will "feel himself proportionally elevated" within the parameters of colonial society.[29] Major General Hugh Lyle Carmichael, a commanding officer with the 2nd West India Regiment in the early nineteenth century, made similar comments, claiming that explicating to new recruits their enviable state "had soon a perceptible effect upon their conduct & demeanor," and that African recruits quickly came to embrace the "pride & distinction" of serving the king.[30]

While the Black troops certainly recognized that their material conditions were better than those endured by enslaved plantation laborers, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the extent of their feelings of "pride" or "distinction."[31] There are no complete life histories recorded by West India Regiment soldiers, and so historians must speculate based on trace references in the archives. Rigid military life was not fun, and many surely resented those who had forced it upon them. But given their deeply circumscribed opportunities in the British

[28] French, *Military Identities*.
[29] Thomas Hislop, "Remarks on the Establishment of West India Regiments. Written in the Year 1801," enclosed in Hislop to the Duke of York, 22 July 1804, WO 1/95.
[30] Hugh Lyle Carmichael to Viscount Castlereagh, 27 July 1808, CO 137/123.
[31] It seems likely that many Black soldiers felt some distinction bestowed upon them, but it is not easy to press beyond speculation. Roger Buckley, for example, apparently believed that West India soldiers took substantial pride in their work, but he struggled to find the proof in the archive. Sidestepping the question in his monograph, *Slaves in Red Coats*, he instead uses a piece of historical fiction to forward that argument. In his novel, *Congo Jack*, Buckley describes an African soldier of the 8th West India who "delighted in [the] rigid embrace" of the Red Coat with unique regimental decorations; it made him feel "indestructible." "We of the Eighth West India took great pride in our uniform," Congo Jack narrates. "Martial zeal flared in my soul with incredible force." Buckley, *Congo Jack: A Novel* (Mount Kisco, NY: Pinto Press, 1997), 16-17.

Caribbean, and, later, as displaced people in British West Africa, there were various reasons for conscripts to choose pragmatism and accept their position as colonial soldiers. Regulars could count on fairly steady pay and decent rations, for one, necessities that Africans enslaved and thrust into the Atlantic diaspora often lacked. And further, after the trauma and displacement of enslavement and the middle passage, the regiments did offer a sense of community and group identity that must have been attractive to some. Such prospects, Christopher Leslie Brown has noted, could and did serve to bind Black soldiers to the colonial military establishment.[32] And the Black troops did have some status and authority; it is not unfathomable that some soldiers may have savored their opportunities to act out the power they had. The British army was, in so many ways, a new kind of captor for the young African men forced to join up, and it is unlikely that many troops were eager colonial soldiers. But, even if they saw through their officers' confident ramblings about the great honor of the service, Black troops must have understood that the military did offer certain things—pay, provisions, power however constrained—that they would have struggled to find elsewhere.

Infantry training was undoubtedly made more complicated by the fact that new African conscripts spoke no English. While some of the earliest recruits for the regiments in the mid 1790s were Black West Indian draftees, British officers quickly shifted their attention to the slave market and purchased thousands of enslaved Africans for the service. Through the first half of the nineteenth century, as the previous chapter showed, officers of the West India Regiments drew Africans off slave ships and into the ranks, maintaining polyglot companies in which few new recruits spoke a word of English. And African soldiers often did not achieve anything near

[32] Christopher Leslie Brown, "The Arming of Slaves in Comparative Perspective," in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, ed. Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 346.

English language fluency over their terms of service. The tropical garrison was alive with chatter in numerous languages, including Igbo, Twi, Kikongo, Kimbundu, Hausa, Yoruba, Gbe, Mandinka, Pulaar, English, French, and other tongues.[33] Regimental records offer limited explanation of the ways in which the army worked around the linguistic barriers that plagued basic training, and military service more broadly. But extant sources do indicate that African sergeants and corporals translated officers' orders into African languages and otherwise spoke to soldiers in their native tongue.[34] With perhaps a rare exception or two, white officers did not speak a word of Igbo or Twi or any other language their African troops would have known, and thus it was up to their underlings to sort out the lines of communication for the purpose of training and command.[35]

The requisite layers of translation and communication proved frustrating. "Great difficulty attends to their drilling and instruction," one high-ranking officer observed, "as one half do not speak English."[36] And yet, for all the difficulties that communication barriers caused, language instruction was uneven in the corps. Some officers, it seems, did make some effort to ensure that English would be the lingua franca under their command. A captain of the 2nd West India Regiment stationed in Jamaica in 1803 noted with some disgust that most African troops struggled to pronounce their army-imposed English names, even those who had served "several years" in the corps. He demanded that "every exertion" be taken to instruct the men, and forbade

[33] Regimental Description Rolls and individual soldiers' discharge records attest to the ethnolinguistic diversity of West India Regiment soldiers. See, in particular, Description Books, 2nd, 4th, and 6th West India Regiments, WO 25/644, 653, 657; and Royal Hospital Chelsea Soldiers' Service Documents, West India Regiments, WO 97/1155-1162.
[34] 3 May 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203; 20 April 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[35] In contrast, many British officers serving in the Bengal army around the same time underwent language training, which was embraced as a means of cultivating trust, loyalty, and personal relationships between British officers and sepoy soldiers. See Kaushik Roy, "The hybrid military establishment of the East India Company in South Asia: 1750-1849," *Journal of Global History* 6 (2011): 206-207.
[36] Quoted in Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 64.

all "Country languages," at least until the troops demonstrated significant progress in English. The officer mobilized his "Guinea" sergeants and corporals, ordering them "to teach their Countrymen" while the white officers oversaw and reinforced such instruction. The commanding officer decided that every roll call would begin with each man stating his own name, and all parades would conclude the same way. Soldiers would also be expected to pronounce every piece of their arms, accoutrements, and clothing. And no "indulgence" was to be provided unless the men could ask for it "in English, and Soldierlike manner."[37] But this does not seem to have been common practice in the West India Regiments, and overall there is little evidence that officers committed to, or had the means to provide, steady English-language instruction.[38] Colonial and military observers attest that African soldiers spoke to each other in African languages on and off duty. One British official stationed with small detachments of the 1st and 2nd West India Regiments aboard a British warship in the 1830s, for example, remarked that the African troops "very imperfectly understood" English and exclusively conversed in "a conventional idiom of their own."[39]

In the barracks at night, over meals, or out alone on sentry duty, the African infantry conversed in their native tongues. Perhaps a small clan of Hausa soldiers enjoyed breakfast together and reminisced about the homeland; perhaps a group of Coromantee troops shared Akan proverbs as they downed their grog rations by the fire before bed. But these brief moments of calm were rare reprieves from the endless manual exercises that developed recruits into able and reliable colonial soldiers. Regimental officers, and the NCOs who carried out their orders,

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[37] 20 April 1803, 1 May 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[38] Tim Lockley has stated that a "hybrid language" that combined "elements of European and African languages" developed over time. This may well be true, though I have uncovered no evidence to support the claim. Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 98.
[39] David Turnbull to Lord Stanley, 29 June 1842, CO 318/157. John Davy, a military doctor stationed in the Windward and Leeward Islands around the mid nineteenth century, makes a similar comment. Davy, *The West Indies, Before and Since Slave Emancipation* (London: W. & F.G. Cash, 1854), 539.

trained new recruits in relentless pursuit of discipline. The army kept the Black troops in line, both literally and figuratively, and the preeminent objective of perfect order dictated the day-to-day experiences of soldiers in the corps.

**Drill and discipline: the British Caribbean**

At the military stations occupied by the West India Regiments, discipline was enforced and reinforced through a strict schedule of drill, maintenance, manual labor, and punishment. The white men who officered the Black corps demonstrated a fanatical obsession with order and discipline, the infatuation rooted in their beliefs that Africans required particularly strict and constant management.[40] "Military discipline," David Killingray argues for African soldiers serving in British colonial Africa, "was strictly enforced on the basis that with African troops authority had to be constantly imposed and applied."[41] Indeed, military and non-military observers alike believed the regimentation of African soldiers to be a monumental task, insisting that the men's mental and physical attributes were incompatible with military order and discipline.[42] Of course, excessive routines of pattern marching and menial station labor that enforced military discipline were not unique to the West India Regiments.[43] White soldiers too were drilled into the ground by officers who saw their men as unsophisticated dregs in need of

[40] Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203; 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1. The army applied the same beliefs and approach to the management of African military laborers too. See Frederick William Naylor Bayley, *Four Years' Residence in the West Indies during the Years 1826, 7, 8, and 9. By the Son of a Military Officer* (London: William Kidd, 1833), 456-457.
[41] He prefaces the statement: "In a colonial setting, ideas of racial superiority and modern discipline were closely related." David Killingray, "The 'Rod of Empire': The Debate of Corporal Punishment in the British African Colonial Forces, 1888-1946," *Journal of African History* 35, no. 2 (1994): 202, 206.
[42] Charles Kingsley, *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1872), 208; Killingray, "The 'Rod of Empire,'" 206-207.
[43] I accept James Burk's definition of the term "military discipline": "the orderly conduct of military personnel—whether individually or in formation, in battle, or in garrison—most often as prescribed by their officers in command. A high level of discipline begins with instruction and is perfected through repetitive drill that makes the desired action a matter of habit." See Burk, "Military Culture," in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict*, 2nd edition, ed. Lester Kurtz (San Diego: Academic Press, 2008), 1244.

strict routine and order. In this way, much of the analysis of army routines that follows might be extrapolated to white regiments too. But there were some specific, calculated differences in the regimentation and daily routines of white and Black soldiers in the British army. If white troops were guileless and pitiable, so officers insisted, Africans were "untutored savages"—naturally "backward" and sometimes "ferocious" men who had much farther to go in order to achieve anything that resembled military discipline.[44]

In the West India Regiments, order and discipline were enforced through constant activity under tight supervision. Reconstructing colonial soldiers' day-to-day routines is a challenging task, and military historians have noted that the "interior life" of the regiment can be particularly difficult to recover and analyze.[45] Internal regimental records tend to be wildly inconsistent, their relative quality and thoroughness dependent on how committed individual officers were to making and keeping them.[46] Some of the richest sources for the granular day-to-day activities of any corps are commanding officers' Orderly Books. These records include daily, or near daily, entries in which officers recorded their commands—an extra drill session, a special inspection, fatigue duties, funeral preparations, corporal punishment, and more. But only a scarce few survive for the West India Regiments. Most thorough and detailed are the daily orders from 1802 to 1804 for the 2nd West India Regiment stationed at Fort Augusta in Kingston harbor and the 1801 orders for an unspecified regiment—almost certainly the 5th or 6th West India—stationed at the lonely colonial batteries on the Bay of Honduras.[47] While they cover a frustratingly limited

[44] 3 May 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203; *The Palladium* (Saint Lucia), 1 December 1838; Captain Luke Smyth O'Connor, "Suggestions for the Discipline, Uniform, Messing, and Recruiting of the West India Regiments," *United Service Journal* (1837), part 1, 361.
[45] John E. Cookson, "Regimental Worlds: Interpreting the Experience of British Soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars," in *Soldiers, Citizens, and Civilians: Experiences and Perceptions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1790-1820*, ed. Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann, and Jane Randall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 33.
[46] G.A. Steppler, "Regimental Records in the Late Eighteenth Century and the Social History of the British Soldier," *Archivaria* 26 (1988): 7-17.
[47] The National Army Museum in London holds the former; the latter belongs to the National Library of Jamaica.

period of time, the sources allow for a reasonably detailed reconstruction of quotidian life in the West India Regiments, at least in the revolutionary Caribbean, and the daily military procedures through which officers supervised, threatened, and punished Black colonial soldiers.

**1st West India Soldiers Mustered and Inspected, Fort Charlotte, Nassau, c. 1860**

*Source: GEN MSS 887, folder 43, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

At the tropical station, a typical day began at half past four in the morning. Rousted by a drummer who had stayed out with the sentries all night, the men moved quickly, allowed thirty minutes to roll up their blankets and tidy their rooms, dress in their casual wear, and make their way to the parade ground for the morning muster. On the dewy pitch in the dark, officers and sergeants made their way through the rows of straight-backed soldiers, observing and inspecting, before putting the regulars through a couple of hours of drill. Breakfast followed—coffee and sugar with bread and some fruit made up a standard meal—and chores filled the rest of the morning. The troops cleaned the barracks and undertook various maintenance tasks around the station. Those tapped for the dreaded fatigue duties gathered axes, shovels, or whatever else they needed from the quartermaster and headed out. New recruits and “awkward men” returned to the

parade ground for extra training.[48] In the early afternoon the corps broke for dinner. Soldiers took turns cooking for themselves and their comrades "according to the roster," preparing deep pots of rice and frying up vegetables and a little bit of beef or salt pork with herbs and spices. Some days they tossed everything into a cauldron for a thick stew. The men passed around bread left over from breakfast, and more fruit if it was available. Someone ran an armful of plates out to the sentries too.[49] It wasn't a bad meal, but in most cases white soldiers got a lot more. Officers and military doctors insisted that Black bodies thrived on minimal nourishment, and especially skimped on animal proteins.[50] On some days, the regiment turned out after dinner too for a full dress parade, marching and maneuvering in their heavy wool uniforms and presenting for one final inspection before retiring to the barracks and huts for the night.

Endless, repetitious drill was the quintessence of military order and discipline and structured the days and lives of soldiers in the corps. Multiple times a day the troops trod the parade ground, dripping sweat and working through the eighteen essential infantry maneuvers over and over again. All colonial soldiers endured frequent and exhausting drill sessions, to be sure. But British commanders in the tropics expressed concern about white troops being marched too often and for too long, especially in dangerous heat and humidity. In 1795, as the War Office prepared to send thousands of white soldiers from the British Isles to the Caribbean to combat French Republican forces, War Secretary Henry Dundas ordered that white soldiers in the Atlantic tropics be "exercised moderately" with the "Preservation of Health" in mind.[51] The

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[48] 10 January 1802, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1. This was, to be sure, an idealized schedule, and was certainly subject to changes and rearrangement.
[49] 9 December 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[50] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 91-93. Sarah Zimmerman notes a similar practice in the *tirailleur* armies of French West Africa. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020), 96-98.
[51] "Regulations for the Use of His Majesty's Troops, upon their Arrival in the West Indies," 10 October 1795, in Henry Dundas, *Facts Relative to the Conduct of War in the West Indies* (London: J. Owen, 1796), 187.

decree was enforced. A few months later, officers of the white 66th Regiment stationed at Port-au-Prince, for example, earned a stern warning, and threats of retribution, from a senior officer after they were caught having their soldiers "out in the heat of the day."[52]

But military officials were unconcerned about the inordinate drilling of Black soldiers in the oppressive climate, believing them to be naturally comfortable laboring in the tropics.[53] Officers also insisted that the troops were in obvious need of the repetitions. Here, army officers embraced the general insistence that all British soldiers were unsophisticated and lazy, and blended it with imperial racism to justify the superfluous, sweltering drill sessions forced upon West India companies. One senior officer backed up the excessive marching with his belief that Black troops lacked the intellectual capacity to remember the maneuvers, writing confidently that the men "require to be perpetually at exercise," or else they "soon forget what they are taught."[54] Army officers criticized the mental capabilities of white soldiers too, but that does not mean that the comment wasn't racialized. Twentieth-century military instructions for those commanding African divisions clarify this point, placing African soldiers' intellect definitively below that of white regulars. African troops have "the mind of a child" by any "European standard," the War Office explained in a pamphlet distributed to officers headed to West Africa during World War II.[55] In India as well, British conceptions of race and intellect shaped the particulars of training and treatment. Channa Wickremesekera explains that sepoy soldiers who deserted East India Company regiments and then returned were usually made to restart their training from square one, their officers assuming that they must have forgotten the military

[52] 25 February 1796, Orderly Book, 66th Regiment, St. Domingo, 1796, LOC, Kislak MS 1000.
[53] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 84-112.
[54] Inspection Report, 1st West India Regiment, Barbados, 1819, WO 27/147. Emphasis in original.
[55] *Meet the West African Soldier: A Brief Introduction for Members of His Majesty's Forces About to Serve in West Africa, issued by General Headquarters West Africa*, n.d. [early 1940s], WO 173/627.

routines and marching patterns. This, he notes, was not something to which white soldiers were subjected.[56]

**1st West India Grenadiers Test Out Field Artillery, Up Park Camp, Kingston, c. 1865**

*Source: GEN MSS 887, folder 85, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

Unexcused absence from group exercise was a serious offense, and those who missed a session could expect hundreds of lashes as punishment. Even severe illness was a flimsy excuse. Each morning at Fort Augusta in Jamaica, and probably elsewhere too, a sergeant headed over to the military hospital to see if any sick soldiers were able to march. Those who did not appear to be in grave condition were forced up and out for the "convalescent parade," and then returned to their beds after.[57] Regimental officers fretted about the potential inactivity of soldiers stationed

[56] "[A]fter a few months disuse," an officer with the Bengal army wrote, the sepoy "becomes as completely ignorant of his duty as if he had never learned it." Channa Wickremesekera, *"Best Black Troops in the World": British Perceptions and the Making of the Sepoy, 1746-1805* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 178-179.
[57] 10 January 1802, 3 December 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.

aboard military vessels too. A captain of the 2nd West India, for example, demanded that the small detachment of soldiers stationed aboard a prison ship floating in Kinston harbor be drilled twice a day for at least thirty minutes "in the manual & platoon exercise." While they minded captives of the Napoleonic wars and various other prisoners of the British state, the troops were to run through their marching patterns on deck, of course with the added challenge of keeping their balance as the ship rocked beneath them.[58]

West India Regiment officers observed the rank and file carefully—on the parade ground, in the barracks, and everywhere else. The subaltern of the day—the white officers rotated responsibility for leading the regulars through their schedule–-examined the troops' clothing and accoutrements, analyzed the precision of their marching, and graded the relative zeal they exuded as they progressed through the marching patterns. Those who underperformed were subject to vicious retribution. A major at the Honduras garrison complained that some of the troops had been lacking in enthusiasm while on parade and warned that those who continued to be deficient in this respect would be "immediately confined" and subjected to "severe punishment."[59] Obsessive officers observed the men as they made their way to and from the parade pitch too, leveling various criticisms and spewing frightening threats of retribution. In Jamaica, a captain complained that the troops marched to and from the parade ground in a "very irregular manner," and criticized the ways in which they presented their muskets, sloppily combining three distinct motions into one.[60] Traveling officers and NCOs made the rounds to the various sentry stations to check up on those on guard duty. At Fort Balcarres and Fort Lindsay, two small, swampy batteries on the Bay of Honduras, sentries could expect an inspection in the

[58] 7 June 1804, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[59] 18 April 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.
[60] 12 April 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.

middle of the night from the sergeant on duty. The rules for guard duty were extraordinarily strict—men were to always carry their muskets in hand, for example, and were forbidden from conversing with their comrades. And on the approach of an officer or sergeant, sentries were to "put themselves in a proper position, and to Pay the Compliment to which his Rank entitles him."[61] At numerous stations, officers complained that the sentries were too lax at their posts. At Fort Augusta, the captain leveled that the guards routinely engaged in "very idle and unsoldierlike habit[s]," and demanded that any man found neglecting his duty be added to the "Officers Report," a grim development likely to result in corporal punishment.[62]

Officers and NCOs made daily visits to soldiers' barracks and huts "to see that Regularity prevails and that good order is Established amongst the men."[63] During drill or chores, or perhaps while the men were eating dinner, a captain or a sergeant shuffled through the barrack rooms to ensure that all was in order. Blankets were to be rolled up, clothing in its proper place, and accoutrements organized and put away. At Fort Augusta, which had solid, multi-storey barracks, each soldier had his own peg nailed into the wall from which he was to hang his knapsack, and a specified slot into which he set his firelock. Each space was carefully labeled, and "any man using anothers [sic] is to be immediately confined." The troops were ordered not to leave "their things loose about the Barracks," and warned that those found to be too untidy would be "sent to Drill," and risked being court martialed too.[64]

Officers also held frequent inspections of soldiers' personal items; every few days the men presented their muskets, belts, cuffs, collars, pouches, and slings for the sergeants and

[61] 5 May 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.
[62] 5 December 1802, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[63] 22 May 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.
[64] 2 September 1803, 21 September 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.

captains.[65] Examinations of tidiness and order applied to the body too. Various white officers railed on Black soldiers' alleged lack of personal hygiene. One complained that the regulars fail to wear clean shirts to parade, while another ranted that he "cou'd [sic] not get these Men to keep themselves clean, nothing can show a stronger want of Discipline in these Companies."[66] Unwashed clothing and irregular bathing, though, was nothing unique to the West India Regiments, and thus such complaints say more about the officers, and the British army in general, than this group of soldiers.[67]

Monotonous chores were an important piece of the project of maintaining order and discipline, and exhausting manual labor occupied much of the troops' time. At Fort Augusta, for example, washing the large barrack rooms was a frequent task, a multi-step process that included sweeping, scrubbing, and mopping, and then raking dry sand across the floor. The officer provided intense supervision. He was often impossible to please. After one morning of intense barrack-scrubbing, the captain of the day complained that the group had used too much water.[68] For an array of menial tasks, the officers and NCOs could "make application" to borrow a group of soldiers "for their own purpose." Captains and sergeants were generally encouraged to take soldiers as personal laborers, and new African recruits especially. This, one officer explained, "will facilitate the object in view which is the disciplining of them."[69] Regimental records offer little insight into what sorts of informal off-the-books labor soldiers did in these situations, but it is clear that officers exercised considerable authority to work their men as they pleased in the name of discipline and order.

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[65] Examples of this procedure abound in the order books. Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.
[66] 19 July 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203; 17 July 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[67] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 313-314.
[68] 1 December 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[69] 8 April 1801, 13 November 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.

Garrison chores, as taxing as they must have been, were small jobs compared to some of the fatigue labor projects forced upon Black soldiers. The West India Regiments engaged in extensive manual labor in the colonies in which they were stationed. Some tasks, like the maintenance of barracks and fortifications, had a clear military purpose; others, like repairing a road miles from the garrison, did not. In Trinidad, for example, a few hundred soldiers of the 11th West India Regiment spent many hours over several days building roads and public buildings and constructing new fortifications in the hills overlooking Port of Spain, and soldiers of the 9th and 12th West India cleared brush at Chaguaramas to make way for military structures. In Belize, soldiers of the 5th Regiment dug a canal through the swamp near the station.[70] West India soldiers stationed near Kingston were frequent day laborers for the colonial government. Travelers and traders routinely rolled by units of Black troops in fatigue dress hard at work repairing roads that had been torn up by carriage wheels or washed out by tropical storms.[71]

In these instances, Black soldiers may have labored alongside enslaved people or they may have worked the jobs on their own, as government officials quickly came to realize that West India troops could be ordered to work for substantially less than it cost to hire a party of enslaved people from a local plantation.[72] Such tasks did not relieve the troops from the ritualistic drill sessions so central to the maintenance of order in the colonial garrison. At the Belize station, for example, the captain ordered fatigue groups to "Parade by themselves" before heading off to work, and in Jamaica, a small "working party" of one sergeant, one corporal, and thirty-two regulars was made to "Parade at Gunfire" before heading off to repair a road nearby.[73]

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[70] R. Blackworth, "History of the Black Troops in the W. Indies," 10 February 1836, CO 320/3, 77-78; Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 128.
[71] Maria Nugent, entry 27 January 1804, in *Lady Nugent's Journal of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*, ed. Philip Wright (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1966), 195.
[72] Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 128-129.
[73] 18 May 1801, 22 May 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203; 25 August 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, 2001/12/1.

The sergeants and corporals were expected to watch the men carefully and ensure discipline and good behavior outside the station. When a group of planters in British Honduras demurred to the local garrison captain that they had caught a group of soldiers out on fatigue duty trolling their properties and stealing food and other goods, the officer raged that the troops must not "straggle about or the purposes of marauding" and demanded that they always be marched to and from the labor site under intense observation.[74]

Manual labor was a staple of life in the British army, and certainly not unique to Black units like the West India Regiments. But in the Atlantic tropics, exhausting physical drudgery was far more likely to fall on Black troops than whites. Indeed, the realities of non-combat work represent a significant deviation in the quotidian routines of white and non-white soldiers in tropical stations. Historians of the East India Company's sepoy armies have drawn similar conclusions. Channa Wickremesekera has shown that sepoy soldiers did far more physical labor than white troops, a reality which, over time, confirmed a military labor hierarchy in India which asserted that South Asian troops were naturally suited for manual drudgery.[75] British commanders in London discouraged officers from assigning fatigue duties to white soldiers stationed in the tropics (though, notably, many did so anyway).[76] War Secretary Henry Dundas was clear about the army's commitment to keeping white troops—exceedingly vulnerable to heat, humidity, and fever—from toiling the oppressive climate: "Whenever [fatigue assignments] are of such a Nature, as that they can be performed by Negroes, Care should be taken to have Negroes in Readiness for that Purpose."[77] Dundas was, in this instance, not referring to soldiers

[74] 30 July 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.
[75] Wickremesekera, *"Best Black Troops in the World."*
[76] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 130.
[77] "Regulations for the Use of His Majesty's Troops, upon their Arrival in the West Indies," 10 October 1795, in Henry Dundas, *Facts Relative to the Conduct of War in the West Indies* (London: J. Owen, 1796), 188. There is little doubt, however, that Dundas' decree was not always followed.

but to Black laborers, specifically the anonymous collective of enslaved garrison workers usually called "fort negroes" in the British Caribbean. Enslaved people were ubiquitous at colonial fortifications in the eighteenth century, and especially those in the Atlantic tropics where white soldiers were so often gravely ill.[78] "Fort negroes" were generally hired out from their enslavers and responsible for the worst of fatigue labor around the station. They gathered wood, hauled water, scrubbed floors, cooked food, and handled the heinous task of emptying out the latrines, amongst various other jobs.[79] Still, Dundas' decree evidences the army's lack of regard for Black soldiers, as West India regulars routinely handled fatigue duties from which white soldiers were excused. Indeed, British military officials seem to have looked at West India infantrymen as colonial fighters and "fort negroes" rolled up into one: the quintessential tropical military laborer.[80] The British statesman James Stephen noted in 1824 that labor companies "exclusively composed of drafts from the black corps" were essential in saving white soldiers from death in the "torrid zone" of the West Indies.[81]

Black regulars' usefulness to Britain as tropical military laborers often meant that retiring soldiers were not released from the army but rather reassigned to garrison labor companies when officers decided they were no longer healthy or agile enough for active duty. When the War Office demobilized the 5th West India in 1817, for example, it ordered many of the still-able troops, perhaps a few hundred, to be transferred into "Garrison Companies" and continue their service in Jamaica and the Bahamas as pure fort laborers.[82]

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[78] Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 174-181.
[79] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 130.
[80] For similar conclusions, see Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 54-112.
[81] James Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated, as it Exists in both Law and Practice, and Compared with the Slavery of Other Countries, Antient and Modern* (London: Joseph Butterworth and Son, 1824): I:427.
[82] H.B. Hall to the Military Secretary, 25 May 1817, CO 137/144. The Description Book for the 5th West India Regiment (WO 25/656) confirms that numerous retiring regulars were assigned to the Bahamas Garrison Company.

At Prince Rupert's Head in Dominica, Governor Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone made extensive use of the 8th West India Regiment as labor battalions. In early 1802, the Black troops were employed daily from dinner to sundown, hacking thick brush out of the swamp adjacent to the formidable Cabrits Garrison.[83] The rank and file, unsurprisingly, despised such work. As the days passed the situation intensified, and after a few weeks the troops had had enough. On the night of 9 April, presumably after several hours at work clearing the swamp, a group of Black soldiers picked up their muskets and opened fire on their officers, a moment of violent resistance and the first catastrophic breakdown of order in the West India Regiments. The event was declared a mutiny, and the court martial testimony of Black soldiers and NCOs offers a glimpse into the men's feelings about fatigue labor. A "creole" soldier named Stuart stated that the mutineers "complained of being worked too much." Corporal Dominique testified that the troops believed they were being worked "like Field Negroes." And perhaps they were on to something. Many claimed before the court that the army had not been paying them the requisite additional salary for fatigue labor, offering instead the occasional extra mug of rum as compensation. And at some point before the mutiny, the troops caught word that the marshy site of their unpaid labor was actually Governor Cochrane-Johnstone's private property, on which he intended "to build Houses" and "plant Canes."[84] The apparent conclusion that the governor envisioned them as his own private labor force was certainly rooted in soldiers' observation that the swamp labor regime was akin to plantation slavery. Johnstone was court martialed a few years later for forcing the troops to labor for "his own use," though the charges were brought only because of the soldiers'

[83] Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone to Lord Hobart, 4 April 1802, CO 71/34; Cochrane-Johnstone to Thomas Trigge, 22 April 1802, WO 1/95; Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 101-110.
[84] "Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry assembled at Fort Royal, Martinique, on the 28th Day of April 1802 … in order to investigate the Causes of the late Mutiny which broke out in the 8th West India Regiment at Prince Rupert's, in the Island of Dominique, on the Night of the 9th of April 1802," WO 1/95.

violent response. The former governor claimed that Black troops were routinely deployed in such a manner and argued that consistent fatigue work was the antidote for the natural idleness of soldiers.[85]

**Order in the corps: military justice and corporal punishment**

Officers in the British army reinforced their orders and their authority with fresh-shredding corporal punishment that left bodies damaged and onlookers queasy. Carried out with shocking regularity, flogging was fundamental to order and discipline in the armed forces, as militaries universally embraced efficient displays of bodily torture. Excessive applications of physical pain allowed officer-tormentors the domination of the bodies and minds of soldiers, whose agony was at once a public scene and an isolating ordeal.[86] The British army, Peter Way writes, "wag[ed] a war of terror against its own men," scarring, deforming, and even killing young soldiers for often-petty offenses in violent displays of public retribution.[87] As with any British corps, military justice figured into the standard routines of the West India Regiments. Like drilling, messing, and routine chores, corporal punishment was built into the garrison schedule. Commanding officers of the 2nd West India in Jamaica, for example, arranged for floggings to follow the afternoon drill. A couple times a week at half past five, the companies present at the Fort Augusta garrison lined up on the parade ground "to see the sentence of a Court Martial put into execution."[88] Most of the time, convicted soldiers faced the lash or the "cat," enduring hundreds of strikes to the

[85] Court Martial of Andrew Cochrane Johnstone, 1805, WO 71/109.
[86] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 28-55; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1977]).
[87] Way, "Militarizing the Atlantic World," 347; Colley, *Captives*, 328-334.
[88] 2 November 1802, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1. This ritual is noted frequently and throughout the entirety of the Order Book.

bare shoulders as their comrades looked on.[89] NCOs sometimes endured whippings too, but more often their misbehavior earned them a demotion in rank to private and the accompanying loss of the status and authority of a non-commissioned officer.

Soldiers stationed across the British empire, from Canada to South Africa to India and elsewhere, were regularly terrorized by whip-happy officers.[90] Peter Way has shown how the lash ruled the lives of British troops in Seven Years' War-era North America.[91] Padraic Scanlan has noted that the white soldiers of the Royal African Corps, a convict regiment stationed in coastal West Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century, endured outrageous floggings at the hands of their officers. The atrocious conditions and the extent of corporal punishment in the African Corps were the stuff of military lore, and white soldiers' experiences of military justice in British Senegambia and Sierra Leone were as disquieting as any.[92] West Indian stations, Roger Buckley shows, were perhaps the most violent of them all. British troops in the Caribbean endured disproportionately heavy flogging compared to soldiers stationed in other parts of the empire, likely the product of an ugly cycle in which soldiers acted out in the deadly tropical stations while officers grew more and more brutish in their attempts to force discipline and

[89] Sylvia R. Frey, "Courts and Cats: British Military Justice in the Eighteenth Century," *Military Affairs* 43, no. 1 (1979): 5-11.

[90] The corporal punishments inflicted upon soldiers in the British army were not uncontroversial; various imperial officials questioned the necessity of such harsh physical abuse, especially as applied to the bodies of white troops. An 1812 Horse Guards circular capped regimental courts martial sentences at 300 lashes, down from 1,000. Military officials reduced the figure again, to 200, in 1834. The military corporal punishment reforms of the 1830s were motivated by other factors too, specifically the abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1834 and an order passed by the governor-general of India that outlawed the flogging of sepoy soldiers in 1835. In military and British political circles, the rejoinder to these decisions was the subsequent charge that white soldiers were being brutalized worse than Africans and Indians. By mid-century, and after the well-publicized death of a white soldier after he endured 150 strikes for "insubordination," the maximum sentence allowed in regimental courts was further reduced to fifty lashes. Colley, *Captives*, 340-343; Peter Burroughs, "Crime and punishment in the British army, 1815-1870," *English Historical Review* 100, vol. 396 (1985): 561-564; Radhika Singha, "The 'Rare Infliction': The Abolition of Flogging in the Indian Army, circa 1835-1920," *Law and History Review* 34, no. 3 (2016): 783-818.

[91] Way, "Militarizing the Atlantic World."

[92] Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 119-122.

obedience.[93]

But there is substantive evidence that officers modified their approaches to military justice when it came to the Black soldiers of the West India Regiments. Using regimental courts martial statistics to compare the severity of punishments meted out to the Black soldiers of the 4th West India Regiment and the white soldiers of multiple British regiments all stationed at Gibraltar between 1817 and 1819, Tim Lockley calculates that Black troops were significantly more likely to be court martialed than their white garrison-mates, and were flogged more, and more often, as well. The discrepancy must have been the product of imperial beliefs, established and refined on the plantations, about race and the most effective methods of disciplining Black people. Garrison officers, Lockley calculates, were more likely to choose alternative punishments like solitary confinement or a pay stoppage for white soldiers than Black troops, believing the lash to be the only kind of punishment that Black people understood. Military doctors presided over all whippings in the army, responsible for stepping in when they determined the languishing soldier could not take any more. But prevailing wisdom about the alleged physical robustness of Black bodies led army medics to believe that Black people could withstand more physical abuse than white people could, leading army doctors to allow floggings inflicted upon Black troops to continue for substantially longer.[94]

Perhaps in this way, corporal punishment as it was inflicted upon white and Black soldiers mirrored the racial discrepancies of colonial courtroom justice in British West Indian slave societies. As Diana Paton and Vincent Brown show, white ruling classes in the plantation Caribbean modified traditional English practices of punishment to allow for especially heinous abuse to be inflicted upon Black bodies. British officers commanding African soldiers seem to

[93] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 203-247.
[94] Lockely, *Military Medicine*, 75-76.

have made a similar adaption, if not by law, in practice.[95] Notably, other non-white soldiers too, specifically sepoys in the armies of the East India Company, were subjected to particular methods of discipline and punishment that were tailored to men of a certain "race" and caste.[96]

Ideas about punishing and controlling Black people in British Atlantic colonies organized around slavery and white supremacy had been well formulated by the time the West India Regiments were established. Plantation disciplinary regimes designed to manufacture order and obedience out of racialized bodily terror must have contributed to the standards of corporal punishment in a corps of enslaved or formerly enslaved Black soldiers originally raised in the slave societies of the British Caribbean. As Dawn Harris has demonstrated, particular methods of (and white obsessions with) punishing the Black body that were refined on plantations extended far beyond the sugar estates, persisting as a means of ordering and disciplining Black people and enforcing white supremacist socio-racial hierarchies in various colonial spaces.[97] Tropical Atlantic garrisons, especially those in rigid plantation societies controlled by white proprietors who demanded that Black people be put and kept "in the right place," were domains in which British officials wanted to clarify and impose racial order alongside military order.[98] Ultimately, much remains ambiguous about the relationship between race and corporal punishment in the nineteenth-century British military, as brutish physical torment certainly transcended nationality and skin color.[99] But still, it is difficult to imagine that the West India Regiment officers who

[95] Diana Paton, "Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 4 (2001): 923-954; Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 139-140.
[96] Douglas M. Peers, "Sepoys, Soldiers and the Lash: Race, Caste and Army Discipline in India, 1820-1850," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23, no. 2 (1995): 211-247.
[97] Harris, *Punishing the Black Body*.
[98] Lambert, "'[A] Mere Cloak,'" 635.
[99] The answer to this question might actually become clearer later on. The Army Discipline and Regulation Act abolished corporal punishment in the British army in 1881. But African soldiers serving in British-African colonial forces like, the Sierra Leone Frontier Force or the Gold Coast Constabulary, or later, the West African Frontier Force or the King's African Rifles (British East Africa) continued to endure flogging and various other physical punishments that would never have been permitted against white soldiers. Killingray, "The 'Rod of Empire.'"

dictated the punishments of African soldiers were not influenced by the white supremacist fabric of the imperial Atlantic world and the various long-standing convictions about the right way to punish Black people.

For accused soldiers, the frightening sagas of army punishment began days before they were stripped and tied up on the parade ground. Defendants first faced the military court. The vast majority of soldiers across the British empire were brought before a Regimental Court Martial, a comparatively informal court composed of a rotating cast of five commissioned officers. The regimental courts were subject to only the vaguest of regulations and minimal oversight, scenes of free-wheeling retribution and the often-vindictive judgments of whichever white officers were present and available on the day. The courts followed no precedent, as sentences for the same or similar crimes were wildly inconsistent and often failed to identify any specific rule that had been broken. Unanimity was not necessary for conviction; a simple majority of three of five officers could sentence a man to a life-threatening flogging or multiple weeks in solitary confinement.[100] Regimental courts offered the accused the opportunity to submit a plea and present a case for exoneration. But lacking any sort of council, and, often in the case of West India Regiment soldiers, sufficient English language skills, mounting a defense could be an impossible task. And even those equipped to argue must have felt uncomfortable challenging the officers to whom they had been trained, by threat of physical punishment, to show absolute deference and obedience.[101]

Enclosed with the records of half-yearly regimental inspections are the returns of the courts martial and punishments endured by West India Regiment soldiers over the preceding

[100] G.A. Steppler, "British Military Law, Discipline, and the Conduct of Regimental Courts Martial in the later Eighteenth Century," *English Historical Review* 102, no. 405 (1987): 859-886; Arthur N. Gilbert, "The Regimental Courts Martial in the Eighteenth Century British Army," *Albion* 8, no. 1 (1976): 50-66.
[101] Way, "Militarizing the Atlantic World," 351.

months before the review.[102] The commanding officer at the garrison kept a running list of the names, crimes, and punishments of every private and NCO tried in front of a regimental court and submitted that list to the senior inspecting officer during his visit. Common accusations included absence from drill, drunkenness, gambling, theft, sale of military-issued items, physical violence, and the vague-as-it-was-common charge of "unsoldierlike conduct." Over five and a half months at the Orange Grove Barracks in Trinidad, which housed most of the 1st West India in 1812, regimental courts martial heard sixty-three cases. All but eleven resulted in some form of punishment, almost always a bout with the lash. Private Joseph endured 300 strikes "For being Drunk on the Cocorite Guard." Private Marlborough was whipped the same number of times "For Theft." Private Boyle suffered 204 stripes "For unsoldierlike conduct when on Sentry." Corporal Paul was convicted of refusing to obey his sergeant's orders and for "riotous & Insolent conduct," and sentenced to receive 500 lashes. After 423 strokes, the garrison medic determined that the disgraced NCO could not take any more and ordered him untied and dragged into the military hospital.[103] Reflective of the nonchalant attitudes of British officers, the army inspector read over the return from the Orange Grove station and judged such applications of military justice to be "generally lenient and considerate."[104] Visiting the 5th West India Regiment at Fort Augusta in Jamaica around the same time, Major General Trevor Hull acknowledged that courts martial and corporal punishment were "unhappily frequent" at the station.[105] From January to June of 1812, the Black privates and NCOs at the Kingston harbor station had collectively been martialed an astounding eighty-four times with most convicted soldiers receiving a few hundred

[102] These records exist for Caribbean stations, but not for West African posts, which were not inspected regularly nor under such official circumstances.
[103] "List of Courts Martial held in His Majesty's First West India Regiment From the 4th May to the 12th October 1812," WO 27/113.
[104] Inspection Report, 1st West India Regiment, Trinidad, 1812, WO 27/113.
[105] Inspection Report, 5th West India Regiment, Jamaica, 1812, WO 27/108.

lashes. The whippings were frequent indeed. On 26 March, Private Thomas Maitland endured 300 lashes; on 28 March, Privates Anthony Dessource, John York, and Robin Hood collectively suffered 975 strokes; and on 2 April, Privates James Acomat, James Smith, and William Elliot sustained 550 lashes together, close to 2,000 total lashes handed down in the span of eight days.[106]

Charges could be maddeningly trivial too. Private Robert Gape was punished when, after an officer trotted out to the scene with a measuring stick, the court determined that the accused had ventured eight yards beyond his post while on guard duty. The soldier managed to avoid a whipping and was imprisoned instead.[107] Soldiers were also subjected to spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment beatings that went entirely unrecorded, making it impossible to grasp the extent of the physical and emotional torment meted out by military officials.[108] A captain of the 2nd West India Regiment noted that "several men have been confined by Non Commissioned Officers for Misdemeanors too trifling to be brought a Court Martial."[109] If standing a few paces beyond the sentry station was not a "trifling" offense, one has to wonder what was. Regardless, indiscriminate abuse hung constantly over the heads of West India Regiment soldiers, and just about anything could earn a man the wrath of an angry officer. Given the harsh sentences, it is not surprising that military hospital beds were constantly occupied by the victims of corporal punishment. In the two decades between 1817 and 1836, for example, some 2,216 Black soldiers were admitted to Caribbean military hospitals to recover from their floggings.[110]

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[106] "Return of Men of His Majesty's 5th West India Regiment of Foot who have been Tried by a Regimental Court Martial between the 15th of January & 12th June 1812," WO 27/108.
[107] Inspection Report, 7th West India Regiment, Curaçao, 1812, WO 27/113.
[108] Way, "Militarizing the Atlantic World," 358.
[109] 13 October 1802, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[110] Maeve Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance and the British Antislavery World System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 219. Ryan has compiled this data from the statistician Alexander M. Tulloch's 1838 *Statistical Report on the Sickness, Mortality and Invaliding among the Troops in the West Indies*.

Officers and military courts—specifically the more formal and better-regulated General Courts Martial—also exercised the power to kill. General Courts heard the most serious military crimes and were empowered to hand down far more severe punishments than the regimental courts could; juries of twelve officers dealt the most extreme lash sentences to convicted soldiers and sent numerous deserters, murderers, and mutineers to the gallows. With General Courts, there was less room for ideas about race to influence the punishments handed down; convicted capital offenders were hanged or shot regardless of skin color, or at least whipped to a bloody pulp. General Courts adjudicated their share of West India Regiment cases.[111] Private Cabino Botters of the 8th West India, for example, was tried before a General Court in Trinidad in 1806 for "robbery on the King's highway" and subsequent desertion. Botters was apprehended several weeks later and sentenced to an astounding 1,500 lashes, which matched the most severe reported sentence of any soldier in the British army. Later that year, a general court convicted Private Wixford of the 1st West India Regiment of shooting and killing his sergeant. He was sentenced to death and swiftly hanged.[112]

At the smallest, most isolated tropical stations, however, convening a general court of twelve officers was often not possible. This left the power of capital punishment in the hands of just a few present white officials, and in numerous instances, soldiers in the British army were swiftly executed on the command of a single officer. At the secluded Belize stations occupied exclusively by West India companies, for example, a couple of captains held abundant "general courts martial" for Black soldiers, some of which surely doled out capital punishment. But with

[111] General Courts Martial Registers 1796-1825, WO 90/1.
[112] 19 March, 28 September 1806, General Orders, 1st West India Regiment Headquarters, Barbados, NLJ, MS 200. The sentence of 1,500 lashes seems to have been the most severe corporal punishment ordered by a military court, and it happened often, particularly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries before the military reforms of the 1830s and 40s. Henry Marshall, *Military Miscellany: Comprehending a History of the Recruiting of the Army, Military Punishments, Etc., Etc.* (London: John Murray, 1846), 191-192.

so few officers present at the station, the judgements and sentences were not technically legal.[113]

**West African service**

Companies of West India soldiers occupied military stations in coastal West Africa too, where they lived under considerably different social structures than their comrades posted to West Indian garrisons. The British Caribbean, to be sure, was not a monolithic region. Rather, there were abundant differences between greater Kingston, greater Port of Spain, coastal Belize, and other places in which Black soldiers were frequently located. But Caribbean service was generally shaped by many of the same social dynamics—in particular by colonial slavery, the anxieties of white proprietors, and systems of racialized order that governed Britain's territories in the West Indies. In British West Africa, the social and colonial contexts were substantively different. There were no anxious planters around, for one, and concern about excessive mingling between soldiers and enslaved people didn't really apply. And in nascent British settlements on the Atlantic coast of Africa surrounded by independent African states that were often quite powerful, colonial control was simply nowhere near as tight as it was in much of the Caribbean. What did these differences mean for the West India Regiments? Source material for military life in nineteenth-century British West Africa is sparse, but we have enough to draw some conclusions about colonial service in the region, and specifically how Black soldiers' situations in African colonial settlements were similar to and different from conditions in the West Indies.

Beyond the variance in physical surroundings and geography, differences in the strength of colonial control and the power of white officials were probably the starkest divergence that West India soldiers were likely to feel upon arrival in a British West African settlement from the

[113] Brigadier-General Balfour, "Remarks on the Military part of the Settlement at Honduras," 1808, WO 1/95.

Caribbean. Britain's firmest place of hegemony on the coast where West India soldiers were stationed in substantial numbers—Freetown, Sierra Leone—was still not particularly strong, with various Mende and Temne polities beyond its borders and powerful Futa Jallon up in the highlands. African visitors passed back and forth over the porous demarcations of colonial claims. Furthermore, colonial troops also occupied miniscule outposts in spaces that were only tenuously claimed by Britain. Starting in the 1820s, for example, Black companies defended a small colonial trading town more than 100 miles up the Gambia River, completely surrounded by West African states, some of substantial political and economic power.[114] And in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, detachments stationed at Sherbro Island to the south of Freetown struggled to hold down their small fort as local communities made war around them.[115] In garrisons and outposts like these, colonial order cannot have been anywhere near as strict as it would have been in a plantation society, and Black soldiers are not likely to have been subjected to the same kind of surveillance by which white officials upheld racialized social hierarchies in the Caribbean.[116]

Even if there was less pressure from white people concerned about the armed regulars of the West India Regiments and less need to fit Black troops into the tight racial order that organized many of Britain's other tropical Atlantic colonies, the army still followed the same methods of training and drill for Black soldiers, which, as earlier sections demonstrated, were more about disciplining the men and forcing unquestioned order than teaching useful combat techniques. In colonial Bathurst in the Gambia, for example, companies of Black troops

[114] J.M. Gray, *A History of the Gambia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015 [1940]), 336.
[115] "Memo of Captain Walshe's Services on the Western Coast of Africa from October 1860 to November 1871," SML, Holwell Walshe Papers, MS 1650, box 1, folder 6.
[116] That said, this is not to assert a simple Caribbean/African divide in the social conditions under which West India soldiers lived and worked. Military service in some of the less developed and underpopulated British Caribbean colonies like Honduras, for example, probably looked and felt a lot more like some of these West African stations than garrisons in well-established colonies like Jamaica or Barbados.

proceeding through drill patterns was a common sight. One afternoon in town, the garrison chaplain watched the West India Regiments on parade and commented on the soldiers' discipline and good behavior. The troops, about one hundred West India infantry assigned to garrison the colonial trading town, displayed their weapons, uniforms, and carefully-rehearsed marching patterns. The band performed military music on drums, fifes, and bugles. Gathered onlookers took in the performance, shouting and pointing throughout the display, and expressing loud delight in the aftermath of the concluding *feu de joie*. The troops showed well that afternoon, turning up "in capital trim" and executing their maneuvers "in a manner highly creditable to themselves and officers." Their impressive performance was certainly the product of excessive drill and tight order, presumably influenced by the methods for disciplining Black soldiers that officers had previously developed in the British Caribbean. After the parade, the men retired to the garrison where they unloaded their heavy gear and changed into more comfortable fatigue dress for an afternoon of routine chores.[117]

The particulars of West African service again raise the question of what accounted for the general loyalty and good conduct of Black conscripts for the West India Regiments. In British West Africa or even the post-emancipation Caribbean, social contexts in which commanders did not have large enslaved populations to hold up as evidence of Black soldiers' favorable conditions, the explanations that officers offered about the troops feeling superior to toiling enslaved people do not suffice. The army probably still argued for an elevated status bestowed upon enlisted men, though there is little evidence that many were convinced that life in the West India Regiments was enviable. For one, the corps accepted volunteers in West Africa and elsewhere, and the reality that so few came forward is substantial proof alone that colonial army

[117] Thomas Eyre Poole, *Life, Scenery, and Customs in Sierra Leone and the Gambia* (London: Richard Bentley, 1850), II:201-202. On regimental parades as public performance, see Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, 139-165.

life was not appealing. An English visitor to Sierra Leone in 1834 claimed that a Susu resident of the British colony had scoffed when asked if he would ever consider joining the colonial military. "Soldiers … are slaves," the Susu man explained, "loaded with heavy arms and dress, shut up in the barracks as if it were the gaol, forced to march and labour against their will when the white men pleased."[118] In the post-emancipation British Caribbean too there was a sense that African colonial soldiers had become the most constrained and degraded people in the West Indies, lacking various liberties that emancipated people had gained. "Formerly, it was most true that a soldier in a black regiment was better off than a slave," opined one Trinidad resident in 1838. "[B]ut certainly a free African in the West Indies now is infinitely in a better situation than a soldier, not only in a pecuniary point of view, but in almost every other respect."[119]

Surely Black soldiers in free/apprentice labor societies like colonial Sierra Leone were aware of how others viewed their situation. And they certainly felt the unique social constraints of military life that others have described. So why did West India conscripts generally cooperate? One solution to this problem might be to think of colonial military service as a "social resurrection" through which enlisted men constructed meaningful interpersonal bonds with others thrust into the same situation. Some historians of the African diaspora have argued that this concept articulates African community and identity formation in the Atlantic world, a process that defied, or at least reversed, the total severance of prior social bonds described by Orlando Patterson.[120] John Mason, in his work on Cape Colony, has demonstrated that the

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[118] F. Harrison Rankin, *The White Man's Grave: A Visit to Sierra Leone in 1834* (London: R. Bentley, 1836), II:112. The comparison between colonial soldiering and slavery was common and applied to white regiments too. See Colley, *Captives*.
[119] Edward Lanzer Joseph, *History of Trinidad* (London: A.K. Newman and Co., 1838), 262.
[120] Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1231-1249; Walter Hawthorne, "'Being now, as it were, one family': Shipmate bonding on the slave vessel *Emilia*, in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the Atlantic world," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45, no. 1 (2008): 53-77.

"resurrection" concept can apply to displaced people living in colonial societies on the African continent too.[121] It is possible that the West India Regiments offered Black soldiers a unique sense of belonging and a military identity that effectively reconstructed a social world around them. Allen Isaacman and Derek Peterson, for example, have argued that emancipated Chikunda soldiers in Southern Africa embraced a military identity that facilitated a resurrection after enslavement.[122] Formulating a collective identity in the West India Regiments could not have been easy, given language barriers and other challenges. But the visual appearance of the uniform and the particular kind of work that soldiers carried out certainly made it so that Black troops could not blend in with non-military folks. Rather, they stuck out, and these distinctions alone probably went a long way in building a regimental/military identity.[123] To be sure, all of this applies to Black soldiers stationed in the British Caribbean too. The argument here is not that West India troops stationed in Africa necessarily had different motivations for sticking with the corps, but rather that thinking about Black soldiers who were *not* stationed in rigid Caribbean slave colonies necessitates further consideration about what kept African conscripts in the army for the long term.

It is, however, also essential to note that many West India conscripts did not cooperate and instead rejected military life, especially those serving in British West Africa. In Sierra Leone, army officers complained about "frequent desertions"—sometimes as many as a dozen in a single night—to the colonial governor, who urged the Liberated African Department to send

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See also, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[121] John Edwin Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).

[122] Allen Isaacman and Derek Peterson, "Making the Chikunda: Military Slavery and Ethnicity in Southern Africa, 1750-1900," in *Arming Slaves*, ed. Brown and Morgan, 104-105.

[123] Military historians have certainly made this argument for white soldiers in the British army. See French, *Military Identities*; Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*. The obvious differences between Black and white regiments do not necessarily mean that this concept is inapplicable to West India soldiers.

more recruits to offset the issue.[124] The problem was substantial enough that British officials advertised a bounty of five shillings to anyone who apprehended a West India Regiment (or Royal African Corps) deserter and returned them to army headquarters at Fort Thornton.[125] The paucity of sources makes it difficult to compare, but these anecdotal references suggest that Black conscripts fled West African stations more often than they fled Caribbean garrisons. And this would make sense. Given the general differences in geography and comparative levels of colonial control, it was far less difficult for a soldier to disappear into the vast interior from a British settlement in West Africa than it was to flee a colonial station in Jamaica or Trinidad, for example, where Black runaways had fewer places to hide out.[126]

Soldiers who stuck around West African garrisons were subjected to the same kinds of fatigue labor assignments as any other regular in the West India Regiments. In other words, most of the particulars of military routine were the same regardless of location. One afternoon in Sierra Leone in the 1840s, for example, officers at Fort Thornton had a group of soldiers disassembling old congreve rockets out in the yard by the barracks and the military hospital. The troops, dressed in their fatigue whites, were gently crushing the long, heavy artillery pieces, pulling them apart, and casting the scraps aside. But suddenly, one of the men struck a dormant rocket hard enough to cause a spark. The piece exploded, and instantly ignited the rest of the pile of munitions in an enormous blast that shook the military buildings and the government house nearby and rained little fragments of sheet iron all over the ground. At least a couple of the rockets, so witnesses claimed, launched high into the air, clearing Freetown altogether and

[124] Dixon Denham to Lumley, 30 September 1827, SLPA, Liberated African Department Letter Book 1827-1828; Dixon Denham to Robert William Hay, 14 May 1828, CO 267/94.
[125] Cleugh to Campbell, 26 June 1827, Liberated African Department Letter Book 1827-1828, SLPA. The statement also emphasizes the frequency of desertion. “The General Superintendent also desires that you still charge your constables to be on the alert for the apprehension of deserters as within the last two months the Royal African Corps as well as the recruiting companies of the West India Regts have lost an unusual number of men to desertion.”
[126] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 226-227.

landing in the ocean. A crowd of curious townspeople hurried up the hill to the garrison to find smoldering pieces of detonated artillery and several charred and mangled bodies. All of the soldiers in the immediate vicinity of the accident were killed by the explosion, at least eleven in total according to the garrison chaplain. Some had perished on the spot, and several others expired over the following hours after their upset comrades had run them across the yard to the hospital. A few days later, the garrison held a funeral for the men. Grieving soldiers, to somber music played by the military drummers and fifers, marched a "long chain of bodies" to a nearby churchyard for a group interment. Two clergymen split the job of reading last rites and supervising the burials, and the troops in attendance fired a salute as the final deceased soldier was laid to rest. Back at the garrison, the rest of the soldiers began the hard, manual work of reconstructing the structures that had been damaged by the explosion.[127]

Like dangerous fatigue work, fierce corporal punishment also defined the lives of soldiers regardless of local or social circumstance. Few records of the whippings and executions meted out to Black troops stationed in nineteenth-century British West Africa survive, beyond a few anecdotal reports. But such comments are instructive enough. At the exceedingly remote MacCarthy's Island station deep in the Senegambian interior, for example, the garrison commandant alone played judge, jury, and executioner when an African private was accused of murder in 1837. The event "occasioned considerable excitement in the colony, especially among the natives." By morning, the accused soldier's limp corpse dangled from makeshift gallows.[128]

Although the social structures of British West African settlements were substantially

[127] Poole, *Life, Scenery, and Customs*, I:262-267.
[128] William Fox, *A Brief History of the Wesleyan Missions on the Western Coast of Africa* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1851), 425-426. This event recalls the barbarous execution of a white soldier of the British Gorée Corps in Senegambia a half-century earlier. See Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, 120. Notably, the white soldier's death at the hands of the Gorée commandant was actually far more grotesque, signifying the general brutality of small colonial posts in which just one or a few officers held virtually unlimited power.

different than those which generally ordered the British Caribbean, West India soldiers' experiences of discipline and regimentation in African stations seem to have been much the same. Trace records in the archives indicate that drill regimens and punishment differed little by locale or social context. In West Africa, Black soldiers lived away from the tight order of plantation societies in the Caribbean, but it was probably in part *because* colonial order was not as well established in these spaces that officers refused to ease up their rigid rules. And of course, the same imperial beliefs about African "ferocity" and "savagery" applied in all contexts continued to shape approaches to discipline. But this is not to say that there were no differences at all. For one, the comparative lack of tight colonial control in nascent British settlements in West Africa seems to have facilitated more desertions. This indication of the army's difficulties in retaining soldiers opens the possibility that West India troops felt more comfortable refusing certain orders while they lived and worked in West Africa. But challenges posed by the archives make this difficult to confirm.

**Conclusion**

Merciless garrison rituals of drill, parade, chores, fatigue labor, and corporal punishment shaped the daily lives of West India Regiment soldiers stationed in the Atlantic tropics in the nineteenth century. The officers who commanded the corps kept the troops in constant motion and demonstrated a remarkable obsession with order and discipline that was influenced by the army's belief that "raw," "savage," "ferocious," "untutored" (all terms which army officers used) Africans required especially strict observation and management. West India regulars learned the traditional line infantry maneuvers of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British army, even though the Black troops were usually deployed as irregular skirmishers in the rough terrain

of the Caribbean and coastal West Africa. In the army, basic training taught battlefield tactics while also enforcing a strict military hierarchy in which officers gave orders and soldiers took orders. In the case of the West India Regiments, platoon maneuvers were of little practical use, and thus basic training was all about the enforcement of draconian discipline.

Officers' obsession with order manifested in myriad ways. Marching felt endless, frivolous inspections were common, and manual labor was a regular undertaking. These exercises generally structured the time of all soldiers in the British army, and in many ways, West India Regiment soldiers' experiences of discipline, forced labor, and surveillance were fairly typical for the colonial military. But there were notable divergences too. While commanders expressed some concern about overworking the white troops stationed in the Atlantic tropics, Black West India regulars endured inordinate drill and extra fatigue work, resulting in certain adaptations to the standard military schedule for Black soldiers. And while grotesque corporal punishment absolutely transcended racial boundaries in the British army, courts martial records, as well as the recorded attitudes of white officers commanding African soldiers, suggest that West India regulars frequently experienced bodily punishment that was modified and intensified to hurt Black bodies and correct Black soldiers most effectively.

Days and nights in British tropical garrisons were rigid, debilitating, and painful, and the military's insistence on absolute order and discipline dictated so much of colonial soldiers' quotidian lives. But marching and manual labor still only made up part of the station experience. The next chapter will ask what kinds of things West India Regiment soldiers did when they were not raking barrack floors or trodding the parade ground with shouldered muskets.

Chapter Three

# Station Life and the World Beyond: Community, Conjugality, and Belief

On a hot Monday morning in September 1808, an irate officer halted all activities at Fort Augusta, near Kingston, Jamaica, and ordered a "very strict search" of the garrison. Hours before, the Jamaican planter Simon Taylor had lodged a complaint with Major General Hugh Lyle Carmichael at headquarters in Spanish Town, leveling the charge that three enslaved African women missing from his estate had "gone down in a Boat yesterday morning with some Soldiers of the 2nd West India Regt."[1] Taylor insisted that the troops were harboring the women at the fort and demanded their immediate return. Carmichael, commander of all British forces in Jamaica, sent his aide out to the garrison to sort things out. At Fort Augusta, the officers and NCOs swept the barracks, storage rooms, and other buildings for the wanted women. All female residents and guests at the station that day were asked to show passes and explain their business, and many of the Black soldiers were surely interrogated too. Assuming that Taylor's information was good, the troops had probably met up with the women at Sunday market in Kingston and brought them back to the fort in one of the little row boats that the army used to go into town. The incident elucidates some important aspects of everyday life in and near the garrisons occupied by West India Regiment soldiers. It demonstrates that Black regulars routinely met and associated with non-military people in the colonies in which they were stationed; it offers a rare glimpse into soldiers' relationships with women, and specifically in this case enslaved women in a strict slave society; and it clarifies that colonial troops sometimes chose to live outside of military and colonial regulations in order to shape certain aspects of their lives.

Soldiers in the West India Regiments were important members of the colonial societies in

[1] Aide-de-Camp to McLean, 12 September 1808, Carmichael Letter Book, NLJ, MS 14.

which they lived and worked. Military garrisons did not isolate soldiers, but rather they facilitated meaningful, personal interactions amongst colonial troops and between enlisted men and non-military individuals.[2] Religion and spirituality, market visits, conjugal affairs, and big events at the station all served as means through which soldiers in the West India Regiments embedded themselves within the dynamics of colonial society in the British Caribbean and coastal West Africa. Much of this was voluntary, as soldiers pursued relationships with women, discharged veterans residing locally, mutual adherents to their religions, and many others. But in other instances—colonial efforts to evangelize African conscripts, for example—Black troops found themselves more forcibly drawn into state machinations and into contact with the individuals tasked with teaching and "civilizing" them. In short, this chapter argues that the Black soldiers in the West India Regiments interacted with myriad populations of military and non-military people, and these interactions, and the varying contexts in which they occurred, shaped soldiers' lives and influenced wider colonial societies too.

Unpacking the particulars of West India soldiers' lives beyond the drill pitch and the fatigue labor site opens productive avenues through which to draw together several lines of historiography. First, historians of the African diaspora have long been interested in what facilitated community amongst people enslaved and forcibly displaced from Atlantic Africa,

[2] "Forts and their associated communities," Zachary J.M. Beier and Christopher R. DeCorse note, "were places of interaction, consolidation, and contestation." Beier and DeCorse, eds., *British Forts and Their Communities: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 2. This volume aside, few studies explore Atlantic garrisons and the diverse groups of people who occupied and visited them. For the British Caribbean, the most thorough study remains Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 325-352. David Buisseret's extensive work on Jamaican forts is another important exception, though he is more interested in architecture and physical characteristics than social life and culture. For British West Africa, research on garrisons has tended to focus on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century slave trading establishments. For an overview, see DeCorse, "Landlords and Strangers: British Forts and Their Communities in West Africa," in *British Forts*, ed. Beier and DeCorse, 206-230.

finding answers in common language, identity, and religion.[3] Second, scholars of British West Africa, especially nineteenth-century Sierra Leone, where West India soldiers were often exposed to Christian missionaries, have emphasized the extent to which the church featured in the lives of African people living under British colonial control.[4] And third, military historians have been increasingly committed to ingraining soldiers and regiments within the societies in which they lived and worked.[5] Explorations of the social and cultural lives of soldiers in the West India Regiments enrich each of these lines of inquiry by showing how Black regulars across the British Atlantic related to one another and to non-military members of colonial society.

Latter sections of this chapter analyze some of the particulars of West India soldiers' social and cultural lives, from conjugal affairs to religion and spirituality to encounters with missionaries to sports and leisure time. These discussions reveal diverse associations among

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[3] Paul E. Lovejoy, "Trans-Atlantic Transformations: The Origins and Identity of Africans in the Americas," in *The Atlantic World: Essays on Slavery, Migration, and Imagination*, 2nd edition, ed. Willem Klooster and Alfred Padula (New York: Routledge, 2018), 126-146; James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kingship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Much of this research follows, and often challenges, the classic study by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Recent scholarship has focused on specific ethnic labels and their significance in facilitating community amongst those who identified with such appellations. See, amongst many examples. Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijioke Njoku, eds., *Igbo in the Atlantic World: African Origins and Diasporic Connections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

[4] Richard Peter Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone: Re-Building Lives and Identities in Nineteenth-Century Sierra Leone* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

[5] For a summary of the "war and society" turn in military historiography, see Robert M. Citino, "Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (2007): 1070-1090. On the application of this concept to the British army in the era of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, see Kevin Linch and Matthew McCormack, eds., *Britain's Soldiers: Rethinking War and Society, 1795-1815* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014); Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann, and Jane Randall, eds., *Soldiers, Citizens, and Civilians: Experiences and Perceptions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1790-1820* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Notably, Africanist military historians have undertaken the same type of work. See Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

Black troops and between West India soldiers and others, and locate members of the Black corps within the dynamics of particular colonial societies. But before delving into these explorations, the first section describes a few of the dozens of Atlantic garrisons in which the West India Regiments were stationed. It explains why Black soldiers occupied the fortifications they did, and what kinds of surroundings shaped their experiences in British military stations.

**Pestilential locations**

Fort Augusta, the scene of the hunt for the missing enslaved women, sat on a marshy bluff just to the west of Kingston, Jamaica. An elongated stone hexagon braced by thick palmetto-log piles plunged deep into the wet sand, the garrison formed the potent tip of a tiny peninsula, surrounded by water on nearly all sides. The ominous structure boasted a whopping ninety 24-pounders, most of which pointed southward over the entrance to busy Kingston harbor. Inside the thick walls, a number of buildings stood—a magazine, cisterns, a hospital, and long rows of stores, plus soldiers' barracks and officers' quarters. Despite its intense security, the fort was a dangerous place. Tropical storms and hurricanes ripped through from time to time, collapsing structures and flinging wood panels and various untethered items through the air. In 1763, a bolt of lightning had struck the magazine and detonated 3,000 barrels of powder, killing a few hundred military personnel and leaving a crater twenty feet deep that quickly filled in with sand and salty seawater. The garrison was a sickly place too. Constructed on the narrow swampland known as Mosquito Point, Fort Augusta was Jamaica's "most pestilential spot, the scourge of its garrisons." The evidence was not far away. Outside the fort's west-facing wall, grave markers filled in the space between the trees to form a crowded necropolis populated by the decomposing

bodies of soldiers and sailors who had died of tropical fevers.[6]

**Fort Augusta's Peninsula, Kingston Harbor, 1826**

*Source: P/1057, National Library of Jamaica, Kingston.*
While the old cemetery is its focus, the watercolor depicts the garrison as a place of frequent visitation too. Note the numerous sailboats and little row boats in the harbor, and several women approaching the fort on foot with baskets on their heads.

In the nineteenth century, Fort Augusta was often occupied by the African soldiers of the West India Regiments. British commanders generally chose the most heinous, sickly locations to be garrisoned by Black regulars, men whom military and colonial officials widely believed to be naturally comfortable in buggy swampland and resistant to the "miasmas" that decimated white soldiers stationed in such locales.[7] Fort Augusta was not the only spot. The army scattered West

[6] David Buisseret, *The Fortifications of Jamaica: The Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture, April 2008* (Kingston: Department of History and Archaeology, University of the West Indies, 2008), 10; Buisseret, *The Fortifications of Kingston, 1655-1914* (Kingston: Bolivar Press, 1971), 29-33.
[7] Tim Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race: Life and Death in the West India Regiments, 1795-1874* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

India companies across numerous damp tropical fortifications in the Caribbean and coastal West Africa. The Black troops occupied many of these garrisons on their own, saving white soldiers from the wettest lowland stations so detrimental to their health.

This section analyzes patterns in the stationing of the Black corps, first in the British Caribbean, and later in a few specific West African colonial settlements too. It explains where West India soldiers were most likely to be located and why the army chose certain garrisons for Black companies. It also depicts some of the particular surroundings—urban centers, small trading towns, and remote plantations—that, as latter sections of this chapter will show, shaped soldiers' experiences and impacted the ways in which they interacted with outsiders. Many of the fortifications occupied by the West India Regiments, this section will show, were close to populous cities—like Fort Augusta, a short paddle to Kingston—while others were supremely isolated. But in most instances, Black soldiers and the stations they occupied were intertwined with the world outside the garrison.

Tim Lockley, in *Military Medicine and the Making of Race*, shows that white European mortality in the Atlantic tropics was an essential factor in dictating troop assignment. The army, embracing both anecdotal and statistical evidence that Black people were substantially less vulnerable to some of the tropical maladies that ravaged white battalions, undertook a coordinated garrison reorganization in the Caribbean upon raising the West India Regiments in the late 1790s. British commanders stationed Black companies at many of the region's most unhealthy stations and removed numerous white regiments to higher ground where they would escape some the bugs and enjoy fresher air.[8] Here officers acted in direct response to prevailing

[8] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 84-91. On disease and eighteenth-century British expeditions in the West Indies, see Maria Alessandra Bollettino, "'Of equal or of more service': black soldiers and the British Empire in the mid-eighteenth-century Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 3 (2017): 510-533; Erica Charters, "Making bodies modern: race, medicine and the colonial soldier in the mid-eighteenth century," *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, nos. 3-4

contemporary theories about the destructive effect of putrid air, warmed by the tropical heat, on "unseasoned" people's bodies.[9] Soon after, British officials imported these ideas to the coast of West Africa too, as tropical disease necessitated a reliance upon African colonial forces like the West India Regiments to defend colonial settlements in Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and elsewhere as Britain worked to expand its territorial claims on the continent.[10]

From the seventeenth century forward, the British empire—and particularly India and the West Indies—was a place for medical experimentation and observation. Doctors explored and tested new drugs on colonized peoples, and developed consequential theories about the relationship between race, environment, and disease.[11] The afflictions of the tropics were under steady scrutiny, and physicians and other imperial observers quickly grasped that certain illnesses massacred Europeans but seemed not to bother South Asians, Africans, and Black West Indians. Yellow fever was the main killer of white Europeans in the eighteenth-century Caribbean. In tropical Atlantic plantation colonies, white officials noted that enslaved Africans generally managed to avoid critical bouts of the illness.[12] And the British army compiled its own

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(2012): 214-231; J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 137-191; Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 272-322; David Geggus, "Yellow Fever in the 1790s: the British army in occupied Saint Domingue," *Medical History* 23 (1979): 38-58.

[9] Michael Joseph, "Military Officers, Tropical Medicine, and Racial Thought in the Formation of the West India Regiments, 1793-1802," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 72, no. 2 (2016): 147.

[10] John Rankin, *Healing the African Body: British Medicine in Tropical Africa, 1800-1860* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2015), 135.

[11] Mark Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1660-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1600-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Arnold, ed., *Warm Climates and Western Medicine: The Emergence of Tropical Medicine, 1500-1900* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996); Geoffrey R. Hudson, ed., *British Military and Naval Medicine, 1600-1830* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); Suman Seth, *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Toward the end of the nineteenth century and accompanying the rise of formal imperialism in Africa, "tropical medicine" emerged as a legitimate, international subfield of research and medical scholarship. See Deborah J. Neill, *Networks in Tropical Medicine: Internationalism, Colonialism, and the Rise of a Medical Specialty, 1890-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

[12] Justin Roberts, "'Corruption of the Air': Yellow Fever and Malaria in the Rise of English Caribbean Slavery," *Early American Studies* 20, no. 4 (2022): 653-672.

comparative reports of sickness and mortality that pointed toward the same conclusion.[13] People of African descent, Mariola Espinosa succinctly clarifies, did not have innate immunity to yellow fever as some scholars have suggested, but rather they acquired resistance through childhood exposure to the illness.[14] Regardless, the military had decades of data supporting Black people's ability to withstand tropical fevers which they promptly put into practice, and began the process of turning the sickliest stations over to soldiers of the West India Regiments.

The British army's decision to station Black companies in swampy locales did mean that many West India soldiers would be largely disconnected from surrounding communities. At the Cabrits Garrison at Prince Rupert's Head in northwestern Dominica, several companies of the nascent 8th West India Regiment quickly supplanted white regulars in the late 1790s.[15] Set on a small peninsular headland that jutted out into the sea, the guns at Prince Rupert's Head pointed in three directions. The station was separated from the mainland by a thick, noxious swamp which had long caused excessive illness amongst white regiments. When the 8th West India arrived, the white soldiers moved to a fort up in the hills at Morne Bruce overlooking Roseau at the southern end of the island. The white regiments at the upland garrison did not live in luxury, but they enjoyed fresh air and a warm sea breeze while the Black troops up north swatted mosquitoes. Several decades later, the military physician John Davy confirmed that "none but black troops" had been stationed at Cabrits in years.[16] A similar dynamic unfolded across the various fortresses that guarded Saint George's, Grenada. White soldiers moved up to the elevated inland forts in

[13] Charters, "Making bodies modern."
[14] Mariola Espinosa, "The Question of Racial Immunity to Yellow Fever in History and Historiography," *Social Science History* 38, nos. 3/4 (2014): 437-453.
[15] Henry Dundas to Cornelius Cuyler, 10 January 1798, WO 1/86. On army life at Cabrits, see Zachary J.M. Beier, "All the King's Men: Slavery and Soldiering at the Cabrits Garrison, Dominica (1763-1854)," (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 2017).
[16] John Davy, *The West Indies, before and since Slave Emancipation, comprising the Windward and Leeward Islands' Military Command* (London: W. & F. G. Cash, 1854), 497.

Richmond Heights while West India companies took over the lowland garrison on the swampy bluff below. Civil and military officials had long called its location Hospital Hill.[17] In Trinidad, Black soldiers moved in after white troops had been suffering at the Orange Grove Barracks near Port of Spain. The garrison sat at the edge of the Caroni swampland south of town. One British observer was disgusted to see that the army had constructed a fort there at all; "as if no other spot could be found than that inhospitable one within ten miles round," he scoffed. "He who ordered them to be erected on this unhealthy site, did not consider how many it would *murder*!"[18]

West India regulars, to be sure, were often ill in the lowland stations. While African soldiers did generally avoid critical bouts of yellow fever and malaria, numerous maladies still tormented the men. Rheumatism was especially common amongst the Black troops, as were other medical issues like vertigo, palsy, irritable gut, dysentery, and ulcers.[19] Lung diseases in particular claimed the lives of numerous West India Regiment soldiers, and military medics puzzled over the apparently disproportionate effect of phthisis, pneumonia, and other pulmonary disorders on people of African descent.[20] Many soldiers suffered repeated attacks of disease, moving in and out of military convalescent wards. Only when chronic ill-health rendered the men unuseful to the army did some manage a discharge and release.

Like Fort Augusta, Cabrits, and many other garrisons, the military outposts at British Honduras rose out of coastal swampland. A couple of harbor-facing battery mounts formed the lonely station on the Central American main, which had developed a sinister reputation as one of the most miserable of all tropical postings. Most everything was lacking at the garrison, occupied

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[17] Frederick William Naylor Bayley, *Four Years' Residence in the West Indies during the Years 1826, 7, 8, and 9. By the Son of a Military Officer* (London: William Kidd, 1833), 455-456.
[18] Pierre F. M'Callum, *Travels in Trinidad during the Months of February, March, and April, 1805, in a Series of Letters, addressed to a Member of the Imperial Parliament of Great Britain* (Liverpool: W. Jones, 1805), 23. Emphasis in original.
[19] Royal Hospital Chelsea Soldiers Service Documents, West India Regiments, WO 97/1155-1162.
[20] Lockley, *Military Medicine*, 120-122.

by hundreds of soldiers of the 5th and 6th West India Regiments in the early nineteenth century. Necessaries sent from Europe to the Caribbean often did not make the last leg to the Bay of Honduras. The arms and accoutrements that did arrive at the station were mostly the refuse of other corps, a mishmash of muskets and other supplies bearing the insignia of various British regiments and militias, and even the armies of the East India Company. Few of the firelocks were in safe, workable condition; most had been set aside as either "reparable" or "unserviceable." Many lay in rusting heaps alongside piles of detached bayonets and ramrods on the wet floor of the storage room. Fatigue companies lacked axes and other tools; the regimental band had no bugles and only a few old drums. Soldiers lived amongst larvae, sandflies, and mosquitos, their huts often completely washed out by high, standing seawater. At night they dozed in ripped, fraying hammocks that dangled them precariously over the soggy sand and grass below. The army had been promising to build barracks for years, and even earmarked a piece of land "on a tolerable ridge," but never bothered to make such an investment. After a while the Barrack Master gave up and resigned, his appointment being "perfectly useless" anyway.[21]

But despite the relative isolation of many of these stations, the soldiers who occupied them were not cut off from the world outside. Frequent visitors to and trips from the garrison, rather, connected the troops with diverse groups of people. For one, all fortifications required a steady stream of visitors. Black soldiers helped to receive incoming goods and made acquaintance with some of the traders who made regular stops at the fort. In Trinidad, for example, local producers fulfilled the army's demands for 100 large plantains and 100 pounds of yams to be delivered on schedule to the 1st West India Regiment at the Orange Grove Barracks.

[21] "Return of the Arms of the 5th W. India Regiment of Foot, Belize," 1808, WO 1/95; Brigadier-General Balfour, "Remarks on the Military part of the Settlement at Honduras," 1808, WO 1/95; "Fifth West India Regiment Confidential Report as inspected by Brig. Gen. Balfour at Belize, Honduras Bay," 21 November 1808, WO 1/95.

The hefty orders made for a steady trail of creaky wagons to and from the station.[22] Soldiers went out for supplies too, sometimes to a local market to buy produce for their companies and other times to forage through the trees and brush around the garrison. On Sundays at Fort Augusta, small groups of soldiers took the "Market Boat" to Kingston to purchase provisions and supplies for their officers and comrades, and at the Belize stations, officers would often "send their men for plantains, etc."[23] As later sections will show, the forts on the Caribbean coast of Honduras backed up to a couple of plantations, and the troops often associated with the enslaved women and men who lived there. Black soldiers sent or allowed to go into town milled about with traders and artisans, market women, circum-Atlantic sailors, and soldiers from other stations. Market trips must have been crucial means of connecting soldiers with the world. As Ada Ferrer has shown, Atlantic port towns were crucial sites of inter-colonial communication and exchanges of important information.[24] On countless occasions, Black soldiers must have returned to the garrison to share with their comrades news and rumors that could be both exciting and troubling. Perhaps whispers of an upcoming military expedition left soldiers anxiously wondering if they were about to be deployed or reassigned. Perhaps the revelation of a deadly mutiny in another regiment triggered feelings of allure and temptation, as well as concerns about wider retribution and a tightening of discipline.

Black regulars, though, were not strictly confined to isolated stations like Cabrits or the Belizean posts. Gargantuan urban garrisons like Fort Charlotte in Nassau or Saint Ann's in Barbados hosted multiple regiments of white and Black troops at once, bringing West India

[22] *Port of Spain Gazette*, 22 August 1829.
[23] 14 November 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203; 5 December 1802, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[24] Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 44-82.

soldiers into close, frequent contact with other military personnel and local townspeople and visitors too. The Saint Ann's station itself may as well have been a suburb of the colonial capital, "almost a continuation of a street of wooden houses, all the way from Bridgetown."[25] Soldiers stationed at the urban fort trod the sprawling parade ground, often with locals looking on, and wandered the streets of Bridgetown while off duty.[26]

**West India Soldiers Making Camp Near Fort Charlotte, Nassau, c. 1860**

*Source: GEN MSS 887, folder 38, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

Throughout the era of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, the West India Regiments occupied Caribbean fortifications exclusively. But in the years after Britain made peace with France in 1814, the War Office made the Black corps into a transatlantic garrison force with assignments on both sides of the ocean. Pared-down peacetime regiments continued to occupy various Caribbean stations, but they also, beginning in 1819 when five companies of the 2nd

[25] Jerome S. Handler, ed., "'Memoirs of an Old Army Officer': Richard A. Wyvill's Visits to Barbados in 1796 and 1806-7," *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 35 (1975): 22.
[26] *Weekly Times*, 18 November 1853.

West India voyaged from Jamaica to Freetown on orders from London, developed into omnipresent defenders of British settlements in nineteenth-century West Africa.[27] In previous years, soldiers of the Royal African Corps—a white convict regiment, though it recruited African soldiers locally too—had been annihilated by yellow fever and malaria.[28] The army, as they had done in the Caribbean, relied upon the Black soldiers of the West India Regiments to occupy garrisons in which white troops were likely to die of disease. In coastal British West Africa, though, all garrisons qualified as threatening to white lives. West India soldiers were thus scattered around various urban centers and trading towns as Britain extended its territorial claims in the region.[29] Notably, the Royal Navy, not the army, was Britain's main military presence along the coast.[30] But still, land forces were important for supporting the navy's work and for occupying and reinforcing colonial settlements.

Sierra Leone generally served as Britain's main military base in West Africa, a Crown colony since 1808 from which Royal Navy officers policed the coast for slave ships to capture and repossess.[31] Soldiers stationed in the colony occupied Fort Thornton on Tower Hill overlooking Freetown and the harbor. The garrison was not old, especially compared to many of the fortifications of the West Indies. It had stood since the 1790s, constructed in the early days of the Sierra Leone Company's attempt to establish a colony on the peninsula. The fort's longest

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[27] Charles MacCarthy to Henry Torrens, 2 June 1819, CO 267/50.
[28] Mortality records for the year 1812 reveal that 174 of 347 troops stationed in Senegal (Saint-Louis) perished, as did 116 of 260 soldiers at Gorée and forty of 304 at Freetown. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, 122; Philip D. Curtin, *Disease and Empire: The Health of European Troops in the Conquest of Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.
[29] The transition was gradual, and white soldiers continued to serve on the coast in the Royal African Corps and at least to some extent in its successor, the Royal African Colonial Corps. In the mid 1820s, one colonial official reported 480 white and 820 "native" soldiers in Sierra Leone. By the early 1830s, hardly any white soldiers garrisoned the colony. R.R. Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire: Volume I, West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 157, 184-185.
[30] See, amongst various titles, Mary Wills, *Envoys of Abolition: British Naval Officers and the Campaign Against the Slave Trade in West Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).
[31] Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*; Paul Mmegha Mbaeyi, *British Military and Naval Forces in West African History, 1807-1874* (London: NOK Publishers, 1978).

wall faced the harbor, and two tall bastions stood on either side. Inside was the Government House, various small colonial buildings, and the ramshackle army barracks. The station suffered from limited upkeep, its wooden walls and beams rotting in the moist climate.[32] Officers of the Royal African Corps had long complained about the Freetown garrison. Indeed, the ugly state of accommodations in Sierra Leone led military and colonial officials to argue, as they had done before for the Caribbean, that Black soldiers were the only men who could inhabit such derelict quarters. Testifying before Parliament, a British merchant who had spent over two decades in Sierra Leone commented that the barracks had "damp running down the walls," and assured the committee that the accommodations were no place for white troops.[33]

Fort Thornton was well integrated with urban Freetown, and many of its soldiers lived at the outer edges of the city, as the garrison was not large enough to accommodate everyone. "Suburban huts" occupied by the troops spilled down the hill and congregated at its base in "long rows" that formed a small community aptly called Soldier Town.[34] Hundreds of Black soldiers lived in the little military village, many with wives and children too.[35] Their day-to-day experiences there are difficult but important to uncover, and they raise interesting questions about community and familial life that will be taken up in the next section. Proximity to the city offered opportunities to socialize during down time. Freetown-based soldiers, the garrison chaplain noted, routinely killed time in the presence of "sailors, merchants and clerks, half-

[32] For a detailed description of the fort, see Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, 65, 121-122. See also J.J. Crooks, ed., *Historical Records of the Royal African Corps* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1925), 52, 75.
[33] Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *1830 (661) Report from the Select Committee on the Settlements of Sierra Leone and Fernando Po*, 58-59.
[34] F. Harrison Rankin, *The White Man's Grave: A Visit to Sierra Leone in 1834* (London: R. Bentley, 1836): I:66; Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 119.
[35] *West African Sketches: Compiled from the Reports of Sir G.R. Collier, Sir Charles MacCarthy, and Other Official Source* (London: L.B. Seeley and Son, 1824), 185.

dressed Kroomen and unclothed children, chattering women and wrangling boatmen."[36]

Northward up the coast, at the mouth of the Gambia River, soldiers of the West India Regiments (and the Royal African Corps too when it was active) defended the burgeoning colonial trading center of Bathurst at the rivermouth, established in 1816 after Sierra Leone governor Charles MacCarthy annexed a sandy bluff which colonial settlers called Saint Mary's Island. Bathurst quickly swelled to incorporate European and African coastal traders, apprenticed laborers, colonial officials, and soldiers. The urban garrison was the center of command along the river. The troops developed Bathurst's Soldier Town enclave and manned a reasonably well-maintained station. Soldiers occupied barracks made of white stone with a roomy piazza. Accommodations were limited, though, and, as at many other stations, the troops required makeshift huts and other structures to contain them all. When a fresh detachment of 112 soldiers of the 2nd West India arrived to boost the Gambia military establishment, for example, not all could fit in the barracks, leaving a few dozen men to sleep in a "large tent." But powerful winds routinely unmoored the overflow accommodations, and officers decided before long that they had no choice but to overpack the living quarters.[37] On the opposite side of the river stood Fort Bullen. The north-bank garrison developed over time into an expansive and robust structure with guns pointing southward over the rivermouth and west toward the ocean from behind a rounded parapet, the ruins of which still stand. But Britain apparently never invested in much beyond a sturdy stone facade. The men posted to the fort, usually only a few dozen soldiers and an officer or two, lived in mud huts that spilled into the merchant-settler village that was developing in the shadow of the garrison.[38]

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[36] Thomas Eyre Poole, *Life, Scenery, and Customs in Sierra Leone and the Gambia* (London: R. Bentley, 1850), I:12.
[37] 13 April 1844, General Orders, Sierra Leone, WO 28/290.
[38] J.M. Gray, *A History of the Gambia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015 [1940]), 348.

While Freetown and Bathurst were quite crowded commercial centers, other West African stations occupied by the Black corps were exceedingly remote. Companies primarily stationed at Bathurst rotated between the urban garrison and a desolate little outpost a few days' sail up the Gambia River. At MacCarthy's Island, claimed by Britain as an interior trading post which would link the coast to bustling Sahelian markets, soldiers occupied a small mud fastness called Fort George. The garrison was widely regarded as the worst in West Africa, and the most isolated too. With the exception of the garrison commandant, white soldiers were almost never stationed in such a place.[39] One high-ranking officer of the 1st West India Regiment called it "a lonely and desolate station … cut off from all society, plunged in the depths of an African wilderness."[40] The elements made it worse. For several months of the year, the river washed out much of the island, leaving soldiers to slosh about through the mud and wet grass. On the far end of the island, an additional post had been constructed at Fatota, low land that was ever-inundated by standing water and mosquitoes. A paltry guard hut sat partially submerged, from where the troops were to keep an eye on the "natives," alert for any disturbances in the surrounding country.[41] But it was far too small, leaving men to billet with Fatota villagers when they could.[42] Despite the legitimate complaints of isolation forwarded by the officer, the troops were not alone at MacCarthy's. Merchants cycled in and out of the town of Saint George and constructed stone stores to hold goods. Wesleyan missionaries opened a station, and both European and African catechists preached to locals. Liberated Africans released from slave ships (like most of those

[39] Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, 324.
[40] Captain Luke Smyth O'Connor, "Twelve Months' Service in Western Africa," *United Service Journal* (1846), part I, 218.
[41] Such concern was not unfounded, as upriver states did engage in frequent conflict throughout much of the nineteenth century. Of course, in the event of an attack, there would have been little that the micro-detachment at Fatota could do. See Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 165-176.
[42] Poole, *Life, Scenery, and Customs*, II:137-139.

conscripted for the West India Regiments in the decades after 1808) were sent to labor as apprentices in the tiny, developing colonial settlement, and groups of discharged Black soldiers of the Regiments and the Royal African Corps were induced to retire to MacCarthy's Island in exchange for grants of (unproductive) farmland.[43] Little evidence of West India soldiers' relationships with these other groups of settlers and visitors survives in the archives, but it is likely, given what we know about other isolated British Atlantic garrisons, that Black troops found ways to engage with these outsiders.

It is essential to recognize that colonial garrisons—despite the sheer isolation of some and the image of many as closed spaces detached from the world outside—cannot be divorced from the wider societies in which they were located. The walls of potent fortifications, whether thick stone or imaginary boundaries in wet sand, were remarkably porous.[44] The remainder of this chapter explores West India Regiment soldiers' social and cultural interactions with others, both inside their assigned stations and beyond. Relationships between Black colonial troops and Caribbean and African women reveal particular associations amongst soldiers and civilians while also clarifying the role of women within the military garrison. African soldiers' participation in spiritual activities like Islam and Obeah points to a diversity of cultural practices in British forts and beyond and locates the West India Regiments within wider processes of community formation in the African diaspora. And the troops' encounters with Christian missionaries reveal that many West India regulars were subjected to imperial evangelization programs and that some found community through Christianity. Probing African troops' associations with the mission

[43] Kyle Prochnow, "'Perpetual Expatriation': Forced Migration and Liberated African Apprenticeship in the Gambia," in *Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807-1896*, ed. Richard Anderson and Henry B. Lovejoy (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2020), 347-364; Gray, *History of the Gambia*, 337.
[44] Guido Pezzarossi, "Porous Walls and Possessive Structures: British Forts and Networks of the Early Modern World," in *British Forts and their Communities*, ed. Beier and DeCorse, 285-301.

suggests additional understandings of West India soldiers' relationships with each other and with British colonialism.

**Military marriage and conjugal affairs**

Opportunities to leave the garrison unsupervised were a key means by which soldiers interacted with non-military individuals. They also carried some perks. One of the most appealing to West India soldiers must have been the chance to meet, associate, and develop relationships with African and West Indian women. As Sarah Zimmerman has shown, explorations of soldiers' conjugality and military marriage can unlock deeper understandings of both men's and women's experiences of empire and places within colonial society.[45] In the case of the West India Regiments, thinking about these kinds of encounters provides new perspectives on slavery and social order, women and the British army, and soldier-civilian power dynamics.

West India soldiers' conjugal encounters generally took the form of intermittent sexual liaisons. The army encouraged celibacy from all unmarried troops, though most officers accepted that soldiers would engage in sexual activities on their own time and tolerated those encounters so long as they did not create other problems around the station.[46] But such relationships did often bring trouble for the West India Regiments. Soldiers stationed in the pre-emancipation British Caribbean, as the vignette that opened this chapter illustrated, sometimes harbored enslaved women in the garrisons, a practice which could bring furious planters out to military stations to demand that the women be returned. The army did try to crack down on conjugal

[45] Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).
[46] Jennine Hurl-Eamon, *Marriage and the British Army in the Long Eighteenth Century: 'The Girl I Left Behind Me'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Myna Trustram, *Women of the Regiment: Marriage and the Victorian Army* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 125.

visits to the garrisons. Officers in Jamaica threatened to send to the nearest workhouse any enslaved women caught without a pass at the Fort Augusta station.[47] They punished soldiers harshly too. More than a few regimental courts martial and subsequent public whippings involved soldiers who had been caught sneaking around with unregistered female guests. First West India Regiment Private Joseph Derby, for example, was flogged for concealing three women in the garrison. And Corporal Coffee was court martialed after he was caught trying to smuggle a female partner along as a stowaway when the 4th West India departed Barbados on an expedition to recapture Martinique.[48]

Black troops quartered in the Caribbean, especially in the more rural stations, were often caught probing plantations for enslaved women. Soldiers sometimes snuck off for the night, leaving and returning in secret with their officers never the wiser. On other occasions, regulars went AWOL for days or weeks at a time, and extended stays with conjugal partners likely accounted for some of those disappearances. Sir William Young, the wealthy planter, governor, and MP, reported that his overseers "frequently" turned up West India Regiment soldiers on his estates.[49] White proprietors, of course, did not want the troops around, fearing that this "connexion [sic] and common cause with armed men … might not be safe." Indeed, Sir Young's mind leapt to the violent collapse of the plantation regime caused by such intimate mingling between soldiers and enslaved women. "[A] rising generation of children, born and remaining slaves, with relation to a soldier-father," he warned, "might at some time awaken feelings, and create consequences, endangering the whole colonial system." Notably, white West Indians were

[47] *The Royal Gazette* (Kingston), 20 November 1813.
[48] Markus S. Weise, "A Social History of the West India Regiments, 1795-1838," (PhD dissertation, Howard University, 2017), 100.
[49] Young owned four plantations: two in Saint Vincent, one in Antigua, and one in Tobago. E.I. Carlyle, "Young, Sir William, second baronet (1749-1815)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, Oxford University Press, 2004, accessed online October 2021.

not the only ones who were bothered by this. Enslaved men, feeling encroached upon and territorial, harbored their own healthy contempt for the interloping soldiers and the activities in which they engaged.[50] But soldiers and enslaved women did make "connections," and many of the relationships between Black troops and enslaved women were far more than impersonal one-time or occasional encounters too. One British colonial official worried in 1825 that the Black soldiers of the 2nd West India Regiment at British Honduras had become dangerously intertwined with the enslaved population, and particularly enslaved women "by whom many of them have families."[51] In Trinidad, around the same time, the governor advised against removing soldiers of the 3rd West India from the island after the War Office made the suggestion, noting that many of the troops had developed long-term relationships with local enslaved women. Such a decision could incite mutiny, he warned.[52]

Locality certainly impacted and shaped soldiers' sexual liaisons, though some speculation is required for parsing this out. At gargantuan urban fortifications like Fort Charlotte in Nassau or Saint Ann's Garrison near Bridgetown, where West India companies who had mercifully avoided dank lowland stations (if only for a time) were often posted, it was probably less difficult for soldiers to meet local women given the forts' central locations and nearness to towns and markets. The sheer size of the garrisons—with numerous storage rooms, barracks, and huts, not to mention the many hundreds of people milling about—probably made it easier to harbor female guests as well. Additionally, inns and brothels were port city staples, and soldiers with a bit of money to spend likely visited from time to time.[53] Troops stationed in more isolated

[50] Sir William Young, *The West-India Common-Place Book: compiled from Parliamentary and Official Documents; shewing the Interest of Great Britain in its Sugar Colonies* (London: Richard Philips, 1807), 214.
[51] Edward Codd to Lord Bathurst, 18 February 1825, CO 123/36.
[52] Ralph Woodford to Lord Bathurst, 5 December 1824, CO 295/63.
[53] Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus, *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 32-56.

locales, on the other hand, were perhaps more likely to go out on the prowl. The swampland on which the Honduras fort was constructed, for example, bordered a couple of plantations that soldiers had to pass through to leave the station. Local proprietors complained from time to time that Black soldiers were loitering about their properties.[54] At West African garrisons, things were different still. Away from the rigid rules of Caribbean slave society, Black soldiers likely exercised more freedom to associate with African women, and perhaps interested women felt freer to mix with troops at the garrison and in soldiers' huts too.

Some conjugal partners were probably enthusiastic about their meet-ups with West India Regiment soldiers. Many relationships clearly endured for years, with soldiers and women building families and long-term unions akin to marriage.[55] Other arrangements are more difficult to define, and in some instances the soldiers seem to have been a lot more invested than the women. On one occasion, several troops of the 2nd West India stationed in the Bahamas complained that other men had been "visiting" their female partners who lived at Grant's Town, a settlement at New Providence. The soldiers insisted that the "visitors" had been sleeping with their "wives," but, if the troops' allegations were true, perhaps the women did not see themselves as such.[56] On the other hand, many of West India soldiers' sexual liaisons were probably less than consensual. Black soldiers were authority figures in colonial society, and uneven power dynamics assuredly left many women feeling bullied into sex or pressured to run off to military stations with the troops. Some prowling soldiers were probably not handsome suitors but sexual predators instead.

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[54] 30 July 1801, Regimental Orders, West India Regiment, NLJ, MS 203.
[55] From a military perspective, these relationships would seem to fit what Myna Trustram has described as "off the strength" military marriages, unions that the army did not recognize but which cannot be dismissed as illegitimate. Trustram, *Women of the Regiment*, 50-67.
[56] Rosanne Marion Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa": Slave Trade Abolition and Free African Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 140-141.

The military did sanction some formal marriages in the West India Regiments. While not common, these military unions, and the children that they often produced, represent some of the most important and enduring relationships that soldiers could develop. Soldiers' marriages—and the presence of wives and children in the garrisons—impacted life in the Regiments in outsized ways too. At least a few military wives were present at any colonial station; white regiments carried white women married to officers and select soldiers on the strength as well. Some garrisons had "married quarters" to house soldiers and their wives, but probably most of the small, substandard stations occupied by the Black companies did not have such a space. Married couples usually shared huts instead.[57] Select soldiers—presumably only long-term veterans and NCOs would have been considered—sometimes earned permission to live outside the station with their families. In urban centers like Nassau, for example, married soldiers often lived in town with their spouses.[58]

The wives of the West India Regiments, like the soldiers themselves, often had military life forced upon them. As the first chapter showed, recruiting officers periodically selected women and girls from slave vessels upon arrival in British colonies, the same method they used to conscript young male soldiers. While some British officers saw soldiers' wives as an annoying liability and a distraction to the troops, most military personnel recognized the value they provided to the corps. The wives of the West India Regiments worked hard to keep the station running smoothly. They cooked, laundered clothing, scrubbed floors, and did various other jobs. On campaigns, military wives proved their worth as foragers, carriers, and camp-makers. Indeed, one military physician referred to the wives of the West India Regiments as "the best

[57] Bigger fortifications often reserved the ends of barrack rooms for married soldiers and their wives, separated from the open bunks and hammocks of their comrades by a canvas sheet. Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 331.
[58] William Colebrooke to the Earl of Aberdeen, 2 June 1835, CO 23/93.

inhabitant[s] of the bivouac … always serviceable and useful." Soldiers' wives also accompanied their husbands on errands and other trips outside the garrison, apparently on the insistence of the husbands. "Wherever he goes or marches, his wife must accompany him—he will not live without her," recalled the army doctor.[59] Small detachments of soldiers stationed for a period of months aboard the British warship HMS *Romney* brought "a full complement of followers, in women and children."[60] Military wives trapped inside the floating garrison were surely kept busy tending to soldiers, naval men, and British officials.

The lives of Black military wives who lived in tropical garrisons are even more opaque than those of West India Regiment soldiers. But it is abundantly clear that their experiences were difficult. Beyond the numerous manual tasks that they were expected to perform, the women of the Black corps were subjected to various abuses. As Malcolm Thompson shows for French West Africa, officers and NCOs sometimes took advantage of their status and coerced sex from the wives of soldiers, an act that infuriated and humiliated the assaulted women and their husbands too. Sexual abuse by men of rank highlighted the multiple power structures under which military wives lived, as husbands and officers both separately claimed authority over them.[61] But it would be wrong to assume that women passively accepted such treatment. While regimental records say little about the matter, military wives must have taken measures to protect themselves from officers' and soldiers' predations. Perhaps they sought protective alliances with other women of the garrison and friendly military men too. Kingston's *Royal Gazette* notes that some fled the stations altogether.[62]

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[59] William Fergusson, *Notes and Recollections of a Professional Life* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1846), 208.
[60] David Turnbull to Lord Stanley, 29 June 1842, CO 318/157.
[61] J. Malcolm Thompson, "Colonial Policy and the Family Life of Black Troops in French West Africa, 1817-1904," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no. 3 (1990): 449.
[62] Inmates in Caribbean workhouses included, on occasion, African women who had fled nearby army fortifications. *Royal Gazette* (Kingston), 15 August 1816.

Wives of West India soldiers influenced the dynamics of the Regiments in particular ways. In the Bahamas in 1816, for example, a group of African wives of the 2nd West India Regiment stationed at Fort Charlotte in Nassau demanded redress when the army paymaster withheld December salaries from their husbands to offset the cost of new flannel shirts issued to the troops. The wives lodged complaints with the customs officer and the garrison commandant and worked with their husbands to threaten a mutiny.[63] Officers and colonial officials refused to meet the demands of the soldiers and their wives and swiftly punished the rebellious troops. Regardless, the incident shows that wives of the regiment intervened in important affairs on behalf of themselves and their families, though certainly upon calculation and not without risk, when the army's actions made their lives more difficult.

**Two 1st West India Soldiers with an Unidentified Woman, Saint Lucia, c. 1860**

*Source: GEN MSS 887, folder 59, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

[63] Alexander Murray to Charles Cameron, 3 January 1816, enclosed in Cameron to Lord Bathurst, 24 January 1816, CO 23/63. Roseanne Adderley, analyzing the language of colonial sources describing this event, suggests that the soldiers' wives were so involved in this issue in part because they managed family finances. Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa,"* 140.

Military marriages meant that at least a few children occupied most stations too. Surely the responsibility of their mothers and other garrison women for large stretches of the day while the men were drilling and engaging in fatigue duties, children were demanding and sometimes the source of unwelcome problems around the station. In one instance, an annoyed officer of the 2nd West India Regiment opened his daily orders by noting that children had been wandering off to the guard posts and "interrupting" the sentries.[64] Perhaps for the bored, sequestered guards, the curious stares and fun chatterings of a toddler were a welcome distraction. But the unamused captain demanded that the married soldiers and their wives do a better job of keeping their children in line.

Children were sometimes the subject of debates within the British army. A vocal minority of officers believed that regiments could be made to replenish themselves through military marriage and childrearing, a proposal that had been debated for decades in Britain.[65] Some West India Regiment officers liked the idea a lot and pushed for the conscription of more wives and potential mothers. Brigadier General Thomas Hislop, who had helped raise the corps in the wartime Caribbean, envisioned a force that reproduced itself. "The Children would of course, be the property of Government," he specified, "and whether Male or Female, should remain constantly with the Regiment and be considered as belonging to it. Boys would be trained to arms, and become in time excellent Soldiers. The Girls, when at a proper age would be allowed to marry in the Regiment and during their younger years might be taught such employments as would make them useful to it."[66] The West India Regiments never replenished themselves. Marriage in the corps remained fairly uncommon, certainly more so than Hislop might have

[64] 30 April 1803, 2nd West India Regiment Order Book, NAM 2001/12/1.
[65] Weise, "West India Regiments," 83-84.
[66] Thomas Hislop, "Remarks on the Establishment of West India Regiments. Written in the Year 1801," enclosed in Hislop to the Duke of York, 22 July 1804, WO 1/95.

liked, and childbirth does not seem to have been a frequent occurrence. Still, military marriages did sometimes bear children who lived in the garrison under the control of the army, and at least a few African regulars and NCOs headed households within and near military stations after starting families with their wives.

West India soldiers' sexual liaisons and conjugal affairs represent some key aspects of Black regulars' social, and in some cases familial, lives. Outside colonial stations, the men engaged in casual meet-ups with local women, and in other instances developed lasting relationships and families. In the latter case, these informal unions could even discourage British officials from relocating companies to other stations or colonies. Inside the garrison, troops sometimes harbored female guests in secret, while a few fortunate veteran soldiers and NCOs were granted the privilege of a formal marriage. Military-sanctioned unions could be developed in the open, though these relationships were regulated by army officers. In any case, liaisons and conjugality in the West India Regiments created meaningful relationships for soldiers, many of which tied them to people and communities beyond the colonial station and outside the control of their officers.

**Islam and Obeah in the barracks**

Historians of the African diaspora often point to religion and spirituality as explanations for how people of African descent fashioned meaningful communities in the Americas.[67] In the West India Regiments, spiritual beliefs were at the center of numerous interactions amongst Black soldiers and between Black troops and non-military people. In this way, evidence from the

[67] Lovejoy, "Trans-Atlantic Transformations," 127-147; Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas*, 109-110; Sweet, *Recreating Africa*; John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235-271.

British army's Black battalions indicates that conscripted soldiers developed communities in diaspora in much the same way as countless other people of African descent. Furthermore, the reality that these spiritual practices—namely Islam and Obeah—were officially forbidden in the British army (and for the latter, generally forbidden across British colonial society) demonstrates some of the limitations of military officers' power or will to control the lives of West India troops. Officers occasionally noted the practice of "fetishism" amongst African soldiers in the West India Regiments, referring specifically to Islam and Obeah. Despite the illegality of such activities, there is little evidence that soldiers were punished for participating.[68] Many were presumably good at practicing in secret, and officers likely turned a blind eye sometimes as well.[69] Still, we have enough evidence to conclude that soldiers engaged in religious and spiritual practices within the walls of the colonial garrison, and also beyond. These cultural practices were important means by which African troops connected with and related to others.

Numerous West India Regiment soldiers hailed from Islamic regions of West Africa and carried their faith with them into the military. When questioned about the origins of his comrades in the 3rd West India Regiment, the retired African grenadier Mohammedu Sisei (called "Felix Ditt" in the army) noted that he shared Caribbean barracks with men from a number of Muslim states and cities, including the Senegambian jihād states of Futa Toro, Futa Jallon, and Bundu, as well as the famed Islamic centers of Jenne and Timbuktu in the western Sudan.[70] Regimental muster rolls and soldiers' service records support Mohammedu's comments, revealing significant

[68] Major A.B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), 18.
[69] Tim Stapleton, analyzing colonial military culture in British West Africa in the early twentieth century, shows that British officers generally accommodated "barracks Islam" in the garrisons, though Muslims formed a far greater proportion of soldiers in the locally-recruited regiments of colonial Nigeria and the Gold Coast than they did in the West India Regiments. Stapleton, "Barracks Islam and Command Christianity: Religion in Britain's West African Colonial Army (c.1900-1960)," *War & Society* 39, no. 1 (2020): 1-22.
[70] Captain John Washington, "Some Account of Mohammedu-Siseï, a Mandingo, of Nyáni-Marú on the Gambia," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 8 (1838): 452.

minorities of soldiers from heavily-Islamic regions. Mandinka, Fulbe, and Hausa soldiers, of which there were many, were almost certainly Muslim, as were at least some of the numerous Aku recaptives conscripted in Sierra Leone in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.[71]

Some African soldiers had recognizable Muslim names. Historians of the transatlantic slave trade have pointed out that, because Muslims often adopted appellations from the Qur'an and other pieces of Islamic literature, Arabic nomenclature can be a useful means of identifying Muslims in the African diaspora.[72] Because conscripted Africans were generally listed in military records by their army-imposed English names, this methodology can only be so helpful. But the records provide a few examples. In 1847, a young man named Arboubarcar, so the colonial scribe spelled it, was forced into one of the West India Regiments in Freetown from a slave ship captured near Ouidah, and he cannot have been the only Muslim amongst the fifty-four men conscripted from the vessel. Later that year, the army took Brimah, Fodae, and two men, both named Mammoddoo, amongst many other conscripts, from aboard a slaver brought in from the Rio Pongo.[73] Even anglicized military names occasionally provide clues about soldiers' religious identities. Private Thomas Mahomet, for example, was one of the charter recruits for the 5th West India Regiment, serving for nearly two decades after joining the corps in 1798, and Private Robert Moosa, a "Mandingo," joined the 2nd West India at Nassau, New Providence in 1837.[74]

What the expression of Islam looked like in the garrisons occupied by the West India

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[71] Description Roll, 5th West India Regiments, WO 25/656; Soldiers' Service Documents, West India Regiments, WO 97/1155-1162. On Islam and the Aku, see Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 227-259.
[72] Daniel B. Domingues da Silva, David Eltis, Nafees Khan, Philip Misevich and Olatunji Ojo, "The transatlantic Muslim diaspora to Latin America in the nineteenth century," *Colonial Latin American Review* 26, no. 4 (2017): 529-545.
[73] Liberated African Register 75357-84420, SLPA.
[74] Description Roll, 5th West India Regiment, WO 25/656, f. 17; Service Record for Private Robert Moosa, WO 97/1160. We have origins information for both soldiers. Private Moosa, unsurprisingly, is listed as "Mandingo." Mahomet's origins are quite different; regimental record-keepers list his "country" as "Bengal, Fort Madras" indicating that at least a few Muslim soldiers were men of South Asian origin. While Moosa was almost certainly a recaptive, Mahomet was probably poached off an East India Company ship in England.

Regiments is not abundantly clear. Major Alfred Burdon Ellis of the 1st West India recalled an old story of a new Muslim conscript in Sierra Leone who wore a gris-gris around his wrist and, when subjected to some teasing from skeptical comrades and officers, "drew his knife, and … plunged it into his thigh" to prove the effectiveness of the amulet. The anonymous soldier, so Major Ellis tells it, died of his infected wound.[75] It is difficult to judge the veracity of the officer's dramatic tale, but if it is rooted in truth, it suggests that some Muslim soldiers may have worn symbols of faith on their bodies. It also suggests that they were likely to be harassed for doing so, which perhaps forced some Muslim troops to practice quietly and privately.

Serving in the grenadier company of the 3rd West India along with Mohammedu Sisei were Jackson Harvey and Philip Findlay, two Muslim men from Gobir in the central Sudan who had been forced into the army, probably together, somewhere in the British Caribbean in 1809.[76] Mohammedu was reportedly conscripted two years later. Findlay served eight and a half years in the corps, released in 1818 when part of the 3rd West India was disbanded as part of the mass post-Napoleonic wars demobilizations. Harvey and Mohammedu Sisei seem to have served until the regiment's final dissolution in 1825. In the tropical fortifications of the West Indies, a shared adherence to Islam connected the three men, and probably others in the company and the wider garrison community as well. Notably, their religious bonds crossed ethnic and linguistic boundaries. While Harvey and Findlay were probably slave-shipmates, and from the same city-state of Gobir in the central Sudan, Mohammedu came from an upper Gambia River community many hundreds of miles away. As Paul Lovejoy has argued, mutual adherence to Islam often

[75] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 18.
[76] "The Humble Memorial of Philip Findlay and Jackson Harvey Natives of Africa," 19 July 1837, CO 295/119; William Oldrey to Lord Howick, 29 July 1837, CO 295/119; George Carden to Lord Howick, 27 July 1837, CO 295/119; David V. Trotman and Paul E. Lovejoy, "Community of Believers: Trinidad Muslims and the Return to Africa, 1810-1850," in *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, ed. Lovejoy (Princeton: Marcus Weiner, 2003), 219-231.

brought Africans together in the diaspora, as religious affiliation superseded ethnolinguistic identity.[77] It seems likely that Muslim soldiers in the West India Regiments did just this, gravitating to one another in the colonial garrison and wherever else they found themselves, and maintaining their shared religion as a meaningful part of their lives.

**Group of Sergeants, West India Regiments, Hythe, England, 1862**

*Source: BRA 7/14/1177, #1, Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town.*
Note Sergeant Mohamed-Doo, 1st West India Regiment, second from the right. The NCO's conspicuously long beard raises further questions about how Muslim soldiers may have chosen to express themselves while in the British army.

[77] Lovejoy, "Trans-Atlantic Transformations," 126-127; Trotman and Lovejoy, "Community of Believers."

Findlay, Harvey, and Mohammedu Sisei were mobile, as active soldiers generally were, occupying military stations in Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, and Trinidad throughout their time in the corps.[78] As they were periodically reassigned, their small Islamic soldiers' community moved as well, and in new locales they found new groups of believers with whom to connect. In Trinidad, the three grenadiers met Jonas Mohammad Bath, an enslaved Susu Muslim who was often forced to work on colonial public projects, including the construction and maintenance of Port of Spain fortifications.[79] The men, presumably along with various other Muslim associates, cultivated an Islamic community that incorporated members both inside and apart from the garrison. And years later, after the three soldiers had been released from the army and after Jonas Mohammed had purchased his freedom, the group all joined together in Port of Spain's "Mandingo society of Mahommedans," a mutual-aid group led by Bath that, amongst other things, pooled cash to emancipate other Muslims enslaved on the island.[80] The former grenadiers' specific roles in the Islamic community are not entirely clear, though Philip Findlay (who took the name Mohammed Hausa) served as an imam.[81] Notably, retired soldiers were generally made to settle on Crown lands in eastern Trinidad, expected to develop the coastal frontier as farmers and traders.[82] Perhaps because of their close relationship with Bath and other Port of Spain Muslims, Findlay, Harvey, and Mohammedu Sisei abandoned the disbanded soldier

[78] Washington, "Some Account of Mohammedu-Siseï," 450.
[79] Carl Campbell, "John Mohammed Bath and the Free Mandingos of Trinidad; The Question of their Repatriation to Africa 1831-38," *Journal of African Studies* 2, no. 4 (1975): 469.
[80] Campbell, "John Mohammed Bath." The community's styling as a "Mandingo" society requires some explanation. In this instance, as was often the case in the African diaspora, the term "Mandingo" was used more or less synonymously with Muslim, and not necessarily as an ethnic or regional identifier. See Trotman and Lovejoy, "Community of Believers." For a broad analysis of "Manding(o)" in the Atlantic world, see Sylviane Anna Diouf, "Devils or Sorcerers, Muslims or Studs: Manding in the Americas," in *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman (London: Continuum, 2004), 139-157.
[81] William Oldrey to Lord Howick, 29 July 1837, CO 295/119.
[82] David V. Trotman, "Africanizing and Creolizing the Plantation Frontier of Trinidad, 1787-1838," in *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions*, ed. Lovejoy and Trotman, 218-239. Other demobilized soldiers found themselves in British Honduras and Sierra Leone, other underdeveloped frontiers of Britain's Atlantic empire in the early nineteenth century. See the Epilogue.

villages and made for the city instead.

African soldiers engaged in an array of spiritual practices. On various occasions, West India Regiment officers reported finding parrot feathers and little bits of cut-up rags in garrison buildings. In other instances, they fielded reports of bones, shards of glass, and rotting pieces of busted calabash tucked beneath soldiers' bedsheets. Objects like these, recognizable then and now as paraphernalia for the broad collective of African shamanistic activities known as Obeah in the African diaspora, point to the presence of spiritual practitioners within the colonial garrison and open the possibility that Obeah specialists from the outside visited stations on request.[83] West India soldiers who specialized in Obeah had significant power around the garrison, and also made a good bit of pocket change in exchange for their services. One officer noted with clear condescension, "usually someone amongst them, more cunning than the rest, professed an acquaintance with the supposed diabolical ritual; and gained influence with, and extorted money from, his more timid comrades."[84]

West India soldiers would have had plenty of reason to call upon an Obeah specialist from time to time. Some physically infirm regulars probably preferred such treatment over a stay in the nasty tropical military hospital, and those suffering emotionally may also have leaned on the healing powers of practitioners. Obeah, though, could also be used to torment. Unsuspecting soldiers who found spiritual objects tucked in with their belongings could become consumed by fright, and reports of Obeah paraphernalia in regimental storage rooms suggests that white officers and other military employees were sometimes the intended targets of the dangerous

[83] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 144-152; Sasha Turner Bryson, "The Art of Power: Poison and Obeah Accusations and the Struggle for Dominance and Survival in Jamaica's Slave Society," *Caribbean Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 80-81; Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 132-156.
[84] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 16-18.

forces unleashed by the practitioners. Evidence of Obeah in Atlantic garrisons is vanishingly rare, and the extent to which it played into soldiers' lives probably can't be known. But there are traces of its use in the archive which point to the practice, perhaps occasional and perhaps frequent, of distinct Afro-Caribbean spiritual activities in potent and orderly centers of British imperial power.

In the spring of 1850, recently-retired 1st West India Regiment sergeant William Warren was brought before two magistrates in Montego Bay on charges of practicing "the dangerous and deceitful arts of obeah." Warren did not deny his post-military profession as an "obeah-man," and the low-level court handed him the most severe sentence they could—twenty-eight days in the gaol and hard labor for the duration.[85] The former soldier was arrested only a few months after his release from the army, and the timing suggests that he had not only practiced within the garrison but had also, while in the military, built a steady business serving non-military people who lived in Jamaica. Assuming that Warren had been an active practitioner in the army, his officers either didn't notice or didn't mind. He was honorably released from the corps at Up Park Camp in Kingston with a clean service record and a commanding officer vouching for his "very good" character and conduct over twenty-three years of service. A "Nango" [Yoruba] recaptive conscripted in Sierra Leone, Warren had been promoted twice—to corporal and then to sergeant—and by the time of his discharge had spent more time as a non-commissioned officer than a private.[86] As an Obeah practitioner and an NCO, William Warren was certainly an influential man amongst the African soldiers in his company and around the station. His spiritual work must have shaped many of his relationships with other soldiers, and it seems likely that he and some of his comrades gathered together from time to time to call upon spiritual forces. But

[85] *The Cornwall Chronicle and County Gazette* (Montego Bay), 21 May 1850.
[86] Service Record for Sergeant William Warren, WO 97/1162.

the practice of Obeah also linked men like William Warren to others in Jamaica and provides a particular example of meaningful associations between West India soldiers (or at the very least, a recently-discharged veteran) and non-military people.

**The Regiments and the mission**

Black soldiers in the West India Regiments generally engaged with Islam and Obeah on their own accord. Such spiritual practices, and the communities that formed around them, operated apart from, and often in contention with, the regulations of the British army and the British colonial state. Black soldiers' engagements with Christianity, though, unfolded in a much different context. While this was highly dependent on place and time, for many African regulars, state-sanctioned missionary instruction occupied a prominent place in the military schedule. It was also a part of the wider imperial vision for the West India Regiments. As the "civilization" of Africans developed into a British national priority in the nineteenth century—especially in the context of slave-trade abolition, emancipation, and burgeoning colonialism in coastal West Africa—Black soldiers became one of the populations of African descent to be systematically exposed to mission Christianity. In this way, the Black troops not only worked for the empire, they were also the work *of* the empire—at once a reliable arm of British imperialism and a sorry crowd of cursed beings in need of salvation. West India soldiers' engagements with missionaries, along with the example of their training and discipline discussed in the previous chapter, locate Black troops within empire-wide ambitions for teaching and "civilizing" Africans. They also show, in specific circumstances, how some of the soldiers (and retired veterans) who converted chose to associate with other Christians on their own terms.

At most British Caribbean stations, religious instruction was sporadic and uneven,

generally depending on the availability of traveling missionaries. In Jamaica, as of 1812, a minister based at Spanish Town visited Fort Augusta every Sunday to preach to "the whole of the Corps" while also taking care of unspecified "other duties."[87] At least one of the extraneous responsibilities undertaken by the catechists was the visitation of sick soldiers in the hospitals. A garrison chaplain working in Antigua, who divided his Sundays between stations at Monk's Hill and "the Ridge," spent ample time holding the hands of the infirm soldiers and officers who occupied the well-worn beds in the military ward, praying for divine intervention and imploring the gravely ill to find God before they expired.[88]

Some soldiers in Caribbean stations did embrace Christianity and visit the local chapel for services. In Saint Lucia in 1843, for example, about a dozen soldiers of the 1st West India went down to the Protestant church in Castries for a group baptism and sat together afterwards while the pastor spoke about the meaning of the ceremony and the responsibilities they had undertaken as Christian men.[89] But despite these examples of soldier-church engagement, it seems that missionaries in the Caribbean rarely achieved any mass conversions. The few thousand troops released from the army in the years that followed the end of the Napoleonic wars were generally assumed to be unevangelized and still in need of missionaries' attention. In British Honduras, where hundreds of African veterans of the 5th West India Regiment were settled, the colonial superintendent made several pleas for a few Moravian missionaries to frequent the disbanded soldier villages.[90] And in Trinidad, Governor Ralph Woodford insisted that a catechist be sent to live out with the demobilized soldiers on the island's eastern coast. A head bishop in Barbados had promised to send one, and Woodford went ahead and took funds

[87] Inspection Report, 5th West India Regiment, 1812, WO 27/113.
[88] Inspection Report, 1st West India Regiment, 1817, WO 27/142.
[89] *The Palladium* (Saint Lucia), 1 June 1843.
[90] George Arthur to Lord Bathurst, 26 June 1821, CO 123/30.

out of the former soldiers' pensions to construct a permanent home for a missionary. But no one ever moved in. Two decades later when a new governor resolved to try again, the building was in rot and the demobilized troops were, according to the missionary sent out to survey the situation, living "in a deplorable state of ignorance."[91]

Soldiers' experiences with the church differed by location. Troops stationed in or near larger colonial cities must have been subjected to more frequent visits from missionaries and could presumably have attended local services in town sometimes too, while those out in more isolated forts likely went months or longer without associating with a chaplain. The specifics of colonial governance mattered too. In Sierra Leone, a colony largely structured around the mission to evangelize Africans, the church featured much more prominently in soldiers' lives. At least sometimes, a mandatory baptism was one of the first experiences of those conscripted in the colony, with new recruits being "marched into church" on their first Sunday in the army.[92] Numerous Anglican and Methodist missionaries lived and worked in Sierra Leone, preaching to and generally supervising thousands of recaptive Africans settled across the peninsula.[93] For West India soldiers, this meant abundant attempts on the part of local chaplains to convert African troops, and, if missionary publications are to be believed, seems to have resulted in a notable population of Christian soldiers who practiced throughout their time in the army and continued to do so in retirement.

The substantial presence of missionaries in Sierra Leone, and the outsized role of the chaplains in day-to-day colonial governance, made substantially more achievable the

[91] Reverend D. Evans to Reverend D. Dakins, 8 February 1837, CO 295/118; Reverend D. Evans to Lord Glenelg, 3 June 1837, CO 295/119.
[92] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 16.
[93] Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*; Padraic X. Scanlan, "The Colonial Rebirth of British Anti-Slavery: The Liberated African Villages of Sierra Leone, 1815-1824," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 4 (2016): 1085-1113.

evangelization of African troops conscripted and stationed in the colony. West India Regiment soldiers "in full war costume," and uniformed troops in the Royal African Corps too when it was active, were a familiar sight in Freetown chapels.[94] Indeed, red coats colored church congregations each Sunday. "It is a pretty sight," the garrison chaplain Thomas Eyre Poole scrawled proudly into his journal, "to see the troops marching down the winding slope from Tower-hill to St. George's, on Sunday, to the sound of drum and fife." How much the soldiers got out of the sermons of Poole and others depended on how well they understood English, and even the chaplain conceded that many of the troops could do little more than sit quietly and act interested.[95] Some Sierra Leone congregations, though, were led by African catechists who preached in African languages, which might offer an additional explanation as to why West India Regiment soldiers were more engaged in Christian life in this colony than any other. As the previous chapter established, few West India Regiment soldiers learned to speak English very well, and thus sermons in African languages certainly would have been more engaging and accessible. Starting in the 1840s, the Oyo-born bishop Samuel Crowther began preaching in Sierra Leone in the Yoruba language. The sermons were a sensation and drew huge crowds from amongst the colony's Yoruba-speaking Aku recaptive population.[96] By this time, as the first chapter noted, the West India Regiments included a substantial proportion of Aku soldiers who were likely to have been intrigued by the efforts of Bishop Crowther and his colleagues.

For at least a few African regulars, interest in Christianity and participation in Christian communities went far beyond their attendance at Sunday services. Sergeant Peter Nicholls, a

[94] George Thompson, *Thompson in Africa: or An Account of the Missionary Labors, Sufferings, Travels, and Observations of George Thompson. In Western Africa, at the Mendi Mission*, 2nd ed. (New York: S.W. Benedict, 1852), 87.
[95] Poole, *Life, Scenery, and Customs*, II: 52, I:315.
[96] Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 201-202.

recaptive from a town near Calabar on the Biafran coast, was a devout Christian, a product of the mission school in the colonial village of Regent where he was settled after his arrival in the colony. Unlike most recaptive soldiers who were conscripted just days after disembarking a slave ship, Nicholls arrived in Sierra Leone too young for the military. But after a few years working as a servant to an officer, he joined the Royal African Colonial Corps stationed at Fort Thornton in Freetown. A few years later, he was promoted to sergeant, a rank which he kept when the African Corps was folded into the West India Regiments in 1840. Nicholls spent his early mornings before muster and drill at the chapel, and often brought comrades too. At one point, Nicholls' sergeant major reported him for spending too much time in church and not enough time looking after things around the garrison. In spare moments while on duty, Sergeant Nicholls wandered off into "the bush" to pray. One day, while napping on a carpenter's table in the guard house, the devout NCO had a vision. "I Saw one little thing small as grain sand shining untill [sic] it became a great light." Later on, back in the barracks, he opened a closet and kneeled down to reach something. "[T]here the Lord Pour down his Blessing upon my Soul I saw something while I was upon my knee very great and it was very shining."[97]

Sergeant Nicholls wrote about his salvation and his devotion to God, which he had apparently renewed years prior while gravely ill in the hospital, in a long, autobiographical statement of faith. Nicholls was certainly one of the most enthusiastic Christian soldiers, as evidenced by the Methodists' request that he compose a testimony for the mission to send back to England as evidence of their Good work.[98] But he was surely not the only African soldier who

[97] Christopher Fyfe, "Peter Nicholls – Old Calabar and Freetown," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 1 (1960): 105-114.
[98] Richard Anderson, "Uncovering testimonies of slavery and the slave trade in missionary sources: the SHADD biographies project and the CMS and MMS archives for Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and the Gambia," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 3 (2017): 620-644.

felt a meaningful connection with God. A shared Christian faith, like mutual adherence to Islam in the barracks, was a means of building community amongst soldiers. It was also central to relationships between active troops and other Christians outside the army, many of whom were demobilized veterans who lived in the colony too. In Soldier Town, the little hamlet of huts at the base of Tower Hill, retired Sergeant John Lambert of the 4th West India Regiment, a Coromantee soldier and veteran of Napoleonic war invasions of Martinique and Guadeloupe, opened a Methodist congregation that was popular amongst active and retired soldiers. Officers at the garrison were irked to find that many of the troops had been attending a 4:00 service before the morning muster at sunrise.[99] The disbanded soldier Laughlan Cummings of York, a coastal village a few miles southwest of Freetown, had his own congregation too. Fifty or so retired regulars met early morning and evening for prayer at Cummings' "Wattle House."[100]

Devout veterans were serious about maintaining autonomy over the ways in which they practiced their faith. In Gibraltar Town, a village originally settled by a few hundred veterans of the 4th West India Regiment who had been stationed at Gibraltar in the years before their demobilization, the community of disbanded soldiers demanded their own morning service. In a riot, they chased out the incumbent Anglican missionary who had not allowed this to happen and oversaw the installment of a Methodist chaplain who agreed to sanction their private congregation.[101]

**Sports and social events**

In November of 1853, military officers, colonial officials, local townspeople, and esteemed

[99] Black Pensioner List, WO 23/154; Fyfe, "Peter Nicholls," 107.
[100] Statement of the Circumstances of Liberated Africans and Disbanded Soldiers, Appendix A11, CO 267/91.
[101] Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 201.

guests from afar gathered at Saint Ann's station in Bridgetown to watch the "Garrison Races." The festivities, which featured horse races, cock fights, and other competitions, were a big draw that turned the military headquarters into an open house of sorts.[102] Events like the Races brought West India regulars, and other soldiers too, into close contact with a wide array of military folks and non-military people. They also affirmed the place of British soldiers, including Black troops, in some of the social practices that characterized British colonial culture.

West India soldiers often participated in group games and activities arranged by their officers. For one, the army organized soldiers' cricket clubs and public cricket matches at the big urban garrisons like Saint Ann's, which had grass pitches on which to play and enough soldiers and regiments around to make a few teams. Officers and soldiers stationed in Bridgetown established the Saint Ann's Cricket Club in 1805, the first of its kind in the Caribbean. Different regiments faced off against one another. The 3rd West India, for example, played the Royal West India Rangers in a well-publicized garrison match soon after the club's formation. Over the next several decades, a handful of garrison cricket clubs emerged across the British Caribbean, making military cricket matches common events in colonial forts. As this unfolded, the increasingly-popular game became closely associated with soldiers, garrisons, and colonial military culture. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, garrison clubs made up of West India Regiment soldiers routinely played other non-military teams from nearby in epic matches that turned out substantial crowds of townspeople and visitors.[103]

The troops may well have enjoyed playing cricket. And some were probably quite skilled, perhaps joining competitive or recreational teams in retirement as well. At the very least, the

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[102] *Weekly Times*, 18 November 1853.
[103] Elizabeth Cooper, "Playing Against Empire," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 551. See also Hilary McD. Beckles, *The Development of West Indies Cricket: Vol. 1 The Age of Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1998); Dominic Malcolm, *Globalizing Cricket: Englishness, Empire and Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

matches offered an exciting break from rigid drill and fatigue labor. But, as Elizabeth Cooper points out, cricket matches were imperial rituals and means of strengthening global British dominion, and it is important to consider wider machinations such as this when discussing the involvement of Black regulars in these kinds of activities.[104] But even if that was the army's main intention, the games that soldiers played also represent an important facilitator of social interaction inside Atlantic garrisons.

Cricket matches, like the Garrison Races, were public events at the garrison in which soldiers, colonial officials, and townspeople milled about. Wealthy folks and special guests of the officers were offered to stick around and enjoy a nice dinner at the fort. The army hosted all kinds of celebrations at military stations periodically throughout the year, events which turned garrisons into chaotic scenes of drinking, music, and dancing. For soldiers, these occasions offered moments of leisure and lax order, although they were often dedicated to public military performance at the same time. New Year's Day called for public parades and *feux de joie* in the morning followed by food and games later in the afternoon. On one such holiday in Freetown, soldiers of the 1st West India took part in a garrison Olympics of sorts, competing in foot races and other sports "for the general entertainment of the inhabitants" who had turned up at the station to watch.[105] Monarchical birthdays were additional occasions in which officers, soldiers, and visitors feasted and partied.[106] In Saint Lucia, after a royal salute at noon and some post-parade tidying, the soldiers settled in for an evening dinner with free-flowing rum and porter. After dinner, the men took to the parade ground to dance with their wives and other women who worked around the station. African soldiers and their partners apparently recreated African

[104] Cooper, "Playing Against Empire."
[105] *The African Interpreter and Advocate* (Freetown), 4 January 1868.
[106] Scott Hughes Myerly, *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars to the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 139-142.

dances, skipping and tumbling on the pitch to the music of the regimental band.[107]

**Conclusion**

Across the British Atlantic tropics, the African soldiers of the West India Regiments occupied many of the empire's most uncomfortable and sickly garrisons. In the Caribbean, British officers carried out a deliberate effort to remove white soldiers from mosquito-infested lowlands and replace them with Black troops, the operation based upon evidence from the army and the plantations that people of African descent were far less likely to parish in such environments. On the coast of West Africa, the Regiments occupied old forts and new ones established as Britain expanded its imperial claims in a region in which white soldiers struggled to survive. In Atlantic garrisons, soldiers built meaningful relationships with one another. And despite the reality that many of these stations were in remote, isolated locales, soldiers often engaged with non-military populations as well.

Military garrisons were not closed spaces. To the contrary, fortifications and the people who occupied them were integral parts of the wider societies in which they were located. Many West India soldiers associated with women, merchants, missionaries, and others in ways that reshaped their lives and sometimes created enduring interpersonal bonds. In some instances, West India regulars built families with women living near the stations; in others, a mutual adherence to Islam connected Muslims in the army with enslaved and free believers who lived around town. In forming these associations and others, the troops often pressed the boundaries of military regulation to engage in particular activities as they wished.

Garrisons occupied by West India companies could also serve as the settings for

[107] *The Palladium* (Saint Lucia), 25 May 1839.

particular encounters between African conscripts and Britain's imperial agenda. Missionary activity, while it varied by location, sometimes became a significant force in African soldiers' lives. Many Black infantry were uninterested and never got very involved; they often had little more than an occasional confluence with a catechist visiting the station anyway. But for some, engagement with the mission created lasting connections amongst evangelized soldiers and between them and other Christians beyond the garrison.

Exploring the sociocultural interactions and activities in which soldiers engaged establishes a far more complete picture of life in the West India Regiments and the place of Black troops in British colonial societies. It also clarifies that the dull and exhausting work of soldiering was only a piece of the troops' day-to-day experiences. The next chapter will look outward from tropical fortifications and their surrounding communities to explore some of the military operations launched from Atlantic garrisons against rival imperial powers, coastal African communities, and Caribbean enslaved and free populations.

Chapter Four
**The Regiments Under Arms:**
**Tropical Combat in the Caribbean and West Africa**

In April 1848, a company of the 1st West India Regiment based at Cape Coast Castle in West Africa struggled to keep their canoes from capsizing as they waded across a choppy lagoon under heavy fire. The troops had been sent to demand redress from a local ruler near Fort Apollonia on the western Gold Coast accused of organizing a series of attacks on European traders. Stepping onto shore, the Black British regulars hacked through forest and brush on the way to the town of Atembu, the apparent home of the chieftain. Along the way, one soldier was shot dead from close range by defenders of the village. But the resistance did not last long, and the company managed to push through and enter the town. There they captured the wanted chief and hauled him back to Cape Coast on a merchant ship called the *Governor*. Meanwhile, an ocean away in Kingston, Jamaica, another company of the same corps, the 1st West India, boarded a military transport bound for Belize. There, British officials and settlers, spooked by a series of skirmishes between Indigenous groups along the northern frontier of the colony, had requested reinforcements. Upon arrival, the troops headed up to the Hondo River at the Mexican border, escorting a British official who thought he could help negotiate a truce between the Indigenous combatants. This proved unsuccessful, and the Black soldiers instead bivouacked at the border indefinitely, frequently startled by false alarms and rumors of invasions of British territory. In one instance, they hustled all the way back to Belize after hearing whispers that Indigenous fighters intended to sack the place. No attack materialized, and the Black soldiers returned to their makeshift river station, which they occupied, with occasional relief from another company, for nearly four years.[1]

[1] Major A.B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), 213-221.

This chapter follows companies of West India Regiment soldiers into combat in the Atlantic tropics. It aims to answer the fundamental question: what did the West India Regiments "do" as active colonial soldiers when called upon for combat service? Early histories have offered tactical answers to this query. The first pieces of Regimental history to be documented in secondary literature were the various battles and skirmishes in which the corps was engaged in the Caribbean and coastal West Africa. Each writing in the final decades of the nineteenth century, Major Alfred Burdon Ellis and Colonel James Caulfield traced a century of tropical deployment for soldiers of the 1st and 2nd West India Regiments respectively.[2] A more recent sweep of the centurial history of the corps has likewise committed to mapping expeditions and troop movements on both sides of the Atlantic.[3] This chapter undertakes some similar reconstructions of the combat missions assigned to soldiers of the West India Regiments, but with particular attention to the kinds of tasks that British officers generally assigned to the Black corps. Its larger contribution, though, is examining how the British empire's evolving ambitions and agendas shaped and reshaped the military work of the West India Regiments through much of the nineteenth century. It shows how the West India Regiments defended and extended the British empire.

The chapter explores the combat assignments of the West India Regiments in a few different contexts. It begins in the wartime Caribbean (c.1794 to 1814). Soldiers in the Black corps were unleashed into the rocky, nearly impassable interiors of contested islands like Grenada, Saint Vincent, and Saint Lucia to root out bands of Black insurgents supported by the French Republic. They also participated in amphibious invasions of French, Spanish, Dutch,

[2] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*; Colonel J.E. Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History of the 2nd Batt, West India Regiment from Date of Raising 1795 to 1898* (London: Forster Groom & Co., 1899).
[3] Brian Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve: The Story of the West India Regiments of the British Army* (St. John's, Antigua: Hansib Caribbean, 1997).

Danish, and Swedish West Indian colonies. In these various combat assignments, West India soldiers often undertook certain tasks—in particular, tracking and skirmishing missions which sent them into the rugged heights—for which the army believed that Black regulars would be more successful than white European troops.

Peace between Britain and its imperial rivals triggered a fundamental reorganization of the West India Regiments and a redefinition of their purpose and work as colonial soldiers. Such changes reflected a couple of the major interests that Britain pursued in the years and decades after the war: an orderly transition from slavery to free wage labor in the Caribbean and a strengthened colonial presence in West Africa. Latter sections of the chapter will show how the West India Regiments provided armed support for these imperial ambitions, focusing first on the Caribbean before crossing the Atlantic to the coast of West Africa. In the British West Indies, the second section explains, the Regiments' main military tasks shifted toward the policing of Black populations in colonies navigating the social upheavals of the "amelioration," emancipation, and post-emancipation eras. Throughout this period, West India regulars took on a central role as colonial constables mobilized to squash enslaved insurgencies and, after emancipation, freedpeople's "riots" and other disturbances that threatened order in the former slave colonies.

In West Africa in the postwar period, the work of the Regiments was different still, and again reflected a particular imperial agenda. West India soldiers in coastal West Africa, the third section shows, served the interrelated ambitions of British merchants and expansionist colonial officials. The corps' main engagements featured the "pacification"—and, sometimes, the annexation and occupation—of coastal African states near British colonial settlements, particularly in the Sierra Leone region and along the Gambia River. The prevailing imperial justification for many of these conflicts was the defense of colonial commerce against local

rulers who had crossed British traders in one way or another. These were some of Great Britain's earliest campaigns of destruction in Africa.

Exploring the different situations and contexts in which West India troops were deployed reveals a broadening of the work of Black soldiers originally raised to skirmish in the mountains of contested Caribbean islands in the 1790s. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the West India Regiments had developed into a circum-Atlantic corps of tropical soldiers whose combat assignments, and wide geographical coverage, reflected the diverse ambitions of a changing and growing British empire.

**The Regiments, the "Brigands' War," and Napoleonic campaigns**

In June 1797, the nascent 2nd West India Regiment disembarked a military transport in Grenada, an island "just emerging from a very calamitous state of rebellion."[4] The corps itself was just emerging from a violent affair in Saint Vincent where British colonial troops had participated in a fierce guerilla conflict against Garifuna Caribs and enslaved insurgents fighting for control of the island.[5] In Grenada the situation was similar. Local forces comprising thousands of enslaved Africans sponsored by the French Republic undertook an island-shaking insurgency to free the colony from British rule.[6] Soldiers of the 2nd West India arrived at Saint George's during the late stages of the conflict, reinforcing thousands of British regulars and locally-raised Black rangers, as well as a few companies of the still-forming 1st West India Regiment. The soldiers of the 2nd joined the latter two groups—the 1st West India and the various Black ranger corps—in tracking

[4] R. Blackworth, "History of the Black Troops in the W. Indies," 10 February 1836, 67-68, CO 320/3.
[5] Christopher Taylor, *The Black Carib Wars: Freedom, Survival and the Making of the Garifuna* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Julie Chun Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance during the Age of Revolutions," *Early American Studies* 11, no. 1 (2013): 117-132.
[6] Kit Candlin, "The Role of the Enslaved in the 'Fedon Rebellion' of 1795," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 4 (2018): 685-707; Edward L. Cox, "Fedon's Rebellion 1795-96: Causes and Consequences," *Journal of Negro History* 67 (1982): 7-19.

and combating insurgent bands hiding out in the mountainous interior of rocky Grenada. The white regiments present had all but given up the mission. One officer, frightened and holed up in a "negro hut" on what he thought to be the top of the island's tallest mountain, lamented the difficulty of navigating the "dark wilds" and "beaten roads" which had too often led British soldiers into booby traps and subsequent "ambuscade."[7] Commanders insisted that the Black companies, "habituated to and calculated for surmounting such obstacles," were the men for the job. The troops spent the next several months clambering the mountainous interior of the island in steady pursuit of the dangerous "brigands."[8]

Britain and France went to war in 1793, and the West Indies, as it had during each eighteenth-century clash of imperial powers, quickly emerged as a major theater for military operations.[9] British forces scored rapid victories in Saint Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. French Republicans countered. Key to France's military response was the mass recruitment of formerly-enslaved people emancipated by decree in 1794. French forces took back Guadeloupe with an army of liberated troops. Afterwards, they shifted their attention to conquering colonies like Grenada and Saint Vincent, held at the time by Britain, but having previously belonged to France and still occupied by numerous French planters and traders. Republican forces supported enslaved insurgents and fomented wider rebellion on the islands, tying the overthrow of British colonial governments with emancipation under French rule.[10]

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[7] Brigadier General Campbell, quoted in Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 90-91.
[8] R. Blackworth, "History of the Black Troops in the W. Indies," 10 February 1836, CO 320/3, 67-68.
[9] See David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Nicholas Rogers, *Blood Waters: War, Disease and Race in the Eighteenth-Century British Caribbean* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2021).
[10] Laurent Dubois, "Citizen Soldiers: Emancipation and Military Service in the Revolutionary French Caribbean," in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, ed. Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New

British officers in the Caribbean increasingly faced masses of Black soldiers who had aligned their aims with the Republican cause. This shaped the war in particular ways, combat style being one. Clashes with African insurgents in the Caribbean generally featured irregular skirmishing in the rocky interiors of the various islands. Roger Buckley has noted that "a guerilla struggle of concealment and ambush increasingly set the tone of the war" in the Revolutionary Caribbean.[11] Dominica governor Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, in 1798, made the same point, but more bluntly: "It is all bush fighting in this Country."[12]

Enslaved freedom-fighters in the Americas, Vincent Brown and Manuel Barcia have recently shown, often deployed ambush and concealment tactics prevalent in African wars, as many anti-colonial combatants had certainly been soldiers in Africa. Such tactics transplanted naturally from tropical West Africa's dense forests and damp, brushy areas into the rough terrain of West Indian islands.[13] British (and other European) officials had long recognized an adeptness for irregular skirmishing amongst Black fighters in the Americas. Drawn-out, deadly conflicts with Jamaican Maroons in particular led to such conclusions.[14] But white officials also recognized that the Black rangers fighting on their side, who often likewise had backgrounds as guerilla combatants in Africa, excelled in doing the counterinsurgent work that colonial forces so desperately needed.[15] As a corps of Black regulars, the nascent West India Regiments were

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Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 233-254; Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 222-248.

[11] Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 83.

[12] Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone to Henry Dundas, 7 June 1798, WO 1/86.

[13] Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2020); Manuel Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807-1844* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also John Thornton, "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of Caribbean History* 25, no. 1 (1991): 58-80; Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500-1800* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 127-147.

[14] Barbara Klamon Kopytoff, "Guerilla Warfare in Eighteenth Century Jamaica," *Expedition* (1977): 20-26.

[15] John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam: Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript*, ed. Richard Price and Sally Price (New York: Open Road Distribution, 2016).

expected to serve this purpose in the revolutionary Caribbean. Indeed, when General John Vaughan argued that raising the West India Regiments would allow Britain to enjoy the benefits of "opposing Blacks to Blacks," he was probably thinking about the guerilla tactics embraced by enslaved African insurgents as much as anything else.[16]

Throughout the conflicts of the 1790s in colonies like Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, and Grenada—which British officers often collectively termed the "Brigands' War"—the army made extensive use of the still-forming West India Regiments as patrols, trackers, and irregular skirmishers against bands of enslaved and free Black insurgents. We can't know how exactly West India soldiers fought, stylistically, when unleashed into the rocky heights of the eastern islands. But it stands to reason that, given the African origins of many and, more generally, the corps' demonstrated success in irregular warfare in difficult terrain, West India soldiers likely used, when appropriate, the guerilla fighting styles that predominated in the Caribbean.[17] Regardless, the essential point is that British officers' assumptions about Black soldiers and irregular combat fashioned a particular use for the West India Regiments as imperial players in the "Brigands' War." In this way, environment and fighting style was as important as disease environments in dictating the work of the Black corps in the revolutionary Caribbean.

Before their arrival in Grenada, the soldiers of the 2nd West India Regiment had undertaken some of the most difficult advances into the mountains of Saint Vincent, attempting to locate and dislodge armed bands hiding out. Such missions were exceedingly dangerous. In

[16] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 25 December 1794, WO 1/83.
[17] As Timothy Stapleton remarks, "Given the lack of sources, one of the most difficult questions for a historian to answer about Britain's West African soldiers is: how did precolonial concepts or traditions of warfare influence how these colonial troops fought?" Stapleton, *West African Soldiers in Britain's Colonial Army, 1860-1960* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 26.

one instance, a party of West India soldiers traced the Colonarie River up "to a considerable elevation" and discovered a large party of Black and Garifuna fighters making camp high up in the hills. The tracking mission ended in calamity. The insurgents hailed musketballs on the approaching West India troops, forcing a quick and chaotic retreat. Black soldiers performed risky emergency rescue operations too. When a small detachment of the 42nd Highlands Regiment stationed at an interior outpost was ambushed by a group of Carib soldiers and forced to disperse in the woods, the army sent a detachment of the 2nd West India in for support. Officers apparently believed that the Black regulars would provide the quickest and most efficient support mission in the rugged terrain.[18] This incident also clarifies that white soldiers could not avoid irregular engagements in the Americas, and as one historian has noted, the lingering assumption that white European troops were useless as guerilla fighters is untrue.[19] Scottish Highlands soldiers like those whom the 2nd West India detachment was dispatched to rescue, for example, were deemed to be quite adept in such combat for their origins in rocky northern Scotland.[20] Still, this expedition exemplifies a particular kind of combat assignment for West India soldiers in the revolutionary Caribbean and demonstrates the British army's vision for Black regulars as the men for the most treacherous missions into the tough interiors of the islands.

Around the same time, British forces in Saint Lucia were fighting a violent guerilla war against enslaved combatants supported by the French Republic. Like many eastern Caribbean colonies, Saint Lucia had long been wrestled back and forth between Britain and France, making

[18] Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 12-14.
[19] Peter E. Russell, "Redcoats in the Wilderness: British Officers and Irregular Warfare in Europe and the Americas, 1740 to 1760," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1978): 629-652.
[20] Matthew P. Dziennik, *The Fatal Land: War, Empire, and the Highland Soldier in British America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

the small island the scene of frequent conflict in the eighteenth century. An amphibious invasion had reasserted British control over Saint Lucia in 1794, but French-backed forces were mounting a sustained and powerful attempt for reconquest.[21] The conflict quickly devolved into merciless hand-to-hand skirmishing between British forces and Black "brigands" hiding out and attacking from the craggy interior. The futile assignment of rooting out the insurgent bands was led by General John Moore, aided by a few thousand white and Black soldiers. But yellow fever ravaged the white troops and wiped out about half of those present, nearly killing the general himself in the process. Moore, looking out for the health of the European regulars, left most of those battalions to occupy coastal forts and watch out for incoming French reinforcements. The Black troops under his command, two large ranger companies about to be re-styled as the 9th and 12th West India Regiments, would lead the hunt for the "brigands."[22] Here, as in myriad other instances, the Black colonial troops' resistance to fevers and perceived skill in irregular combat combined to make them the ideal tropical colonial fighters.

Moore's Black soldiers scoured the mountainous interior of Saint Lucia. The general's personal diary details their exploits well and provides one of the best accounts of the early combat work of the West India Regiments and the specific military tasks in which they engaged in the revolutionary Caribbean. Over several months, the troops shuffled through the thick, rugged brush in search of guerilla bands and campsites. On more than a few occasions, Black soldiers turned up insurgent groups hiding out in the heights. In one instance, the troops mounted an early morning ambush of a little village and dragged the "brigands" from their huts at bayonet-point. The company killed one man on the spot and threatened a massacre if someone

[21] David Barry Gaspar, "La Guerre de Bois: Revolution, War and Slavery in Saint Lucia, 1793-1838," in *A Turbulent Time*, ed. Gaspar and Geggus, 102-130.
[22] Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 88-90.

did not quickly spill the location of their main camp and provision grounds. One of the hostages agreed and led the troops on a short crusade through the woods. But when they arrived, they found the campsite deserted. Perhaps someone had snuck off during the original ambush and provided advance warning of the likely arrival of the troops. The West India soldiers went ahead and ransacked the abandoned bowers, taking food and anything else of value for themselves. After a couple of days of poking around the area, the British officers who had led the treacherous campaign split the force up and moved many of the troops along. Others of the Black corps were left up near the camp for a while longer "to patrol the woods continually … and attack the brigands wherever [they] could hear of them."[23]

The British campaigns in the Windward and Leeward Islands were ultimately successful, with the still-incomplete yet effective West India Regiments playing an essential role in bringing Grenada, Saint Vincent, and Saint Lucia back under steady British control, even if in most cases insurgents hostile to Britain remained fortified in the rough interior of the islands. By late 1798 or so, French power in the region had been largely extinguished, at least for a time. British commanders pulled out of the war in Saint Domingue and elected not to re-invade Guadeloupe, which Republican forces had wrestled back from Britain a few years before. Still under construction in the late 1790s, the West India Regiments had clearly been of use to the British empire. General Moore, for his part, littered his diary with comments about the "excellent qualities" of the Black troops under his command and declared them "invaluable" to the British war machine in the West Indies.[24] Such comments likely contributed to an expanded role for the West India Regiments as Britain's war in the Caribbean shifted into a new phase, away from drawn-out skirmishing on long-contested islands and toward amphibious invasion and swift

[23] John Frederick Maurice, ed., *The Diary of Sir John Moore* (London: Edward Arnold, 1904), I:227-228.
[24] Maurice, ed., *Diary of Sir John Moore*, I:240.

conquest of strategic territories.

After helping to steady some of the chaotic guerilla conflicts of the 1790s, the West India Regiments joined a series of assaults on colonies belonging to the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden.[25] Much of the time, British forces found these tiny islands virtually undefended and induced an immediate, bloodless surrender. Such was the case at Saint Bartholomew in 1801, as the Black troops of the 2nd, 3rd, 8th, and 11th West India Regiments had to do little beyond providing a presence of able foot soldiers while a naval captain talked the miniscule garrison of Swedish soldiers into laying down their arms. But it was not always so easy. Just a few days later, the Black troops engaged. The expeditionary force had turned its attention to well-defended Saint Martin, an island just across the channel from Saint Bartholomew, shared by France and the Netherlands. A brigade consisting of nearly 2,000 West India soldiers landed and pushed up into the hills to storm the main fort above the French port town of Marigot. Britain took the island and the campaign proceeded onward.[26]

White European line and light infantry participated in these expeditions too, and in most cases actually outnumbered Black troops. But excursions such as these had long ended in catastrophe for British forces, with many white regiments wiped out by yellow fever and malaria before any invasion could even begin. These tropical operations, like the earlier guerilla struggles against the "brigands," relied on West India soldiers as both guerilla fighters *and* men who were less likely to be incapacitated by illness. A chaotic 1809 expedition to Spanish Santo Domingo reinforced the reality that this was a matter of both health and terrain. In June, Major General Hugh Lyle Carmichael was collecting forces in Jamaica to be sent off to invade the Spanish colony. 428 privates of the 2nd West India Regiment sat ready at Kingston garrisons, along with

[25] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 257-258.
[26] Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 22-23.

688 white soldiers.[27] Soon after embarkation, a punishing storm rocked the overcrowded military transports and forced the convoy to land in distress on the southern coast of Haiti. With the help of a purchased schooner, the expedition made it to Santo Domingo. But along the way, many of the white soldiers were struck with "a sudden and fatal sickness," leaving the 2nd West India to take over the brunt of combat and fatigue operations. The Black troops were the last to return to Jamaica. Carmichael had ordered the infirm white soldiers evacuated first and kept the West India regulars around to finish the job.[28]

Britain undertook the calamitous attack on Santo Domingo in the midst of the final wave of conflict in the Caribbean (c.1808-1810) in which British forces effectively vanquished their imperial rivals in the region. The invasions of Spanish and French West Indian colonies around this time coincided with the Peninsular War, for which masses of British soldiers and warships were called back from the reaches of the empire to concentrate on the continental European theater. In response, the work of the West India Regiments became even more essential in sustaining British power in the Caribbean. A trifecta of offensives against French Marie Galante (1808), Martinique (1809), and Guadeloupe (1810) ended on Britain's terms the war with France in the Atlantic tropics, and detailing the specifics of some of these operations reinforces our understanding of the British army's expectations of the West India Regiments as tropical soldiers.

Britain's 1808 capture of Marie Galante, a small island sandwiched between Guadeloupe and Dominica, reignited conflict with Napoleonic France in the eastern Caribbean as British officers looked to land a decisive blow against the rival power. Royal Naval ships quietly seized

[27] "Embarkation Return of the Forces on the Expedition against Santo Domingo in the 1st and 2nd Divisions Commanded by Major General H.L. Carmichael … on the 4th & 9th June 1809 from Jamaica," WO 1/95.
[28] Hugh Lyle Carmichael to David Dundas, 20 September 1809, WO 1/95; Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 31-33.

the island in March. French officials at Guadeloupe, in a swift response, acted quickly to organize a reconquest. In August, a French convoy with a few hundred regulars approached the port town and battery of Grand Bourg on the southwestern side of the round island. Spotted on landing by the crew of the HMS *Circe*, the French troops fled to the interior as the marines seized their transport vessels. British naval officers sent word of the French attack to General George Beckwith at army headquarters in Barbados, who promptly mobilized three companies of the 1st West India Regiment and embarked them for Marie Galante to root out the marooned French soldiers.[29] The Black corps docked on 29 August, and Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Blackwell gathered up some royal marines and sailors occupying Grand Bourg to join the expedition. The Regiments trawled the island interior "for five days and nights," picking up abandoned muskets and ammunition, as well as a spiked six pounder, as they engaged the French troops several times. A cannon that the British lieutenant colonel had insisted be brought along quickly proved useless in the brush and had to be rolled back to Grand Bourg. Coming upon a hideaway, the 1st West India located and released nine captive British mariners who had been taken prisoner in the French invasion a few days prior. Officers reported two West India soldiers wounded in these skirmishes, one of whom died soon after.[30]

After nearly a week tracking the stranded soldiers, the Regiments induced the surrender of 162 French privates and fourteen officers, who agreed to be detained and to return all hostages taken during the invasion. The soldiers of the 1st West India shook down their prisoners of war, collecting hundreds of firelocks, belts, and pouches, and some twenty-four kegs of ball cartridge. British officers believed there were still more troops hiding out on the island, including the French colonel whom the captured soldiers dubiously claimed had returned to Guadeloupe, but

[29] Dyde, *Empty Sleeve*, 81-82.
[30] Nathaniel Blackwell to George Beckwith, 4 September 1808, WO 1/96.

called the mission a success regardless. The 1st West India claimed a prize for their hard work, a French drum major's staff bearing the phrase, "*La République Française une et indivisible*," and boarded their transports soon after to return to Bridgetown.[31] Back at Saint Ann's Garrison, commanders organized a parade and reception, and rewarded Lieutenant Colonel Blackwell with a sword while the Black companies lined up behind him.[32]

**3rd West India Soldiers Fire on French Troops, The Saintes, 1809**

*Source: NAM 1976/2/47/1, National Army Museum, London.*

The following year, West India soldiers performed heavy tracking and skirmishing duties as Britain reconquered Martinique from France. And several months after that, in early 1810, the Black troops guided the recapture of Guadeloupe as Britain continued its assault on French

[31] Nathaniel Blackwell to George Beckwith, 4 September 1808, WO 1/96.
[32] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 124.

power in the region. On the initial landing of the British expeditionary force in Guadeloupe, a 500-man Light Infantry Battalion composed of the light companies of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th, and 8th West India Regiments pressed ahead into the hills above Capesterre to cover the disembarkation of the rest of the brigade. The Black skirmishers continued out front as the advance guard, with several regular companies of the 4th and 8th West India, and a couple thousand white soldiers, a ways behind. The light troops cut a twenty-mile path east to west toward the colonial capital. Avoiding the most rugged inland topography, which today composes a dense and rocky national rainforest, West India Regiment skirmishers still struggled to move over rough terrain. After a couple days marching, the West India light brigades fired their first shots, dispersing a group of French guerillas in the heights overlooking the port of Trois Rivières. The skirmishers pressed onward toward a nearby fort, as panicked French troops rained musketballs down and lit artillery fuses. One West India soldier was killed and another was wounded. As the oppressive heat of high afternoon gave way to torrential downpour that evening, the troops made camp for the night. In the morning they found the little outpost abandoned.[33]

As the Capesterre brigade pushed west, a second brigade had landed at the town of Veaux Habitants a few miles north of Basse Terre, planning to close off the French capital from the north while their comrades moved in from the east. The force included several companies each of the 3rd and 6th West India, as well as the grenadier companies of the 1st, 4th, and 8th West India, accompanied by the white 15th and 25th of Foot and some unspecified light infantry companies. The troops led the way up to the heights above Veaux Habitants and camped out. A few days later, the British brigades converged on Basse Terre and captured the colonial capital.[34]

[33] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 132-139.
[34] Dyde, *Empty Sleeve*, 90-93.

British forces took 2,000 French prisoners upon capturing Basse Terre, in what was effectively the final major clash between Britain and Napoleonic France in the Caribbean. West Indies General George Beckwith, distributing his General Orders a few days later, acknowledged "the fatigues of a march, difficult in its nature, through the strongest country in the world."[35] The West India Regiments had served a particular purpose for Great Britain throughout the war years, namely by anchoring numerous expeditions to and through the "strong country," missions which white soldiers often struggled to carry out. Peace in Europe would bring changes to the organization and the work of the West India Regiments. But as Britain's vanquishing of its rivals cleared the way for new imperial designs, the Black corps would find plenty to do as armed enforcers of British colonialism in the Atlantic tropics.

**"Aiding the civil power": counterinsurgents and riot police in the Caribbean**

The end of the Napoleonic wars redefined the work—and the imperial state's demands—of the West India Regiments. In the postwar period in the British Caribbean, the Black corps settled into a peacetime role as garrison occupants and colonial constables responsible for upholding social order. Steady, persistent tasks included local guard duty and performative parading. But this mundane day-to-day was sporadically interrupted by various internal emergencies, most commonly those that pitted colonial forces against enslaved or free Black populations. In the years that followed the Treaty of Paris, Britain's Atlantic empire entered another, different, period of conflict and commotion. This one was largely defined by arguments relating to the "amelioration," and later the abolition, of slavery in the Caribbean. The socioeconomic convulsions caused by these imperial actions manifested in sporadic rebellions spearheaded by

[35] George Beckwith, General Orders, 6 February 1810, WO 1/96.

Black West Indians—uprisings which, according to anxious colonial officials, required swift and violent responses. Throughout the period of "amelioration" and into the post-emancipation era, the West India Regiments worked with local militias and various white companies to squash insurgencies led by enslaved people and to exterminate freedpeople's "riots" and other disturbances. In this way, the Black corps were made to provide military support to an empire navigating major social, political, and economic changes that often turned violent.[36] West India soldiers reliably reinforced colonial authority, though their constabulary work often resulted in dustups between themselves and local Black populations.

The West India Regiments had long been deployed as armed enforcers of the slave system and the social order that supported it in the British Caribbean. Most frequently, this took the form of tracking and capturing runaways, as colonial officials often sent Black troops into the brushy interiors to locate enslaved people who had fled plantations. Jamaica governor and commander-in-chief George Nugent, for example, deployed a large force of about 300 men of the 2nd West India into the mountains "to apprehend some Nests of runaway Negroes" in the summer of 1804. The rugged terrain being "inaccessible to European troops or the militia," the job fell on the local Black companies. The men were successful in locating the mountain "nest." The troops captured and escorted into Spanish Town twenty runaways who had apparently escaped the plantations years before, and also managed to "disperse the rest," many of whom were later arrested on various nearby estates by slave patrols and militiamen. After completing their mission, the Black troops were rewarded by the parish for succeeding in this task "which

[36] British officials in the Caribbean widely advocated colonial state militarization in the emancipation era as a means of asserting control. In Jamaica, Jonathan Dalby notes, colonial officials raised the first permanent police force in the aftermath of the Baptist War. The establishment "had little to do with the detection of suppression of crime and was employed primarily, during the course of the next half-century at least, to deal with the threat of disorder." Dalby, "Precursors to Morant Bay: The Pattern of Popular Protest in Post-Emancipation Jamaica (1834-1865)," *Journal of Caribbean History* 50, no. 2 (2016): 117.

had been so often attempted in vain by the Militia."[37]

Ada Ferrer and Vincent Brown have argued that Atlantic slavery was a perpetual state of war that oscillated between low- and high-intensity conflict between enslaved people and the alliance between their enslavers and the colonial state.[38] Long-term deployment in the war that was African slavery was an enduring task for West India Regiment soldiers. Beyond the more informal conflicts with bands of runaways in the British Caribbean, the West India Regiments engaged enslaved insurgents in two of the three major uprisings of the amelioration era, what Michael Craton termed the "late slave rebellions" several decades ago.[39] The first engagement occurred in Barbados, beginning on Easter Sunday night, 14 April 1816, a violent event often labeled Bussa's Rebellion.[40] British soldiers at Saint Ann's Garrison were awoken early the following morning to news that hundreds of well-armed insurgents had commenced sacking the sugar estates of Saint Philip's parish, collapsing homes and setting the cane ablaze. A few hours later, by 10:00 on Monday, 200 soldiers of the 1st West India, along with 400 white regulars and 250 militia, marched on Saint Philip's, hustling away from a chaotic scene in Bridgetown and toward the billowing canefields on the eastern side of the island.[41]

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[37] George Nugent to Cooke, 30 August 1804, Nugent Papers, NAM 6807/183/3/347.
[38] Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 234; Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*, 6.
[39] Michael Craton, "Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies 1816-1832," *Past & Present* 85 (1979): 99-125.
[40] For detailed analyses of this event, see Hilary McD Beckles, *Bussa: The 1816 Revolution in Barbados* (Bridgetown: Barbados Museum and Historical Society, 1998); Beckles, "The Slave-Drivers' War: Bussa and the 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion," *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 39 (1985): 85-110.
[41] Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies. With a Continuation to the Present Time* (London: T. Miller, 1819), V:102-103. Interestingly, at least some of the 1st West India Regiment soldiers were new draftees from the Bourbon Regiment, which British officers had raised at Mauritius and Réunion in the Indian Ocean after capturing the islands from France in 1810. One officer at Saint Ann's Garrison termed the mobilized 1st West India company "our Bourbon Blacks." The Bourbon Regiment had been disbanded in early 1816, with at least some soldiers carried thousands of miles to Barbados to join the 1st West India. Some service records for these soldiers, hailing from "Isle de France" and "Isle de Bourbon," survive in the National Archives. See, for example, Service Records for Privates Jacques and August, WO 97/1158; Service Record for Edward Jean, WO 97/1159; Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 165; Extract of a private letter, St. Ann's Garrison, 27 April 1816, CO 28/85.

The colonial troops, under the command of Colonel Edward Codd, met the insurgents in the evening, at which point the enslaved quickly dispersed across the surrounding properties. Codd had the white regulars and militia make camp for the night and sent the 1st West India forward to root out the insurgents. Recognizing the enslaved fighters' guerilla tactics—"Such indeed was the Warfare pursued by those people," he later commented—the colonel leaned on the Black regulars. A couple hours later, Codd received word that the troops had located a large group of insurgents hiding out, and the 1st West India commander, Major Cassidy, wished to know if they should wait for the white companies or proceed with an attack immediately. Codd was in no hurry. He replied that he would have the white troops there in the morning and told Cassidy to keep watch on the band of insurgents. But overnight, the West India soldiers endured an attack from enslaved men brandishing "Firelocks, Bills, Pikes, Hatchets &c." One Black private was killed and a sergeant was wounded.[42] The troops returned fire and then broke into a bayonet charge. The 1st West India reportedly left forty enslaved soldiers dead or injured on the spot and chased the remaining men out onto the property of a Mr. Grossett where they killed and wounded several more, effectively ending the insurgency. Many of those who got away were tracked down and slaughtered over the following days by the militia.[43]

Seven years later, in British Demerara on the South American coast, the 1st West India Regiment helped to suppress an empire-shaking insurgency that incorporated thousands of enslaved people. Hearing rumbles of an imminent attack on the coastal plantations to the east of the Georgetown capital in August 1823, the British governor, John Murray, rode out to investigate. Stopped by a group of armed insurgents, Governor Murray hightailed back to the colonial capital where he immediately mobilized the troops at the Georgetown garrison—one

[42] Edward Codd to James Leith, 25 April 1816, enclosed in Leith to the Colonial Office, 30 April 1816, CO 28/85.
[43] Extract of a private letter, St. Ann's Garrison, 27 April 1816, CO 28/85.

company of the 1st West India and the 21st British Fusiliers. A Rifle Corps and militia were quickly rounded up too. The enslaved fighters laid waste to several estates, burning crops, killing overseers, and taking hostages. The colonial counterinsurgents made their way east from the capital. British forces swept the wrecked plantations, engaging the insurgents in sporadic skirmishes as they waded through creeks and struggled over busted bridges between properties, working to rescue white planters and overseers barricaded on their estates.[44]

As the troops moved along, the 1st West India soldiers were made to double as military laborers. The Black regulars worked side-by-side with groups of enslaved men to unroof nearby structures and lay the planks across the shallow dikes that separated properties so colonial soldiers and militia could cross. The Black troops, then left behind by the rest of the force, struggled to carry supplies over the flimsy makeshift bridges. On at least one occasion, a group of insurgents took advantage of the stalled West India detachment and fired upon them. The West India regulars dropped their armloads of accoutrements, perhaps into the mucky water below, as they scrambled to pick up their muskets.[45]

Colonial forces met hundreds of enslaved fighters the morning of 19 August, two days into the insurgency, at Bachelor's Adventure plantation. Talk of a truce quickly broke down, and the 1st West India company opened fire on command, dispersing the insurgents into the inland cotton fields. The militia gave chase, and in the hours that followed, local forces killed or wounded over 100 enslaved people. More were rounded up and led into Georgetown in chains to stand trial.[46] Over the following five months, the colony remained under martial law, patrolled by

[44] Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009 [1982]), 283-284.
[45] Joshua Bryant, *Account of an Insurrection of the Negro Slaves in the Colony of Demerara, Which Broke Out on the 18th of August, 1823* (Georgetown, Guiana: A. Stevenson, at the Guiana Chronicle Office, 1824), 28, 32.
[46] Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 284-285.

well-armed militia and the 1st West India Regiment, which had called in two additional companies from Barbados.[47]

In both conflicts with enslaved fighters, the soldiers of the 1st West India "were the troops put in advance, and by whose fire the insurgents were dispersed," emphasized one British statesman arguing publicly for the usefulness—and the often-doubted reliability—of the West India Regiments.[48] Historians have taken some interest in the 1st West India's involvement in the violent suppression of the slave insurgencies in Barbados and Demerara. For David Lambert and Tim Lockley, these events lay bare the complex social positions of Black colonial soldiers, at once victims and oppressors occupying an ambiguous threshold between colonizer and colonized.[49] The West India Regiments' role in policing and subjugating enslaved populations does raise obvious questions about Black British soldiers as "agents" of colonialism who, sometimes, captured and killed enslaved people for pay. These concerns are often accompanied by additional questions about identity and "race-consciousness," as Black, formerly-enslaved, West India soldiers seem to have had so much in common with enslaved people in the pre-emancipation Caribbean.[50] While these violent and troubling aspects of West India Regiment service can leave us tempted to locate Black corps on the collaboration/resistance spectrum or within "intermediary" models of colonialism, it is more helpful to think about how Black soldiers may have understood their personal circumstances and how their limited opportunities as

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[47] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 172-173.
[48] James Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated, as it Exists in both Law and Practice, and compared with the Slavery of Other Countries, Antient and Modern* (London: J. Butterworth and Son, 1824), I:428.
[49] David Lambert and Tim Lockley, Introduction to "Africa's Sons Under Arms," special issue, *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 451-458; 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," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 4 (2018): 627-650.
[50] Lambert and Lockley summarize this historiography well. See their "Introduction," 455-456. I agree with their suggestion that our collective desire to read allied resistance to slavery and colonialism has contributed to some of the puzzlement around Black soldiers' violent subjugation of "their own people."

colonial conscripts dictated their actions.[51] The troops had little to gain for miscooperation, and, often, a lot to lose. Failure to comply was met with swift retribution in the army, and mutinies rarely succeeded. Desertion—the ultimate refusal to participate in the colonial corps—was an option, but few soldiers had any place to go in Caribbean plantation colonies. Many West India Regiment deserters returned to camp voluntarily after a time, and others ended up in gaols and workhouses. Some were probably re-enslaved too.[52] In short, with few alternative options, West India Regiment soldiers had little choice but to act in their own self interests. This meant carrying out orders for the sake of their well-being and for the preservation of certain privileges afforded to them as members of the colonial state apparatus, regardless of who was standing at the end of the musket barrel.[53]

Through the final years of slavery in the British Caribbean, West India Regiment soldiers had reliably stamped out insurgencies led by enslaved freedom fighters, preserving order in British colonies navigating the chaotic social and economic changes of the amelioration era. Abolition and emancipation in the 1830s, though, changed little about this piece of the Regiments' work, as keeping Black populations in line remained a fundamental part of colonial soldiers' responsibilities. As Howard Johnson has noted, the control and management of the free plantation labor force was the preeminent occupation of imperial soldiers and civil police in the

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[51] Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1534. On "collaborators"/"intermediaries" and colonial governance, see Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 3-33. For a military approach to African agents of colonialism, see Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014). For a critique of the "collaborator" model that centers the experiences of African colonial troops of enslaved origin, see Sarah Balakrishnan, "Imperial Policing and the Antinomies of Power in Early Colonial Ghana," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 53, no. 2 (2020): 173-193.

[52] Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 227.

[53] As Peter Voelz writes, "black people usually had their own motives of self-interest and the normal motives of normal people who fought in these colonial conflicts. … There were too many other considerations—and stronger ones—to have common color, cultural, or continental origins or race-consciousness as primary motives in war." Voelz, *Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (New York: Garland, 1993), 332.

post-emancipation British Caribbean.[54] In short, for colonial forces like the West India Regiments, the "slave rebellion" was neatly replaced by the "riot" as the internal emergency which sprung soldiers into action against local populations of African descent.

In late August 1838, just a few weeks after the period of apprenticeship had ended, colonial troops were called out to a property in northern Grenada where the proprietor was demanding that freedpeople either agree to work for meager wages or leave. Apparently, the group had done neither, resulting in a series of arguments and, ultimately, a plea for armed reinforcements. Local constables struggled to steady the situation, and a few dozen soldiers of the 1st West India and the white 70th Regiment sailed up the coast from Saint George's to occupy the plantation. On arrival, the troops helped to make numerous arrests, clearing the estate of those unwilling to continue working the property.[55] The event, if fairly small and localized, was certainly symbolic. In the post-emancipation era, the West India Regiments would continue to support white proprietors in their conflicts with Black laborers, and, in turn, protect the agricultural productivity of the British Caribbean.

This ongoing task manifested across the region in the form of general policing and law enforcement. In Jamaica in the decades after emancipation, West India troops stationed around Kingston and Spanish Town were frequently called out to help put down protests, riots, and street fights across the colony, the violent upshots of various arguments about work, property, taxes, local elections, and other issues.[56] In 1848, sixty men of the 2nd West India Regiment were deployed to Saint Mary's parish to support colonial tax collectors who claimed they were being

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[54] Howard Johnson, "Patterns of Policing in the Post-Emancipation British Caribbean, 1835-1895," in *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830-1940*, ed. David M. Anderson and David Killingray (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 71-91.
[55] *Grenada Free Press*, 29 August 1838.
[56] Gad Heuman, "'Is This What You Call Free?' Riots and Resistance in the Anglophone Caribbean," in *Contesting Freedom: Control and Resistance in the Post- Emancipation Caribbean*, ed. Gad Heuman and David V. Trotman (New York: Macmillan Caribbean, 2005), 104-117; Dalby, "Precursors to Morant Bay."

threatened by Black residents. The situation was mostly calm by the time the troops arrived, but the men kept the parish under military occupation for a few weeks for good measure. Three years later, a detachment of the 1st West India marched on the riverside town of Easington to the east of Kingston after a group of Black residents, upset by the results of the vestry election, killed a local official and sacked the courthouse and the police station. The troops oversaw the arrest of some fifty people, many of whom were later convicted for rioting or manslaughter, and stayed to defend the estates of the white planter who had won the election. In 1859, a well-armed company of the 2nd West India sailed in haste from Port Royal to Savanna-la-Mar in Westmoreland to help put down a rowdy protest of the colonial toll-road system.[57] Elsewhere across the British West Indies, the Regiments did the same kind of work. Near the town of Saint Joseph, not far from Port of Spain, Trinidad, the troops of the 1st West India Regiment earned rave reviews from local townspeople for dispersing a group of free men of color who had allegedly threatened to kill a local official, sending the town into "a constant state of alarm" for several days. "The inhabitants of Saint Joseph," an anonymous resident confessed—and perhaps exaggerated—to the editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette*, "owed their safety from pillage and massacre, that night, to the officers and soldiers of the garrison."[58] Several years later, dozens of West India soldiers formed part of a coalition force that put down an island-wide uprising in Trinidad rooted in a colonial financial crisis.[59]

The constabulary work of the West India Regiments promoted a generally antagonistic relationship between Black colonial soldiers and the majority-Black populations of the British Caribbean. That said, it is difficult to measure the significance of race within such animosities, as

[57] Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 71-72; Dalby, "Precursors to Morant Bay," 110-115.
[58] *Port of Spain Gazette*, 12 April 1833.
[59] David V. Trotman, "Capping the Volcano: Riots and their Suppression in Post-Emancipation Trinidad," in *Contesting Freedom*, ed. Heuman and Trotman, 130.

Black West Indians certainly sparred with white soldiers as well.[60] Colonial periodicals detail numerous violent clashes between the West India Regiments and civilian populations. In Guiana in the fall of 1852, for example, news of "a brutal and unprovoked assault" committed by several soldiers of the 2nd West India on some of the inhabitants of Georgetown was described in numerous island papers. This was, apparently, the latest in a series of "perpetually occurring" collisions between Black soldiers and civilians. "There is scarcely a colony from Jamaica to Demerara, in which, within the last few years, serious disturbances attended in several instances with loss of life," the editors insisted.[61] In Bridgetown, a group of soldiers of the 3rd West India engaged in a "street row" with Black locals during the Garrison Races, a fair of sorts at the colonial station that featured horse races, cock fights, and other attractions. The Black troops at Saint Ann's Garrison were immediately placed on lockdown, and white soldiers and local police took over their Bridgetown guard duties for the time being. A few days later, a man named Beckles stumbled into town after taking a pistol shot to the thigh as he walked along the access road outside Saint Ann's. Beckles and a couple of witnesses reported that the assailants were visible through the brush and claimed that they were West India soldiers.[62]

News of such hostilities was meant to portray the West India Regiments as unruly, untrustworthy aggressors unfit for any position of authority. The periodicals liberally tagged the Black corps as a "savage," "lawless," "brute force" when replaying such events, and repeatedly suggested their disbandment. Indeed, the Black troops did not cease to be a topic of controversy for white officials who continued to insist that the West India Regiments were composed of innately violent men likely to turn against the state. While the obvious reliability of the Black

[60] Trotman, "Capping the Volcano," 133.
[61] *Weekly Times* (Antigua), 5 November 1852.
[62] *Weekly Times* (Antigua), 18 November 1853.

troops challenges this criticism, it is not in doubt that violent clashes—arguments, street brawls, and even musket shots—between Black soldiers and townspeople were common occurrences. And given their position of authority, it seems likely that the colonial infantry were more often the aggressors than the victims. Soldiers, police, and militia had long tormented Black people in the Caribbean, and it is more probable that the West India Regiments would have followed this trend than broken it. The extensive work of colonial soldiers and constables in policing freedpeople in the post-emancipation Caribbean, Jonathan Dalby comments, externalized a hatred for armed officials amongst Black West Indians.[63] And perhaps for the soldiers themselves, poor Black wage laborers, shopkeepers, and petty traders were easy targets for the periodic exploitation and harassment that asserted the power of British troops over the masses.

While Britain's emergence in the post-war era as an unrivaled Atlantic empire refocused the work of colonial forces like the West India Regiments toward internal threats to the state, some imperial defense work—often in the form of border patrol—was still requested from time to time. Armed deployment against outsiders was most common in mainland colonies like Guiana and Honduras where rumors of frontier troubles—sometimes legitimate and sometimes not—caused periodic panic and fright in capital cities. Because these borderlands tended to be marked by dense brush and require long, strenuous treks through swampland and forest, it was often the West India Regiments tapped by British officials to undertake expeditions far inland to investigate reports of frontier occupation. As the vignette that opened this chapter noted, a rumored invasion of the northern frontier of British Honduras sent Black soldiers hustling off into the forest to bivouac on the riverbank for nearly four years.

A similar situation developed in British Guiana in 1842, when a 1st West India Regiment

[63] Dalby, "Precursors to Morant Bay," 117.

detachment composed of twenty-seven privates and two sergeants led by a couple of white lieutenants, departed Georgetown for the deep interior town of Pirara to chase off some Brazilian soldiers and settlers who had entered British territory. The capital was then reinforced by a small group of Black troops who sailed in from nearby Tobago.[64] In a flotilla of eight-man canoes, the troops traveled south up the Essequibo River before cutting west along the snaking Rupununi tributary to Pirara—"through the wildest parts of the Continent," in the words of one West Indian commentator.[65] The trek took a month; frequent rapids and falls meant that the men had to constantly unload and reload the riverboats to save risking their supplies spilling into the water. Finally arriving at Pirara, the British force located the Brazilian settlement and demanded that the group withdraw. Apparently puzzled when the Brazilian commandant refused to move his troops, British officers ordered the West India soldiers to make camp indefinitely while an officer traveled all the way back to Georgetown for further instructions and reinforcements. For three months the detachment was hutted in the forest. Before long, they ran out of rations. When reinforcements finally arrived, the troops were starving and emaciated. The men had not managed to hunt much game, and the sandy soil produced little edible crop.[66] The bolstered British force was enough to chase the Brazilians off, and the skeletal soldiers were finally allowed to return to Fort Amsterdam in Georgetown. The urban colonial barracks were certainly no luxury, but the solid walls, sea breeze, and fresh bread must have provided ample relief. Upon their return to the city, the soldiers of the 1st West India resumed their standard constabulary procedures, patrolling the town and plantations and prepared to support the needs of the state in moments of disorder.[67]

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[64] *The Palladium* (Saint Lucia), 20 January 1842.
[65] *The Palladium* (Saint Lucia), 13 January 1842.
[66] *The Palladium* (Saint Lucia), 16 June 1842.
[67] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 210-211.

**Frontier fighters: the Regiments in British West Africa**

The postwar evolution of Britain's priorities in the Caribbean—from vanquishing imperial rivals to "ameliorating" and then abolishing slavery while maintaining socioeconomic stability—redefined the purpose of the West India Regiments. At the same time, with the war with France finished, British imperial officials developed an ambitious agenda to be undertaken in West Africa. Front and center were the intertwined initiatives of slave-trade suppression, commercial development, and some territorial expansion too. Potent military force was essential to the success of these ambitions, which, on numerous occasions, brought colonial officials into conflict with African chiefs, traders, and spiritual leaders. During the Napoleonic wars, the Royal Navy had provided most of the empire's muscle in West Africa, along with a few small colonial regiments like the Royal African Corps.[68] But after, the War Office began stationing companies of the West India Regiments at coastal settlements too, to help garrison newly-annexed territories and provide general armed support as Britain put its postwar vision for West Africa into action. Through much of the nineteenth century, white soldiers struggled mightily to survive on the continent and were often only present in very small numbers, making African troops all the more imperative. Nascent British colonialism in Africa added a new, consequential dimension to the responsibilities of the West India Regiments, transforming the corps from a Caribbean force to a transatlantic establishment. In the decades that followed the initial 1819 transfer of a few companies of the 2nd West India from Jamaica to Freetown, West India soldiers aided—and very often led—colonial advances on coastal slave-trading factories, unstable colonial frontiers, and African states and chiefs accused of harassing British traders and hindering commerce.[69] In this

[68] When necessary, British officials also gathered local African forces from amongst allied states. They did this often with the Fante on the Gold Coast, for example.
[69] The West India Regiments previously had small recruiting parties stationed in Sierra Leone, but not a standing, active force.

way, the Regiments quickly developed into essential muscle to support British imperialism in West Africa in the postwar era.

This section aims, first and foremost, to reconstruct some of the West African combat missions assigned to the West India Regiments over the several decades between the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars and the era of the "scramble" for Africa. But in doing so, it also explores the numerous, under-recognized little wars of imperial aggression—and the justifications for them—that characterized the era of pre-partition British colonialism in West Africa. Scholars have made enormous headway recently in analyzing this "early colonial period," for lack of a better term, in British West African history, exploring major (converging) themes like commerce, slavery and emancipation, and missionary activity.[70] But the violence that underpinned these imperial ambitions has garnered considerably less attention. Additionally, explorations of the work of African colonial soldiers serving on the continent lean heavily toward the twentieth century and privilege the era of the World Wars and decolonization.[71] Taking seriously the nineteenth-century expeditions of the West India Regiments points toward a more extended story of colonial soldiering in Africa.

Within a year of their arrival on the coast of West Africa in 1819, soldiers of the 2nd West India Regiment found themselves deployed in British interventionist military activity justified by

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[70] Maeve Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance and the British Antislavery World System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022); Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Richard Peter Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone: Re-Building Lives and Identities in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Trevor R. Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa: Toward Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century Senegal and the Gold Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

[71] Major studies emerging in the past few years alone include Stapleton, *West African Soldiers*; Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020); Ruth Ginio, *The French Army and Its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*.

imperial antislavery and commercial ambitions. From Freetown, naval captains worked the Sierra Leone and nearby Senegambian coastlines, which featured bustling waterways like the Rio Pongo and the Rio Nunez in which slave traders quietly operated. On the Rio Pongo in early 1820, internal political and market developments collided with British antislavery to erupt in multiple violent skirmishes. In February, Royal Navy Lieutenant Robert Hagan seized three slave ships belonging to the Curtis family of American traders operating on the Rio Pongo and temporarily blockaded the entrance to the river. After a series of arguments over several weeks, Curtis and some of his African commercial partners killed several British marines and took more hostage.[72] In Freetown, Governor Charles MacCarthy was livid, and ordered a display of force against the "villainous wretch" Thomas Curtis.[73]

Days later, three companies of the 2nd West India Regiment and an unspecified number of Royal Marines embarked Freetown for the Rio Pongo, dropping anchor at the river mouth a few days later. The soldiers and marines boarded a small fleet of brigs and longboats and waded in under a flag of truce, hoping that their 300-strong force would deter any trouble.[74] The West India Regiments and marines instead endured a barrage of gunfire from the mangrove forest near the riverbank. They engaged the defenders of "Curtis Town" in a brief firefight, pushing local forces back into the woods and taking control of the small settlement. They raided the mud fort, claimed its arms and cannon, and burned the town to the ground before proceeding on to attack the nearby villages allied with the Curtis family. The following morning, the Regiments set out in search of the hostage sailors. Some local intelligence had directed them to a small town tucked

[72] Bruce L. Mouser, "The Rio Pongo Crisis of 1820 and the Search for a Strategy for the Anti-Slavery Squadron off West Africa," *Mariner's Mirror* 97, no. 3 (2011): 145-162; Mouser, *American Colony on the Rio Pongo: The War of 1812, the Slave Trade, and the Proposed Settlement of African Americans, 1810-1830* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013), 93-104.
[73] Charles MacCarthy to Henry Leeke, 9 May 1820, CO 267/51.
[74] Mouser, "Rio Pongo Crisis," 154-156.

away in the forest, to which the troops marched in heavy rain. Unsuccessful after several hours, the British force burned the village and returned to their floating base. But the aggression was apparently enough, and Curtis and his chief allies released the six sailors soon after. The 2nd West India Regiment earned high praise for their involvement in the expedition. Their commander, Captain James Chisholm, wrote from the deck of the HMS *Snapper* that "the Behaviour of the Troops has been highly satisfactory" and commended the men's efforts in the well-defended "Woody Country," perhaps a nod to Black soldiers' notable success in the cane and brush of the West Indies.[75]

Over the next couple of decades, various West India companies participated in colonial operations near British settlements along the coast of West Africa. To be sure, their numbers in the region were quite small at the time—just a few hundred total regulars at most. The larger Royal African Colonial Corps, reconstituted in 1823 only four years after the disbandment of its predecessor, was still Britain's main imperial land regiment in West Africa.[76] But small West India detachments—and recruiting parties too—did remain at Sierra Leone, the Isles de Los, and the Gambia, and on various occasions took part in interior expeditions. A few companies of the 2nd West India, for example, most of whom were recently-conscripted Liberated Africans, participated in Britain's war against Asante in the mid 1820s. The soldiers of the 2nd who were shipped off to Cape Coast joined the African Colonial Corps and locally-raised Fante (and other "native") irregulars on a series of marches into the dense forested hinterland to skirmish with Asante armies.[77]

A few years later, in 1831, small detachments of the 1st and 2nd West India Regiments

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[75] James Chisholm to Charles MacCarthy, 19 May 1820, CO 267/51.
[76] Mbaeyi, *British Naval and Military Forces*, 219-220.
[77] Major H.I. Ricketts, *Narrative of the Ashantee War; with a View of the Present State of the Colony of Sierra Leone* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, T. Edgerton, and J. Ridgway, 1831), 20, 31, 44.

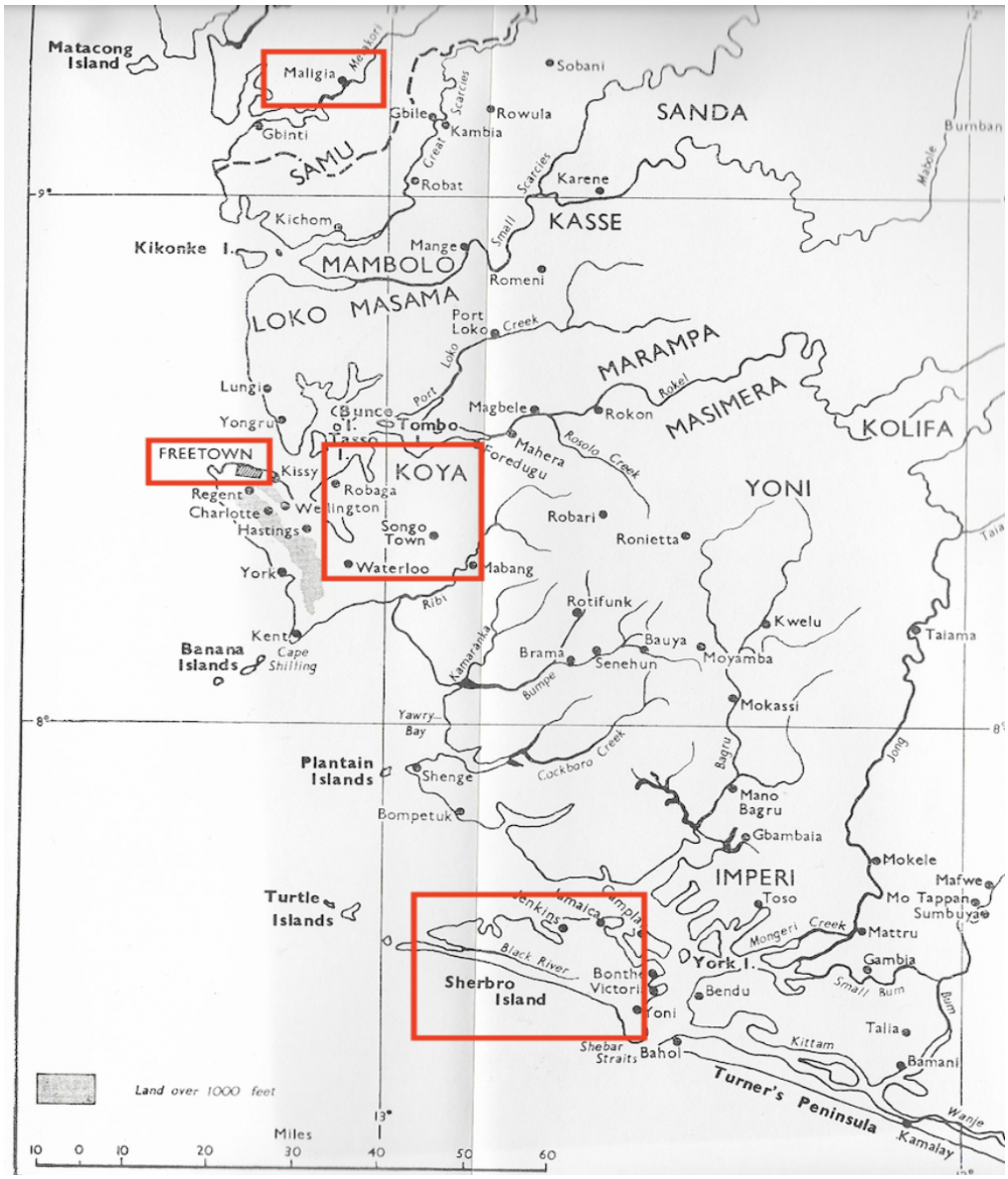
accompanied the African Corps and the Sierra Leone Militia in hastily boarding a military transport in Freetown bound for the Gambia River. The coalition joined Gambia-based colonial forces—another company or two of the African Corps and probably a few dozen more West India soldiers as well—in squashing an attack on a couple of British settlements ordered by the king of the north-bank state of Niumi (British officials called it Barra). The violent clash had been brewing for some time. British officials, intent on halting Niumi leaders' taxation of British river traders, had annexed a strip of land along the northern riverbank across from the colonial town of Bathurst a few years earlier, asserting unfettered access to the rivermouth.[78] The colonial regiments subdued Niumi forces and affirmed Britain's claim to the northern bank. The war in coastal Gambia was no major event in the grand scheme, but it did exemplify what would become a persistent task for the West India Regiments. Supporting British merchants in disputes with local leaders over matters of trade and territory had emerged as a primary motivation for the mobilization of the West India Regiments and other colonial soldiers and irregulars in West Africa.

The trend continued. In Sierra Leone, through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, petty disputes between British officials and merchants and African chiefs and traders broke up the West India Regiments' monotonous routines of drill and manual labor. By this time, the corps was substantially larger and more central to West African colonial conflicts, if only by default; the African Colonial Corps had been demobilized, with its healthy soldiers drafted into the West India Regiments.[79] Freetown-based West India companies sailed for the Sherbro

[78] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 179. On Britain's war with Niumi in the Gambia, see Donald R. Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niumi, the Gambia*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 137-139; J.M. Gray, *A History of the Gambia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015 [1940]), 344-352; Paul Mmegha Mbaeyi, "The Barra-British War of 1831: A Reconsideration of its Origins and Importance," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, no. 4 (1967): 617-631.
[79] Dyde, *Empty Sleeve*, 136.

country just south of the colony in 1849 to settle a dispute between rival chiefs that had disrupted regional trade. And the following year, West India soldiers and royal marines steamed up the Great Scarcies River to back up a British merchant whose argument with a local chief over a debt looked ready to turn violent.[80]

**Map: Sierra Leone and its hinterland**




*Source: Christopher Fyfe,* A History of Sierra Leone *(London: Oxford University Press, 1962).*

[80] Mbaeyi, *British Military and Naval Forces*, 117-118.

A few years later, a catastrophic clash between British forces and chief Bamba Mina Lahai at Maligia, up the Melakori River north of Freetown, roiled the Sierra Leone colony. When the chief ordered European traders out of the river, British officials in Sierra Leone embarked over 400 West India Regiment soldiers and royal marines on three gunboats to demand apologies and compensation from Bamba Mina. The troops landed at Maligia in December 1854, waded ashore, and surrounded the town. Bamba Mina ultimately offered little argument and agreed to the terms demanded by British officials, and the issue was settled for a time.[81] But the following spring, the chief still had not made financial amends, and naval officers steamed up the Melakori River again with a couple of colonial bureaucrats to demand an explanation. The governor's secretary, Eugene Dillett, instead got into an argument with the chief and his men. Back in Freetown, Dillett filled in the acting governor, Robert Dougan, and Dougan matched his secretary's fury. The governor gathered up the Freetown companies of the 1st and 3rd West India Regiments and embarked them in the HMS *Teazer* for the Melakori River with instructions to capture Bamba Mina and burn Maligia to the ground.[82]

Dropping anchor in the river, the troops disembarked and marched on Maligia while the gunboat shelled the town. The infantry, armed with lucifer matches, set ablaze the chief's home, the mosque, and several other buildings before boarding their riverboats to return to the *Teazer*. The troops returned early in the morning to find ruins still smoldering, and conducted a grape-and-canister sweep of the dense brush that surrounded the village. A contingent of about thirty regulars advanced ahead toward the town, where they were surprised by heavy fire from armed men concealed in the brush. Some twenty West India soldiers were killed on the spot. The main body of the colonial force, about seventy-five men, rushed ahead to assist, but faced strong

[81] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 236-238.
[82] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 239.

resistance from the town's defenders. The West India troops sustained heavy casualties on retreat to the *Teazer*. Many lay dead in town and along the riverbank, others had been swallowed up by the thick mud exposed by the low tide, and some drowned in the Melakori when their over-filled riverboat sank after being shot up by the chief's soldiers. Back on the *Teazer*, officers counted eighty-four dead or missing and eleven wounded, more than half of the 135-man force that had landed hours before.[83]

The surviving infantrymen of the 1st and 3rd West India Regiments returned to the Tower Hill barracks in Freetown as panic gripped the Sierra Leone colony. The retreat had been embarrassing, and the acting governor—accused of ordering the expedition "without foresight or judgment"—took the fall for the catastrophe.[84] But the carnage in Maligia did not deter future military expeditions in the name of protecting British trade and traders. On the contrary, the Melakori conflict was one encounter in a series of violent mid-century clashes between the colonial state and various polities of the Sierra Leone hinterland. The frontier would become the scene of raiding, contested boundaries, and violence throughout the second half of the century, with the West India Regiments acting as some of the key colonial combatants.[85]

In the early 1860s, the colonial government embraced an overtly expansionist agenda in the Sierra Leone region. British officials annexed the Sherbro country to the south of the Freetown peninsula, and they were also interested in pressing eastward into the Koya (Quiah) country (see the map above). Colonial officials had long squabbled with Koya Temne over land, access to waterways, and slave trading, issues which had erupted in violent conflict before.[86] In

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[83] Captain R.D. Fletcher to the War Office, 26 May 1855, printed in Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History,* 97-102.
[84] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 240.
[85] Trina Leah Hogg, "'Our Country Customs': Diplomacy, Legality, and Violence on the Sierra Leone Frontier, 1861-1896," (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2013).
[86] Adeleye Ijagbemi, "The Kossoh War, 1838-41: A Study in Temne/Colony Relations in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 5, no. 4 (1971): 549-564; Kenneth C. Wylie, "The Slave Trade in Nineteenth Century Temneland and the British Sphere of Influence," *African Studies Review* 16, no. 2 (1973): 203-

December 1860, Sierra Leone governor Stephen John Hill asked the Colonial Office to endorse some more active measures against any Koya chiefs who were reportedly harassing British subjects, and suggested the establishment of a military outpost along the Rokel River, which sliced deep into the Koya country.[87] A few months later, a group of Koya Temne plundered a British factory at Tombo Island at the entrance to the Rokel. In response, Governor Hill threatened a gunboat shelling, and chief Alexander Bei Kanta surrendered a strip of Koya land to Britain. But the chief quickly reconsidered the decision he had made under duress and tried to back out of the deal. Meanwhile, British traders continued to spar with Koya Temne over the stretch of land, and when a group of Temne shot and killed a colonial soldier occupying the ceded strip, Hill mobilized the 2nd West India Regiment and the colonial militia to root out the attackers and secure the territory for colonial merchant-settlers.[88]

Two hundred soldiers of the 2nd West India led an expedition into the Koya country, supported by a small group of militiamen and some Mende and Loko auxiliaries from the regions around the colony. From the colonial village of Waterloo, which sat near the rough border to the contested Koya territory, the troops marched on the town of Madonkia where Temne forces had constructed a potent stockade.[89] The Regiments and their allies shelled the storage house, their rounds igniting much of what was inside. Over the next week, British and Temne forces clashed several times, first at a village called Songo Town, home to a Loko chief friendly to colonial

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217; Suzanne Schwarz, "Land and Settlement: Temne Responses to British Abolitionist Intervention in Sierra Leone in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *African Economic History* 49, no. 1 (2021): 222-248. Joseph J. Bangura explores the relationship between Temne speakers and the British colonial state during a later period in *The Temne of Sierra Leone: African Agency in the Making of a British Colony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[87] Stephen John Hill to the Duke of Newcastle, 19 December 1860, CO 267/268.

[88] Mbaeyi, *British Naval and Military Forces*, 118-120; Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 310-312.

[89] Paul Mmegha Mbaeyi has described the anti-colonial response as "something close to a Temne national rising" that united Temne speakers across the region against an expanding British colonial state. Mbaeyi, *British Naval and Military Forces*, 120.

officials; again at Madonkia, where soldiers of the 2nd West India re-took the town from Koya Temne forces and burned down the re-constructed stockade; and later at the village of Robea, where the armies engaged in heavy fire for several hours through what British military officers would describe as the "jungle."[90] The efforts of the 2nd West India and their Mende and Loko allies were soon augmented by a couple of royal gunboats, including one sent down from the Gambia, which bombarded several riverine Koya towns while land forces advanced in skirmishing order, ending the war on British terms. Bei Kanta and his allied headmen had little choice but to confirm British control of the disputed part of Koya.[91]

Elsewhere in coastal West Africa, the West India Regiments engaged African forces in regions nearby to colonial settlements, seeking to protect British economic interests by promoting political stability on colonial frontiers. Several hundred miles north of Freetown, along the Gambia River, colonial officials periodically deployed the West India Regiments in the cycles of mid-century regional conflict known as the Soninke-Marabout wars. The jihād launched by *Sheikh* Umar Tal that united much of the western Sudan under the Umarian state had major political ramifications within the river kingdoms near British Bathurst, as Muslim "Marabout" leaders sought to overthrow traditional "Soninke" ruling classes.[92] Warfare in the surrounding states troubled colonial officials and hindered regional trade too. British administrators at first hoped not to get involved in regional religious warfare, even as a violent conflict led by the Muslim reformist Fodé Silla Turé raged in the polity of Kombo just beyond

[90] Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 132-140.
[91] Stephen John Hill to William Hill, 3 February 1862, reprinted in Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 144; Mbaeyi, *British Naval and Military Forces*, 120.
[92] The classic study of Umar Tal's religious wars remains David Robinsion's *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). On the Islamic revolutions as they impacted Gambia River states, see Wright, *Very Small Place*, 143-147.

the colonial settlement.[93] But a passive Gambia governor was later replaced by Luke Smyth O'Connor, an experienced and aggressive career soldier who had grand ambitions for the "pacification"—and annexation—of the unstable frontier territory. In addition to his Gambia governorship, O'Connor was both a long-time officer with the 1st West India Regiment who had cut his teeth as an ensign in Barbados and commander-in-chief of all British land forces in West Africa. O'Connor, on his appointment as governor, carried the military headquarters with him from Freetown, where he had been stationed before, to Bathurst to form a potent colonial garrison at the mouth of the Gambia River.[94]

In May of 1853, several months after his appointment as Gambia governor, O'Connor met with Kombo Soninke leaders and Marabout delegates in an effort to reach some sort of agreement for de-escalation. But eager to subjugate and annex, O'Connor's idea of tempering the situation came in the form of military occupation. With companies of the West India Regiments and the Gambia Militia parading conspicuously nearby, the governor mooted a plan that probably only satisfied him. O'Connor demanded that the Marabout demilitarize and vacate the area and offered protection to the old Kombo rulers if they allowed Britain to annex part of the kingdom. Several Kombo leaders agreed, but Marabout leaders, who occupied the Kombo town of Sabaji, held out and requested time to mull over the negotiations. O'Connor quickly concluded that the Marabouts were stalling in an effort to gather an army to confront British forces. A few days later, he marched on Sabaji with a considerable force of colonial troops—463 total regulars of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd West India Regiments supported by a 105-man Gambia militia regiment and thirty-five retired Black pensioners who had been mobilized for the expedition.[95]

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[93] David E. Skinner, "Islam in Kombo: The Spiritual and Militant Jihād of Fodé Ibrahim Silla Turé," *Islamic Africa* 3, no. 1 (2012): 87-126.
[94] Mbaeyi, *British Naval and Military Forces*, 114.
[95] Mbaeyi, *British Naval and Military Forces*, 114-115.

The West India Regiments and the militiamen lugged two six-pounders and two howitzers out of the Bathurst garrison and through marshy creeks and packed red clay into northern Kombo country. Approaching the town, British forces found armed defenders of the Marabout village stationed around the mosque and the stockade. From a distance the artillery-trained soldiers of the West India Regiments opened fire from the mobile battery and shelled Sabaji. After launching a few rounds, they had blown the roof of the mosque and collapsed several other buildings in the process. The West India soldiers then stormed the village. In skirmishing order, the 1st Regiment formed the center division while the 2nd took the right flank and the 3rd marched on the left. Bayonets forward, the troops chased the armed villagers away from the stockade while the artillerymen continued to bombard the mosque, where a group of Marabouts were holed up. As those inside fled the burning, crumbling structure, crouching West India troops opened fire and massacred an unspecified number of villagers while taking several others prisoner. The ruins of Sabaji were still smoldering when Captain O'Connor confirmed with Kombo chiefs that the territory had been annexed by Great Britain.[96] Two years later, the governor returned to Sabaji in an effort to stamp out lingering opposition to colonial authority. First repelled by local forces, the West India Regiments again inflicted maximum damage on the "rebel town."[97]

The Gambia's mid-century religious wars became a periodic two-decades-long engagement for West India Regiment soldiers stationed along the coast of West Africa. Troops located at Bathurst were on constant alert for an attack from Kombo Marabouts, and colonial forces were periodically deployed upriver too, most often to support British river traders whose

[96] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 228-231.
[97] Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 107.

factories were plundered and destroyed by warring factions.[98] In 1861, some six years after Captain O'Connor's violent return to Sabaji, the West India Regiments led another aggressive expedition against a Gambia River state, this time the lower river kingdom of Badibu, where the Muslim cleric Maba Diakhou had launched a jihād against the old Soninke ruling classes. Months earlier, a group of British merchants reported to the new colonial governor, Colonel George Abbas D'Arcy, also an officer with the 1st West India Regiment, that their trading outposts had been plundered, collateral damage of ongoing warfare in the region. On D'Arcy's order, six companies of the 1st West India and four companies of the 2nd piled into four colonial gunboats and steamed upriver. On arrival, the HMS *Dover* and *Torch* opened fire and shelled Badibu's riverbank settlements for three hours before the West India Regiments waded ashore and engaged local foot soldiers and cavalry in extended skirmishes. The colonial troops bivouacked for the next several nights in range of the *Torch*'s guns, and after destroying the nearby town of Saba they forced several Badibu chiefs to agree to make financial restitution for the attacks on British traders.[99]

A few years later, British tensions with Marabout chiefs reached a head again. In July 1866, Colonel D'Arcy mobilized British forces against the Marabout leader Amer Fall, accused of persistently harassing British-allied headmen. Some 270 West India soldiers and officers, led by Governor/Colonel D'Arcy, steamed upriver in two gunboats with plans to destroy the potent stockade of Amer Fall at the small Muslim village of Tubab Kolon (Tubacolong). The initial shelling of Tubab Kolon, to D'Arcy's frustration, did little damage to the well-defended stockade, and the impatient colonel asked for volunteers to move ahead on foot. Two officers and fifteen regulars, armed with musket and axe, followed D'Arcy to the stockade while the

[98] Mbaeyi, *British Military and Naval Forces*, 116.
[99] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 266-275; Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 120-125.

remainder of the force engaged in a firefight from the outskirts of town. Both officers quickly endured mortal gunshot wounds, and only D'Arcy and two Black privates—twenty-six-year-old Tortola-born Samuel Hodge and another man only known in the records as Private Boswell—arrived unwounded at the wood-walled armory. Hodge and Boswell hacked a hole in the siding and made their way in. Boswell was shot dead in the process, and Hodge endured musket wounds of his own as he axed the stockade gate open from the inside. The injured private bled out as his comrades entered through the door he had opened and set fire to the Marabout stockade. Before long, the surviving West India soldiers, dragging the gravely wounded Private Hodge along with them, returned to the gunboats and embarked for Bathurst, leaving the billowing village behind.[100]

**Private Samuel Hodge Hands a Musket to George Abbas D'Arcy, Tubab Kolon, 1866**

*Source: Chevalier Louis William Desanges, Penlee House Gallery and Museum, Penzance.*

[100] Dyde, *Empty Sleeve*, 195-196.

Samuel Hodge was lauded as a heroic defender of British imperialism. Six months after the expedition, on 4 January 1867, he accepted the Victoria Cross "for his bravery at the storming and capture of the stockaded town," becoming the first Black soldier to receive the British military's highest honor.[101] By this time, he and his company had already been redeployed across the Atlantic to British Honduras where they were sent into the woody interior to patrol the frontier against the forces of an Indigenous chief who had been sparring with British timber producers.[102] On the bestowal of the queen's medal, Hodge was still suffering from the bodily damage inflicted upon him by the defenders of Tubab Kolon. He died in Honduras a few months later.

**Conclusion: from Asante to Morant Bay, and back**

In the mid 1860s, the British Atlantic world rocked from both sides. Nearly concomitant military engagements in West Africa and the Caribbean emphasized the sprawling geographical coverage of the West India Regiments and exemplified the different kinds of work—from undertaking imperial expeditions to policing colonized populations—the Black corps were made to do in the Atlantic tropics. In late 1863, the War Office ordered numerous West India companies to Cape Coast as Britain geared up for another war with Asante. Black troops sailed in from Sierra Leone, and hundreds of others boarded transports in the Caribbean and crossed the Atlantic.[103] On the Gold Coast, however, the Regiments were of little use. Colonial officers on the ground much preferred the locally-raised Fante and Hausa constabularies, which were far greater in number

[101] Victoria Cross Details for Samuel Hodge, Private, 4th West India Regiment, 4 January 1867, WO 98/4/15.
[102] Dyde, *Empty Sleeve*, 181-182, 196.
[103] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 278.

anyway.[104] Most of the West India soldiers ended up making camp at little frontier outposts, where they were chronically undersupplied and exposed to torrential summer downpours that washed away their flimsy huts over and over again. The troops participated in limited fashion in the interior expedition, but the crux of their work was the occupation of the remote stations.[105] As illness ravaged the invariably soaked West India soldiers, the Gold Coast governor pulled the plug and sent many back to the Caribbean and Sierra Leone with apologies for their lack of involvement in military action against Asante.[106]

The following year, West India troops were some of the first responders in the suppression of the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, an event that rattled the British empire and resulted in the Crown takeover of the island.[107] Arguments between Black Jamaicans and white officials over land and labor erupted in a wave of unrest in October, and the governor, John Eyre, ordered swift and harsh retribution. Kingston-based companies of the 1st West India loaded into the HMS *Onyx* in the harbor and sailed a short way east for Morant Bay where local militia were already at work. White soldiers of the 6th Regiment joined the counterinsurgent force too. The West India troops' most notable contribution to the suppression of the rebellion seems to have been their march into the woodsy Cuna Cuna Gap to rescue dozens of landed families who had fled the uprising to hide out in the hills. They also, alongside the white troops and militia, captured numerous insurgents, and surely helped to carry out the tidal wave of gruesome

[104] On local Gold Coast constabularies, see Getz, *Slavery and Reform*; David Killingray, "Imagined Martial Communities: Recruiting for the Army and Police in Colonial Ghana, 1860-1960," in *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention*, ed. Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2000), 119-136; Balakrishnan, "Imperial Policing."
[105] Henry Brackenbury, *The Ashanti War: A Narrative Prepared from the Official Documents by Permission of Major-General Sir Garnet Wolesley* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), II:20, 23.
[106] Benjamin Pine to Colonel Conran, 27 July 1864, quoted in Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 151-152.
[107] See Gad Heuman, *"The Killing Time": The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

executions ordered by Governor Eyre.[108] A few companies of the 2nd West India had sailed in haste from Barbados to provide backup. They missed the uprising but spent the next several weeks patrolling Saint Thomas parish.[109]

Back on the Gold Coast, British-Asante relations remained unsteady, and turned violent once again in 1873. Britain's latest war in West Africa triggered another mobilization of West India soldiers, with numerous companies converging on the Gold Coast from Guiana, Jamaica, and elsewhere.[110] Though they were hardly deployed in the previous decade's expeditions—and would be heavily outnumbered again by local African paramilitary units—the War Office insisted the corps be present and ready regardless. Some of the West India soldiers boarding military transports in the Caribbean, and especially Jamaica, had almost certainly participated in the suppression of the Morant Bay rebellion, and it is possible that a few had suffered through the dreadful summer rains during the last war with Asante.

From their initial establishment in the 1790s through to the later decades of the nineteenth century, the work of the West India Regiments evolved. Initially, the corps undertook heavy tracking and skirmishing work in the cane, brush, and peaks of Caribbean islands. Observations about topography and tactics, in addition to disease and health, led British commanders to carve out this specific role for Black soldiers in the wartime Caribbean. After the war, the Regiments developed into a transatlantic imperial force and provided armed support for the various objectives that Britain pursued in the nineteenth century. Of course, different imperial agendas

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[108] Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 292-293.
[109] Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History*, 152-154.
[110] Dyde, *Empty Sleeve*, 198-205. The Asante War of the mid 1870s has been subjected to fairly substantial, if dated, scholarly inquiry. See John Keegan, "The Ashanti Campaign, 1873-4," in *Victorian Military Campaigns*, ed. Brian Bond (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967), 161-198; Alan Lloyd, *The Drums of Kumasi: The Story of the Ashanti Wars* (New York: Panther, 1965); Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830-1914* (London: UCL Press, 1998); Robert B. Edgerton, *The Fall of the Asante Empire: The Hundred-Year War for Africa's Gold Coast* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

predominated in different regions, meaning that West India soldiers' combat missions varied widely depending on place. In the Caribbean, the policing of Black populations was a central preoccupation for the troops, as the monumental political, social, and economic changes that accompanied the transition from slavery to free wage labor periodically turned violent. In West Africa, Britain's plans to develop commerce and expand its territorial claims were often harnessed to justify military aggression. The West India Regiments, especially in the Sierra Leone and Gambia regions, were the core colonial land force in several of these operations. In these instances, race shaped the corps' military assignments too, but in a different way than it had in the wartime Caribbean. In 1790s Grenada, for example, thousands of white soldiers were present, but many were sick and most struggled in the harsh terrain, thus increasing and solidifying the army's demands of Black colonial troops. In 1850s Gambia, there were few white soldiers around at all.

Time and again, the West India Regiments reliably executed the operations assigned to them. Though some colonial officials disliked and feared the Black companies, few could reasonably deny that they were effective soldiers whose work benefited the British empire. But obedience wasn't assured all the time, and on multiple occasions, West India soldiers went to war against their officers and against Great Britain. The next chapter analyzes one of these instances.

Chapter Five

# Daaga:
# West African Soldiers and a West India Regiment Mutiny in Trinidad

Around 8:00 on the morning of 16 August 1837, three African soldiers of the 1st West India Regiment lined up for execution by firing squad. At the British garrison in the town of Saint Joseph in central Trinidad, various colonial and military officials had gathered, and the white 89th Regiment had made their way over from Port of Spain too. About nine weeks before, in mid-June, the three convicted men and dozens of co-conspirators had armed themselves in the night, attacked the colonial station, and fled out of town. Panic had gripped the colony for hours, followed by intense speculation and finger-pointing amongst army officers and local administrators. After a series of trials in the colonial capital, the three men stood in their "white grave clothes" facing the firing party.[1]

The violent actions of the executed men and their associates had been surprising to many. The 1st West India, over four decades old at the time, had a good reputation. The corps had earned royal honors for its Napoleonic campaigns in Dominica, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. And after the war, soldiers of the 1st Regiment had helped to suppress Bussa's Rebellion in Barbados and the slave insurgency in Demerara a few years later.[2] A couple of other violent revolts had been carried out in different regiments. A group of soldiers in the 8th West India had opened fire on their officers at the Cabrits Garrison in Dominica in 1802. And a few years later, several new recruits for the 2nd West India stationed at Fort Augusta in Kingston harbor had attacked their superiors during a training session and attempted to flee the station. But this was decades before, and one of those regiments—the 8th—had long been disbanded.

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[1] Lionel Mordaunt Fraser, *History of Trinidad, From 1814 to 1839* (Port of Spain: Government Printing Office, 1896), 351-354.
[2] Major A.B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1885).

The uprising at Saint Joseph was well documented. There are a number of reasons for the lengthy paper trail. First and foremost, army officers and colonial officials had to fill in the War and Colonial Offices in London regarding the specifics of the event. And the well-publicized military trials meant ample court records too, many of which were reprinted in local newspapers. Furthermore, the timing of the insurgency—in 1837, just a few years after the abolition of slavery in British colonies—meant that the event would factor into ongoing arguments about race and the perceived dangers of people of African descent who were not bound by enslavement.[3] This likely influenced the thorough coverage of the uprising and trials in the *Port of Spain Gazette*, as well as the various rants and condemnations that featured in London papers like *The Standard*.[4] The Trinidad resident and historian, Edward Lanzer Joseph, who happened to be writing his *History of Trinidad* at the time, devoted the final chapter of his book to covering and explaining the soldiers' attack on the Saint Joseph station, and depicted the event as a clear demonstration of the "backwardness" of Africans—evidence of their unpredictability and "savagery," and of the necessity of Britain's mission to "civilize."[5]

But records of the attack also clarify who, exactly, undertook the mid-June insurgency and nuance our understanding of the ways in which the agitators might have understood and thought about their actions. Military and colonial officials on the ground in Trinidad claimed that the uprising was undertaken by some sixty to 100, or perhaps more, new West African conscripts for the 1st West India Regiment. The soldiers, observers report, were of "Yarraba" [Yoruba] and

[3] 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," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 4 (2018): 644.
[4] *Port of Spain Gazette*, 20 June, 23 June, 21 July, 18 August 1837; *The Standard*, 4 August 1837.
[5] Edward Lanzer Joseph, *History of Trinidad* (London: A.K. Newman & Co., 1838), 259-271. Joseph's *History* quickly became the authoritative account and interpretation of the event. Charles Kingsley's 1872 *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* (London: Macmillan & Co.) copies several paragraphs verbatim from Joseph. Major A.B. Ellis, in his 1885 *History of the First West India Regiment*, does the same, as does Fraser in his own 1896 *History* of the island.

"Paupau" [Popo] origin, having been conscripted as Liberated Africans off slave ships intercepted by the Royal Navy en route to Cuba from Bight of Benin ports. And even more specifically, military and colonial records point to a pair of leaders, offering ample detail regarding their personal histories and extensive speculation about their potential motivations. These kinds of details are rare for an event like this, and they facilitate an interpretation of the insurgency that takes into account soldiers' West African backgrounds and broader West African political dynamics.

The soldiers' uprising at the Saint Joseph garrison has been subjected to little scholarly interrogation.[6] Recently, David Lambert has noted that violent events such as this one shaped the attitudes of white proprietors in the Caribbean toward Black soldiers and Black people more generally.[7] And Maeve Ryan points out that the soldiers' collective action is a helpful reminder that despite their general reliability, West India troops did express discontent in clear, sometimes empire-shaking ways.[8] But efforts to explain the roots of the event and the aims of the insurgent soldiers have been generally unfruitful. One historian's analysis posits that the troops were compelled by anger over their forced enlistments, extensive manual labor assignments, and

[6] And generally, discussions of violent resistance undertaken by African soldiers in British regiments have leaned toward the twentieth century and focused on events on the African continent. See, for instance, David Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010), 121-140; Killingray, "The Mutiny of the West African Regiment in the Gold Coast, 1901," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (1983): 441-454; Timothy Stapleton, *West African Soldiers in Britain's Colonial Army, 1860-1960* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 272-295. For a little-known but contemporary event undertaken by African colonial conscripts, we have to turn to the Dutch East Indies. Ineke van Kessel has analyzed a series of mutinies carried out around 1840 by Akan and Asante soldiers of enslaved (or "donko") origin who served in the Dutch colonial army in Sumatra and Java. She locates the roots of their discontent within a frustrating concoction of unfulfilled promises, want of necessities, and challenges to their status as colonial troops. Van Kessel, "African mutinies in the Netherlands East Indies: A nineteenth-century colonial paradox," in *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History*, ed. Jon Abbink, Mirjam de Bruijn, and Klaas van Walraven (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 141-169.

[7] Lambert, "'[A] Mere Cloak.'"

[8] Maeve Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance and the British Antislavery World System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 221-223.

excessive corporal punishment.[9] These issues likely did upset the insurgents, but they aren't anything unique to the 1st West India in Trinidad, or even to Black soldiers in general. In other words, this argument does not explain why *these* conscripts revolted at *this* particular time. But what, exactly, the soldiers hoped to achieve is an impossible question to answer and leaves little room for firm conclusions anyway. A more instructive line of inquiry might be: what conditions facilitated the actions of the soldiers who attacked the Saint Joseph station, and what can their choices tell us about resistance and collective action in the West India Regiments?

This chapter undertakes a microhistorical analysis of the soldiers' uprising at Saint Joseph. Early sections walk through the events of the bloody morning and the trials of the indicted West African soldiers. Later sections analyze some of the various circumstances surrounding the event—West African warfare; enslavement, recapture, and conscription; and British Caribbean emancipation—and consider how these circumstances helped lay the groundwork for the attack on the colonial garrison. This chapter argues that the majority of the agitators were Yoruba speakers from the eastern Bight of Benin interior who were enslaved in the wars that ravaged the region in the mid 1830s. Their ethnolinguistic backgrounds can be known with reasonable precision, and their similar origins facilitated their collaboration in war against the British army and influenced the ways in which they organized and carried out the insurgency. Analyzing the events at Saint Joseph in this way helps us to understand how African soldiers in the West India Regiments related to one another, how their African backgrounds mattered in the British military, and what facilitated powerful, collective action. Furthermore, in forwarding these arguments, this chapter's analysis also places the event in the context of a series of Yoruba-led and -associated insurgencies happening around the same time in other parts of the Americas.

[9] Thomas August, "Rebels with a Cause: The St. Joseph Mutiny of 1837," *Slavery & Abolition* 12, no. 2 (1991): 73-91.

Recently, military historians have revitalized scholarly explorations of mutiny in colonial armies, pushing beyond more dated studies concerned with identifying grievances, patterns, and material conditions to consider instead "the larger intercolonial and global connections that informed the beliefs and actions of ordinary people in multiple locations."[10] At the same time, historians of Atlantic slavery have long examined instances of African revolts in the Americas. A thick thread of this historiography has considered ethnicity, language, and the geographic and "national" origins of those who took up arms against planters and the colonial systems under which they lived.[11] Drawing these lines of scholarship together, this chapter deepens and complicates our understanding of what armed rebellions in the British army looked like and what kinds of factors facilitated them. It also posits that scholarship on African revolts and warfare in the Americas is useful in wider contexts, as such research helps to explain methods of collective action that are applicable beyond the study of the "slave rebellion."

**"Mutinous conduct" in the West India Regiments**

Conflicts between Black soldiers and their officers and NCOs were frequent in the colonial garrisons occupied by the West India Regiments. Indeed, as previous chapters have noted, courts martial were omnipresent occurrences. At any given time, injured soldiers lay in army hospitals recovering from vicious corporal punishments meted out by military courts in retribution for

[10] Heather Streets-Salter, "The Local Was Global: The Singapore Mutiny of 1915," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 3 (2013): 544.

[11] Coromantee features heavily in this scholarship. See Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2020); Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); John K. Thornton, "The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean," *Journal of Caribbean History* 32 (1998): 161-178; Monica Schuler, "Akan Slave Rebellions in the British Caribbean," *Savacou* 1 (1970): 8-31. Thornton posits that the Stono Rebellion was organized by enslaved people from the Kongo kingdom. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 1101-1113. On Yoruba-speaking insurgents, see Manuel Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807-1844* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

various misbehaviors. “Mutiny” or “mutinous conduct” was perhaps the most serious offense. Such accusations were not frequent, but not vanishingly rare either. General courts martial registers for the British army abroad reveal a number of mutiny accusations in the West India Regiments, though the records offer few details beyond the name of the accused and the verdict and punishment.[12] The first General Court Martial for mutiny in the Black corps followed an occurrence in Saint Vincent in 1797, when the Black private Edward Taylor was caught attempting to organize a takeover of the Brimstone Hill garrison to turn it over to the French. A fellow soldier turned Private Taylor in to one of the corporals. He was swiftly hanged while several convicted accomplices were sentenced to 1,000 lashes each.[13]

This section undertakes a very brief overview of two incidents in the West India Regiments which the British army labeled “mutinies.” It aims to establish that violent, group revolts against the colonial military were organized and carried out by Black soldiers on occasion beginning very shortly after the establishment of the corps. It also discusses how military and colonial officials reacted to these events, emphasizing the increased anxieties that Black soldiers’ uprisings caused, as well as the tendency of officials on the spot to dismiss attacks on colonial garrisons as an unfortunate product of the “savagery” of new African conscripts.

Five years after Private Taylor’s execution, soldiers of the 8th West India Regiment stationed at the Cabrits Garrison in northwestern Dominica carried out a deadly revolt that troubled local officials as well as the War and Colonial Offices in London. This was the first of three major, deadly uprisings carried out by groups of soldiers in the West India Regiments. On the night of 9 April 1802, a group of 8th West India infantry shot and killed four officers and a

[12] General Courts Martial Registers 1795-1825, WO 90/1.
[13] Markus S. Weise, “A Social History of the West India Regiments, 1795-1838,” (PhD dissertation, Howard University, 2017), 106-109.

few garrison employees after an evening of excessive fatigue work. Several NCOs were wounded too. A number of military officials fled the scene for the cover of the swamp nearby, while others were taken hostage by the mutineers. The Black troops, perhaps looking to delay any distress messages coming from the garrison, also rushed to the battery mounts and fired upon the HMS *Magnificent* stationed at Prince Rupert's harbor. One of the majors wrangled a group of fifty soldiers uninvolved in the uprising to help him fortify the access road off the peninsula in order to prevent the mutineers' escape and sent a messenger down to Roseau to alert the governor and order reinforcements to the Cabrits Garrison.[14]

Hundreds of white soldiers, marines, and militiamen arrived at Prince Rupert's a day later and, after a series of deadly skirmishes, re-took the garrison, inducing the surrender of the mutineers.[15] Several alleged ringleaders were taken into custody. Weeks later, they were tried in military courts in Martinique and Barbados, with most condemned to swift execution.[16] In the aftermath of the event, colonial and military officials looked into potential causes of the mutiny at the Cabrits Garrison. The main issue, most agreed, especially upon hearing the court martial testimony provided by several soldiers in the corps, was that the Black troops had been employed in extensive fatigue labor for no fatigue pay, clearing the thick swamp contiguous to the garrison in the evenings on the order of their officers and the colonial governor, Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone. In addition, several soldiers testified to hearing rumors that the regiment was about to be disbanded with the men distributed amongst local plantations to work as enslaved "Field Negroes."[17] The military court and local officials accepted these explanations.

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[14] Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone to Thomas Trigge, 14 April 1802, WO 1/95; Cochrane-Johnstone to Lord Hobart, 17 April 1802, CO 71/34.
[15] Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone to Lord Hobart, 17 April 1802, CO 71/34.
[16] General Courts Martial Registers 1795-1825, WO 90/1.
[17] "Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry assembled at Fort Royal, Martinique, on the 28th Day of April 1802 … in order to investigate the Causes of the late Mutiny which broke out in the 8th West India Regiment at Prince Rupert's, in the Island of Dominique, on the Night of the 9th of April 1802," WO 1/95.

The testimony, however, didn't stop Cochrane-Johnstone from trying to argue that the "savage ferocity of the New Negroes" was the root cause of the incident at the Cabrits station.[18] The governor certainly sensed that he was in hot water for ordering the fatigue work on what turned out to be his own private property, and grasped at the opportunity to deflect responsibility. Evidence does not bear out his accusation, however. African conscripts were certainly involved, but court records indicate that numerous "Creole"—by which the army meant Caribbean born—regulars were active participants.[19]

In the aftermath of the event, the West India soldiers who had been at the Cabrits station were divided up and dispersed amongst other regiments. And Cochrane-Johnstone was later court martialed himself for illegally demanding unpaid fatigue work from the corps.[20] Otherwise, the event had little tangible impact on the West India Regiments or the British army in the Caribbean. Roger Buckley, though, notes that lingering concerns amongst white proprietors diminished the likelihood that aging or disabled Black troops would be released into plantation societies. Rather, soldiers deemed to no longer be useful in a military capacity tended to be held within the British army as unarmed fort laborers, at least for a while. This was not a permanent policy, but one designed to relieve some of the criticism of the Black corps in the wake of the events in Dominica.[21]

At Fort Augusta near Kingston in 1808, another deadly clash between West India soldiers, this time of the 2nd Regiment, and British officers triggered outrage amongst local colonial officials and white proprietors in Jamaica. On the morning of 27 May, following a

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[18] Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone to Thomas Trigge, 14 April 1802, CO 318/19.
[19] "Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry assembled at Fort Royal, Martinique, on the 28th Day of April 1802 … in order to investigate the Causes of the late Mutiny which broke out in the 8th West India Regiment at Prince Rupert's, in the Island of Dominique, on the Night of the 9th of April 1802," WO 1/95.
[20] Court Martial of Andrew Cochrane Johnstone, 1805, WO 71/109.
[21] Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 77-78.

daybreak training session on the garrison parade ground, a group of privates numbering a few dozen fixed their bayonets to their muskets and charged out the entrance to the fort. They stabbed and killed a lieutenant who had tried to halt their escape and shot and wounded a major too. On exiting the garrison, the agitators were approached by a separate group of veteran 2nd West India regulars who had been out parading on the beach. The fire of the trained soldiers killed seventeen of the attackers and dispersed the other sixteen into the thick trees outside the station. All those who fled were captured shortly thereafter.[22]

The perpetrators, according to Hugh Lyle Carmichael, the commander-in-chief of colonial forces in Jamaica, were "33 Africans lately arrived from the Rio Chamba."[23] "Chamba" in this context referred to Tchamba speakers from the northern Gold Coast hinterland, linguistically distinct from the Akan/Twi speakers generally labeled Coromantee.[24] In pointing this out, Carmichael meant to clarify that this was an isolated event undertaken by an "uncivilized" and inherently dangerous group of men who had not yet been inculcated with military discipline. The army seems to have had little interest in seeking a motive beyond Carmichael's explanation. The event was simply, in their eyes, the unfortunate product of the "imaginings & Savage Notions of a few undisciplined Negroes of an interior ferocious Nation."[25]

The events in Jamaica troubled military and colonial officials across the Caribbean. As David Lambert has shown, violent uprisings led by West India soldiers fed fierce imperial arguments about the character of people of African descent and the safety of the white Europeans

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[22] *Journal of the Assembly of Jamaica XII*, 109-112; William Villettes to Lord Castlereagh, 15 June 1808, CO 137/123; J.E. Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment from the Date of Raising 1795 to 1898* (London: Forster Groom & Co., 1899), 28-30.
[23] Hugh Lyle Carmichael to Lord Castlereagh, 12 August 1808, CO 137/123. Another officer stated that the troops were "the last who had been purchased for the regiment and all of the same nation." William Villettes to Lord Castlereagh, 15 June 1808, CO 137/123.
[24] Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas*, 98. The "rio"/river to which Carmichael refers was probably the Volta.
[25] Hugh Lyle Carmichael to the Jamaica Assembly, 1 November 1808, CO 137/123.

who lived around them.[26] The Jamaica Assembly demanded the removal of the 2nd West India from the island, pleading the War Office to send more white soldiers in instead. The army would not go that far, but they did agree to reassign the troops to stations in the Bahamas and British Honduras and replace them with companies from those other garrisons.[27] While British officers generally denied concern about the supposed dangers of the Black corps, courts martial records suggest at least a little bit of discomfort. Just a couple weeks later, in Saint Vincent, two sergeants and two privates of the 6th West India Regiment were rung up on charges of "Mutinous Conduct" for "Loading & Firing without Orders."[28] The timing may have been a coincidence, or it may demonstrate an anxious military establishment in the wake of the events in Jamaica.

The chaotic events in Dominica in 1802 and Jamaica six years later shook the West Indian military establishment and increased anxieties amongst those skeptical of Black colonial troops. Colonial and military officials sometimes probed hard enough to find legitimate motives, like they did in the aftermath of the events at Dominica. In other instances, they seized on opportunities to blame "untamed" Africans, as was the case in Jamaica. But perhaps more importantly, these events also demonstrate that West India soldiers did, on various occasions, violently resist their conscription and poor treatment. Over the next three decades, a number of instances of "mutinous conduct" were recorded in military records, though none as organized and deadly as the attacks on Cabrits and Fort Augusta.[29] That changed in 1837, when dozens of soldiers of the 1st West India undertook a deadly rebellion that led to a series of well-publicized military trials, a public execution, and the reinvigoration of colonial concerns about the danger

[26] Lambert, "'[A] Mere Cloak.'"
[27] Lord Castlereagh to Hugh Lyle Carmichael, 14 December 1808, CO 137/123.
[28] General Courts Martial Registers 1795-1825, WO 90/1.
[29] General Courts Martial Registers 1795-1825, WO 90/1; General Orders, West India Regiment Headquarters, Barbados, NLJ, MS 200.

and "ferocity" of African soldiers.

**War at Saint Joseph's barracks**

Early Sunday morning, 18 June 1837, a fire tore through the little neighborhood of soldiers' huts on the outskirts of the Saint Joseph garrison in central Trinidad.[30] Flames billowed from the military village into the sky, and thick smoke dampened the glow of the night's full moon. A large group of West African soldiers of the 1st West India Regiment—between sixty and 100 according to officers on the scene—made their way over from the scorching huts to the garrison's central square.[31] All the while, whoops and screams from the crowd startled sleeping officers, garrison staff, and other soldiers awake. The troops belted a call-and-response "war-song," so observers called it, as they began their attack on the colonial station.[32]

Leading the middle-of-the-night insurgency, according to military officials and co-conspirators, was an imposing "Paupau" [Popo] grenadier called Daaga, or, since his induction into the 1st West India Regiment several months before, Private Donald Stewart. Some of the garrison personnel apparently called him "Longa Longa" for his exceedingly tall frame.[33] Second in command was Private Maurice Ogston, a "Yarriba [Yoruba] chief" called Mawee in West Africa. Ogston's role in organizing the insurgency is less clear, though he is unambiguously regarded as the main co-conspirator in all military and colonial records.[34]

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[30] The night's events are pieced together here mainly using a couple of colonial sources: E.L. Joseph's *History of Trinidad*, published the following year, and a lengthy despatch that Trinidad governor George Hill wrote to the Colonial Office a couple days after the mutiny.
[31] The numbers are unclear. Trinidad governor George Hill estimated sixty to 100 active participants. George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114. Other contemporary sources claim that close to 300 men participated, but this is likely an overstatement. See Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 264.
[32] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 264; George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114.
[33] John Saillant, "Dâaga," in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*, ed. Franklin W. Knight and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Oxford University Press, 2018, accessed online September 2019.
[34] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 264; George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114; Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Maurice Ogston, WO 71/299.

Daaga/Donald Stewart and Mawee/Maurice Ogston, along with two others, made the insurgent soldiers' first move. Barging into supply rooms, they seized muskets, balls, and powder from the shelves and charged several firelocks. But the insurgent soldiers met resistance immediately. In the storage room, Private Charles Dixon, a long-serving African regular, stepped in to intervene. Mawee, who had somewhere picked up a sergeant's sword, swung around and sliced Dixon. A moment later, Daaga shot the veteran soldier dead. After raiding the stores and arming several of their co-insurgents, the men hustled out and across the yard to the officers' quarters, wounding a couple of other "old soldiers" who had attempted to halt their progress. Approaching the building, the men opened fire, pumping hot musket balls through the windows and into the siding. The volleys sent several officers racing out the back door. Most of the startled men scrambled half-dressed through the high Guinea grass behind the residence and vanished over a hill. Colonel William Bush, the officer commanding the 1st West India companies in Trinidad, began to approach the line of musket-wielding soldiers with his adjutant alongside him. Several of the insurgents fired in the officer's direction in an irregular volley that sprayed musket balls into the ground and through the dense foliage of low-hanging tree branches above. Colonel Bush turned and fled while the adjutant ran for the stable and burst out a moment later on his horse. The insurgent soldiers fired after him as he tore off for the Saint James garrison near Port of Spain to roust and gather the white soldiers of the 89th Regiment.[35]

The Saint Joseph station had quickly become a bloody scene. Private Dixon lay dead in a storage room, and one of the musket shots directed at the fleeing adjutant had struck and killed another soldier. Meanwhile, from inside the shot-up officers' quarters, a couple of African non-commissioned officers opened a steady counter-fire on the insurgents. Sergeant Merry and

[35] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 265-266; George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114.

Corporal Plague, who were later praised by military officials for their actions, killed two of the agitators and may have wounded another.[36]

Colonel Bush and the other officers who had fled the scene met up at a little police outpost just over the hill. The constables there, one of whom was a former West India Regiment soldier himself, gathered their arms and munitions and handed muskets over to the officers too. Meanwhile, the insurgent soldiers were on the move and headed in the direction of the police house, hustling north up one of the main communication roads out of the town of Saint Joseph. The officers and constables waited, crouching down in the grass by the police station, and ambushed the insurgents as they scurried by. Some of the soldiers splintered off, fled, and hid in the brush until the chaos was over; others turned around and scrambled back toward the garrison again. Back in Saint Joseph, a number of militiamen had assembled, along with a few dozen West India soldiers who had not taken part in the uprising. As the insurgents returned to town, they met the militia. The parties exchanged fire, and the altercation quickly devolved into a hand-to-hand melee. Most of the agitators fled the scene. Daaga was tackled and restrained.[37]

By this time, the residents of Saint Joseph were wide awake and peering out their windows with concern. The flames from the soldiers' huts made the air thick and sooty, and shouts and musket fire echoed around the little town too. Militiamen paced the neighborhood and spoke to anxious townspeople who had wandered out into the streets. Officers insisted that the town was secure, but locals must not have been too sure, especially as a garrison official screeched through Saint Joseph on horseback, carrying urgent warnings to neighboring towns

[36] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 264-266; George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114. Sergeant Merry was likely John Merry, an African soldier who had been with the 1st West India for more than three decades by 1837. Colonel Bush vouched for Merry's "good character" when the old soldier was granted his discharge five years later. Service Record for John Merry, WO 97/1160.
[37] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 266-267; George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114.

along the road into central Trinidad, where a couple dozen insurgents were heading.[38] Back at the station, though, things were settling slightly. Daaga and several others had been captured and locked up. And some of the troops who had splintered off and hid during the altercation near the police house filed quietly back into the garrison and pretended they had been there all along.[39] The army's foremost problem turned to rounding up those who were still missing.

The fugitive troops, apparently led by Mawee/Maurice Ogston, had headed east toward the town of Arima in central Trinidad, about eleven miles from Saint Joseph. By the time the group approached the town a few hours later and well after daybreak, a small militia force had assembled outside of Arima, the men alerted in advance by Saint Joseph officials. The West India soldiers attempted to push through the militia line and continue on, and an exchange of fire commenced. But the insurgents, perhaps by this time running low on ball and powder, could do little damage to the Arima force. The town militia mounted a furious attack, and after a barrage of gunfire, six agitators had been killed and eight more lay wounded. Some twenty-eight men dropped their muskets and surrendered on the spot, including the co-instigator, Mawee/Maurice Ogston. A few of the insurgents fled into the woods outside of town. The militia spent the rest of the morning and afternoon scouring the brush for the missing soldiers. All were rounded up but six who had to be cut down from trees, having chosen to hang themselves with their belts and straps over being placed at the mercy of a military court.[40]

The Arima militia, along with various military officials and West India soldiers from Saint Joseph who had made their way out after the insurgents, escorted the captured men back to the station. Officers began the task of making sure everyone was accounted for, and immediately

[38] George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114.
[39] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 267.
[40] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 268-269.

imposed a stringent lockdown at the garrison. By this time, white regulars of the 89th Regiment had arrived from Port of Spain to occupy the town and the station. While the final casualty numbers are unclear, the Trinidad resident and writer Edward Lanzer Joseph, who published the original authoritative account on the mutiny several months later, claimed that more than forty soldiers had been killed, including those shot at Saint Joseph and Arima, those who had commit suicide in the woods, and those executed over the following weeks.[41]

**The trials**

In the aftermath of the violent events at the Saint Joseph garrison, military officers and colonial officials engaged in furious speculation and argument over the cause of the event and the ambitions of the insurgents. As news reached Port of Spain in the hours after the suppression of the garrison attack, the governor, George Hill, made his way out from the capital to survey the situation and demand answers from officers and witnesses. Colonel William Bush, the garrison commandant, tried to get ahead of the various rumors spreading about town and across the colony, well aware that the night's events would put him at the center of a major investigation. Some posited, for example, that particularly harsh treatment by Bush and other officers had driven the men to rebellion, an accusation which the colonel vehemently denied.[42] Governor Hill, for his part, drew few immediate conclusions, though he did express his incredulity that such a large group of newly conscripted—by which he meant "savage" and inherently undisciplined—African soldiers had all been collected at the Trinidad station.[43]

Alongside the heated arguments around motive and fault, military officials in Trinidad set

[41] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 269.
[42] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 263.
[43] George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 20 June 1837, CO 295/114.

to work sorting out which of the insurgent soldiers would be indicted for their actions. Of the dozens of alleged participants in the uprising, officers elected to try five men for "mutinous conduct," amongst other charges, in front of a General Court—Daaga/Stewart and Mawee/Ogston, of course, as well as three additional African privates: Edward Coffin, William Satchell, and Henry Torrens.[44] General Courts Martial were the most formal of military tribunals and those which heard the most serious cases—mutiny, murder, and desertion primarily.[45] The courts assembled at Saint James Barracks just outside Port of Spain, where much of Trinidad's white garrison was stationed. Major Samuel Walker of the 65th Regiment presided, technically representing the queen in the courtroom, with a group of twelve officers—captains, lieutenants, and ensigns—from amongst a few different white regiments serving as "members," essentially the jury. The main interpreter for the trials—though not the only one—was Sergeant Joseph Scotland, by this time a ten-year veteran of the 1st West India. Scotland's ethnolinguistic background is not entirely clear, but we do know that he had been conscripted in Sierra Leone off a slave ship that had embarked at Badagry. He must have spoken Yoruba dialects, as most of the insurgents did, and perhaps other coastal tongues too.[46]

The trials were somewhat of a sensation in the colonial capital. Various local officials sat in, and the *Port of Spain Gazette* devoted the meat of several July and August issues to covering the proceedings—reprinting courtroom testimony at length amongst editors' comments.[47] Each soldier was subjected to his own trial, and over several days in late July 1837, the five defendants

[44] Courts Martial Proceedings, July through September 1837, WO 71/299.
[45] Peter Burroughs, "Crime and Punishment in the British Army, 1815-1870," *English Historical Review* 100, no. 396 (1985): 545-571.
[46] Service Record for Corporal Joseph Scotland, WO 97/1161; Liberated African Department Statement of Disposals 1821-1833, SLPA; *Voyages* database, ID #2970.
[47] *Port of Spain Gazette*, 21 July, 28 July, 1 August, 18 August 1837. Digitized copies of the *Gazette* from around this time are somewhat difficult to find. I used the print copies in the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago in Port of Spain.

faced their charges one after another. Daaga, the apparent leader, went first, but not before Colonel William Bush made a lengthy statement condemning the accused, and defending himself. Central to the colonel's defense was the observation that all of the insurgents were recent conscripts. This was not a failure of garrison officers, Bush pleaded, but rather a product of the army having lacked the requisite time to discipline those who arrived at the garrison "dangerous" and "uncivilized." And seeking to counter the murmured accusations that his maltreatment had caused the uprising, Bush insisted he'd done his best to be kind, welcoming, and attentive to the needs of the men, comparing himself to "a kind parent who is ever alive to the Interests of his Children." Mooting his own explanation for the mutiny, Bush argued that the insurgent soldiers had had their minds "poisoned" by their "countrymen"—referencing the hundreds of Liberated Africans who had been settled in Trinidad over the prior few years—who had encouraged them "to imagine evil" and free themselves from the British army. The colonel pointed to the bustling Sunday markets that West India soldiers attended at Saint Joseph, and highlighted the case of a few African regulars who had deserted the garrison not long before the insurgency to live with "a man of their nation."[48] Few observers took Bush's performance very seriously, and commenters with the *Gazette* publicly ridiculed the colonel for his melodramatic language.[49] The court was not very concerned with motive anyway, and once William Bush had finished his piece, the presiding officer read out the charges against Daaga and began calling witnesses.[50]

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[48] Statement of Colonel William Bush, Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Donald Stewart, WO 71/299. The *Port of Spain Gazette* reprinted the statement in its entirety on 21 July 1837.
[49] The newspaper cast doubt on the veracity of several of the colonel's statements, though they elaborate little on which ones, before devoting most of a column making fun of Bush's "prose run mad." *Port of Spain Gazette*, 28 July 1837. A late nineteenth-century Trinidad historian called Bush's courtroom monologue "a long, rambling speech in which argument and evidence (much of the latter being quite inadmissible) were mixed up in a most extraordinary manner." Fraser, *History of Trinidad*, 348.
[50] I will return to the particulars of Bush's statement in a later section.

The General Court for Daaga/Donald Stewart assembled on 19 July, a month and a few days after that chaotic Sunday in Saint Joseph and the surrounding region. With a dozen white officers ready to hear the case, the court leveled three charges against the defendant: the broad accusation of leading the mutiny, as well as the more specific charges of torching the soldiers' huts and killing Private Charles Dixon in the storage room. To each of the three charges Daaga pleaded not guilty. The prosecution selected at least one witness who could confirm Daaga's guilt on each charge. Colonel William Bush played prosecutor. The first to testify was Lieutenant Bentley, who spoke to the first charge. The officer assured the court that the uprising had begun in the grenadiers' accommodations with Daaga clearly leading the group. A couple of West India privates followed the lieutenant to the stand. It is not clear whether any of those who took part in the insurgency testified against the five accused men, but it does seem likely. Perhaps garrison officers granted immunity to some of those who had been on the scene in exchange for an appearance in court and a confirmation of the defendants' guilt. Private Henry King was next on the witness stand and gave a sworn statement that Daaga had set fire to some of the buildings at the station. Finally, Private Romeo Lindore asserted that Daaga had broken into the storeroom and fired the musketball that killed Charles Dixon. Daaga had no representation at his trial and apparently declined opportunities to cross examine. Military observers took this to mean that Daaga had no defense, and perhaps he did find argument futile. It is also worth considering that the obvious language barriers made it difficult for Daaga to speak in court, even with an interpreter present. According to the court record-keeper, the soldier expressed some remorse in a few words, and the trial closed shortly thereafter.[51]

Private William Satchell went next. The military court charged him with the attempted

[51] Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Donald Stewart, WO 71/299.

murder of Corporal Craven during the firefight at the officers' quarters and the storming of a sergeant-major's home. Various soldiers testified, placing the accused private on the scene and confirming his role in the morning's events. Satchell, through the Yoruba-speaking interpreter, begged forgiveness in his closing statement. He praised Colonel Bush for his kindness and threw Daaga under the bus, claiming that the grenadier had set "the example" and encouraged the attack.[52] Edward Coffin's trial took place the day after Satchell's. Coffin was charged with participating in the mutiny and, at some point during the melee, discharging a firelock and wounding another soldier. Private Romeo Lindore returned to the courtroom as witness and stated that Coffin had been by Daaga's side as they raided the weapons stores. He also testified that the accused had fired on the officers' residence.[53]

Daaga's alleged co-conspirator, Mawee or Maurice Ogston, was next to be tried before the General Court. The Yoruba soldier was rung up on nearly the same three charges on which Daaga had been indicted: for generally aiding and abetting the insurgency, for helping to set fire to the soldiers' huts, and for attacking Private Dixon. Ogston denied slicing Dixon with the sword, but otherwise mounted no defense.[54] Private Henry Torrens' trial was the last. His case was the most personal to Colonel Bush, as the private had allegedly taken a swipe at the colonel with a sharp razor as he was being subdued after capture, having been unaccounted for over several days. Bush testified at length about Torrens' attack and emphasized that the soldier had violently resisted arrest. The court leveled the vague accusation of aiding and abetting the mutiny, along with the charge of attacking a commanding officer. Torrens argued that he was confused and that his detention had been a misunderstanding, claiming that he had taken no part

[52] Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private William Satchell, WO 71/299.
[53] Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Edward Coffin, WO 71/299.
[54] Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Maurice Ogston, WO 71/299.

in the mutiny but rather had fled from the guard house, where he had been stationed for the night, for the sake of his own safety. Bush and his witnesses argued otherwise.[55]

The accused soldiers, and the public too, waited a while for the verdicts to be released. Court officials had to send copies of the testimonies and their recommended verdicts to British army headquarters in Barbados for General Samuel Whittingham, West Indies commander-in-chief, to sign off. On 14 August—two weeks and a few days after the final trial, and about two months after the mutiny had taken place—the HMS *Harpy* returned with confirmation. Daaga/Donald Stewart and Mawee/Maurice Ogston were guilty on all charges, the court having agreed with Colonel Bush and the train of witnesses who argued that the two soldiers had organized and led the uprising. Privates Coffin and Torrens too were convicted on all charges. All four were condemned to death, though Torrens' sentence was later commuted for reasons that remain unclear.[56] Private Satchell was the only soldier not sentenced to be executed. It's not clear why, though he was the only one of the five who claimed to feel real remorse in front of the court, groveling to Colonel Bush and pleading that Daaga had corrupted him. Satchell had faced two charges and the court turned in one guilty verdict and one not guilty.[57] Daaga, Mawee, and Edward Coffin were dead and buried forty-eight hours after their verdicts arrived from Barbados. Satchell, and on his last-minute stay, Private Torrens too, waited in prison for a transport to Botany Bay.

**The insurgents**

In the days and weeks that followed the mutiny, details about the provenance of the mutineers

[55] Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Henry Torrens, WO 71/299.
[56] August, "Rebels With a Cause," 84.
[57] Evidence from the General Courts Martial of Privates Donald Stewart, Maurice Ogston, Edward Coffin, William Satchell, and Henry Torrens, WO 71/299.

leaked out of the garrison. Military officers in Trinidad reported that the dozens of soldiers who had taken part in the uprising were new additions to the 1st West India Regiment. They pointed, specifically, at the two large groups of conscripts delivered to the Saint Joseph garrison in the weeks and months prior to the event. The first party disembarked a military transport at Port of Spain in early January 1837; the second arrived in late May, just weeks before the chaos of mid-June. Additionally, a couple of ethnolinguistic appellations—"Yarraba" [Yoruba] and "Paupau" [Popo]—began to appear in military records as descriptors for the soldiers who had attacked the garrison, details that had also presumably been shared by garrison officials.[58] The army had its own self-interested reasons for the specificity. Colonel William Bush, for his part, wanted to make it clear that the insurgents had not been under his command for long, the insinuation being that he had not had a chance to "tame" the "savage" African recruits.[59] And military personnel surely also aimed to protect the reputation of the West India Regiments, insisting that this was an isolated act for which there was a clear explanation, and not evidence that the companies themselves were dangerous. But regardless of intention, the details emerging from the Saint Joseph garrison offer substantive clues about who the insurgents were and what might have facilitated this event.

The 1st West India Regiment had indeed grown markedly larger over the first five months of 1837.[60] The bolstering of the corps followed orders from London to replenish and augment the Black companies, which had fallen significantly under strength by the mid 1830s.[61] The recruits in question were Liberated Africans, young men released from slave ships captured by Royal

[58] The courts martial proceedings use both terms extensively. Evidence from the General Courts Martial of Privates Donald Stewart, Maurice Ogston, Edward Coffin, William Satchell, and Henry Torrens, WO 71/299. E.L. Joseph does too in his *History of Trinidad*, 259-271.
[59] Statement of Colonel William Bush, Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Donald Stewart, WO 71/299.
[60] For a quick glance at the numbers, see Ellis, *First West India Regiment*, 188.
[61] War Office to the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, 25 January 1836, CO 318/124.

Navy patrols and subsequently turned over to British military officials in the Caribbean. Their journeys into the British army were trying and chaotic. Those odysseys, though, are also traceable using enlistment records, slave ship data, and surviving testimonies of "old soldiers," conspirators, and even Daaga himself.[62] Reconstructions of the new conscripts' backgrounds and transatlantic crossings reveal that the mutineers were part of a contingent of recruits that overwhelmingly originated in the Yoruba states of the eastern Bight of Benin interior. Their similar provenance, as well as their shared experiences of enslavement and the middle passage, facilitated their collective rebellion against the British army.

Historians of the African diaspora have long debated the meanings and the relative usefulness of the African ethnolinguistic terms so prevalent in colonial (and, in this case, military) records. One important consideration is whether it was European officials ascribing those labels upon African people or whether Africans in the diaspora were self-identifying by these appellations.[63] In this instance, it was almost certainly the former—military officers and colonial officials selected the ethnic descriptors and attributed them to the new conscripts. What, then, did "Yarraba" and "Paupau" mean to British officers in the 1830s Caribbean, and what do those definitions add to our understanding of the mutiny and the soldiers who undertook it? In the nineteenth-century British Atlantic world, "Yoruba" generally referred to speakers of the various dialects of the Yoruba language prevalent in Oyo, Ketu, Egba, Ijebu, and other kingdoms of the eastern Bight of Benin and its hinterland (refer to the map below).[64] At this time, the

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[62] Roseanne Adderley has rightly pointed out that linking the demographics of Liberated African communities in the British Caribbean with the geographical patterns of the illegal slave trade is riddled with complication. The unique sources created before and after the Saint Joseph mutiny offer a route around this impasse. Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa": Slave Trade Abolition and Free African Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 94.

[63] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 22-27.

[64] The literature on the Yoruba diaspora is enormous. See, as a starting point, Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). Because Bight of Benin

Yoruba-speaking region lacked a common ethnic identity. Most scholars agree that a pan-Yoruba identity developed around shared language and culture in the diaspora and then refracted back to the homeland with the return of Yoruba-speaking missionaries and merchants beginning around mid-century.[65] Thus, the ascription of "Yarraba" upon the soldiers in question tells us that these were probably Yoruba *speakers*, which in turn also provides a clear region of origin. But the term offers little information about how the men would have seen themselves or one another.

The etymology of "Paupau" [Popo] was both similar and different, as the designation had multiple meanings. The term sometimes referred to language, as "Popo" was often applied to speakers of the closely-related Aja-Ewe-Fon—or "Gbe"—languages of the western Bight of Benin, roughly between the Yoruba states to the east and the Gold Coast to the west. In other instances, "Popo" referred to particular points of embarkation. The term was often applied broadly to Africans forced aboard slave ships at the western Bight of Benin ports of Grand Popo or Little Popo.[66] It is important to note that enslaved people sold through the Popo ports very often were Gbe speakers anyway, so there would have been significant overlap in these plural definitions. Like Yoruba, Popo as a term for specific people developed in the diaspora and subsumed individuals who would have embraced a variety of identities. Thus, again in the context of the Trinidad insurgents, the appellation points to a language and a West African

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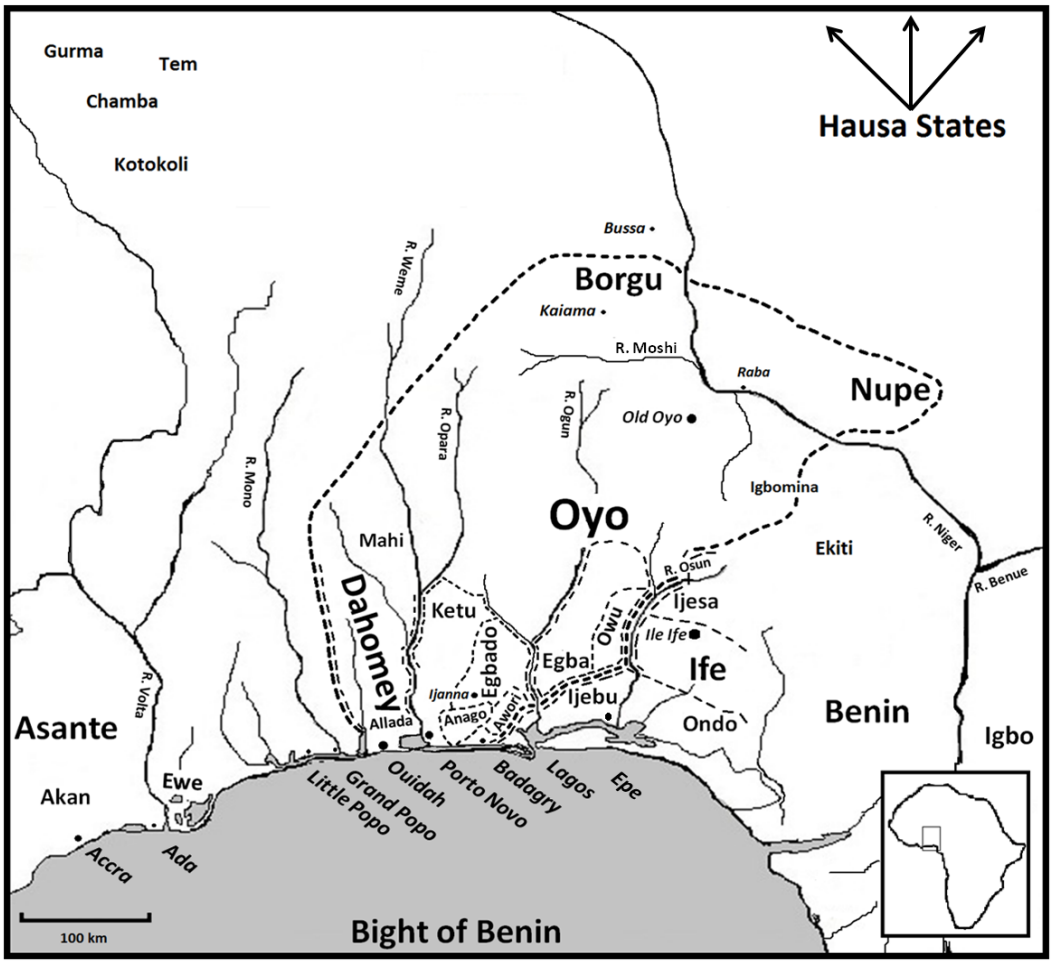
ports like Lagos, Badagry, and Ouidah were often dominated by Portuguese/Brazilian traders, Yoruba speakers were far more prevalent in places like Brazil and Cuba than any British colony. After British slave-trade abolition, though, and particularly in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Yoruba recaptives became one of the most populous groups as British naval patrols targeted these ports. On Yoruba in the British world, see Richard Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone: Re-Building Lives and Identities in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa"*; Rosalyn Howard, "Yoruba in the British Caribbean: A Comparative Perspective on Trinidad and the Bahamas," in *The Yoruba Diaspora*, ed. Falola and Childs, 157-176; David V. Trotman, "The Yoruba and Orisha Worship in Trinidad and British Guiana, 1838-1870," *African Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (1976): 1-17; Trotman, "Reflections on the Children of Shango: An Essay on A History of Orisa Worship in Trinidad," *Slavery & Abolition* 28, no. 2 (2007): 211-234.

[65] J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 156.

[66] Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 148-152.

coastline of origin but tells us little about soldiers' perceptions of themselves.

**The Bight of Benin**




*Source: Henry B. Lovejoy, African Diaspora Maps Ltd.*

We also must keep in mind that, while military officers thought that they recognized two distinct groups of people, those whom the army divided by the Yoruba and Popo ascriptions would have had plenty in common. Many people living along the Benin coastline and in the interior would have been conversational in multiple Yoruba dialects and Gbe languages, for one.[67] And there was significant fluidity between the cultures of the eastern and western bight

[67] Trial testimony confirmed that at least one mutineer, William Satchell, spoke both "Yarraba" and "Paupau" very well, making him "a useful man" to Daaga. Evidence from the General Court Martial of Private William Satchell, WO 71/299.

too. Sandra Greene notes that Yoruba, Aja-Fon, Anlo-Ewe, and other people of the coastal Bight of Benin shared various cultural traditions, while John Thornton argues for some level of "cultural unity" across the region in which the Yoruba language served as a lingua franca and Yoruba deities were worshiped widely.[68] In short, British officials saw a distinction, and maybe there was one, but it would not have precluded collaboration amongst conscripted soldiers who originated in generally the same region of West Africa.

The first of the two congregations of conscripts, the group that arrived in Trinidad in early January, was composed of men who had crossed the Atlantic aboard the Brazilian slave ship *Fenix*. The vessel had lifted anchor at Little Popo, carrying soon-to-be soldiers who, in the British army, would be designated either Yoruba or Popo. British patrols intercepted the *Fenix* as it approached the eastern Caribbean and escorted the brig to Grenada. There, in the port of Saint George, colonial officials turned seventy-six young West African men over to Major Chads of the 1st West India Regiment, who relocated the conscripts to regimental headquarters in Trinidad soon after.[69] The paths that the *Fenix* conscripts followed into the 1st West India Regiment are well documented, in large part because the vessel had carried Daaga/Donald Stewart, the leader of the munity, across the Atlantic.[70] As military officials and contemporary writers like E.L. Joseph dug into Daaga's past in their quest to explain the attack on the colonial garrison, many of

[68] Greene, though, claims that Thornton is overstating the dominion of Yoruba language and culture outside of the Yoruba states. Sandra E. Greene, "Cultural Zones in the Era of the Slave Trade: Exploring the Yoruba Connection with the Anlo-Ewe," in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (New York: Continuum, 2000), 86-101; John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 190. Applying a transatlantic lens, Shantel George notes the endurance of various "Yoruba-Fon derived traditions" in the British Caribbean. George, "Diaspora Consciousness, Historical Memory, and Culture in Liberated African Villages in Grenada, 1850s-2014," in *Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807-1897*, ed. Richard Anderson and Henry B. Lovejoy (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020), 384-407.

[69] "Abstract Return of the Disposal of the liberated Africans landed from the 'Phoenix' Slaver on the 4th [October] at this Port," enclosed in Charles Joseph Doyle to Lord Glenelg, 8 October 1836, CO 101/82.

[70] Various published sources erroneously state that Daaga was conscripted in Sierra Leone. Fraser, *History of Trinidad*, 345; August, "Rebels With a Cause," 76.

the January conscripts at the Saint Joseph station spoke candidly about the group's enslavement, the middle passage of the *Fenix*, and, most notably, their complex associations with Daaga.[71]

Perhaps the most notable revelation from Joseph's discussions with Daaga and with other unidentified conscripts was the full nature of Daaga's relationship with the voyage of the *Fenix* and the other captives who had been forced aboard. In West Africa, Daaga had been a military leader and a slave trader, and numerous *Fenix* recruits explained that Daaga had actually been responsible for their enslavement in the Yoruba country. He and his associates undertook some sort of military operation in the wartorn Yoruba-speaking region, captured an unspecified number of people, and led them southwestward to Ouidah where they sold the group to Portuguese slave traders. For reasons that remain unclear, the Ouidah merchants asked Daaga to lead the group to Little Popo instead.[72] They then embarked upon what would likely have been a canoe passage through the coastal lagoons. At Little Popo, Daaga and his associates met the *Fenix* and helped to load the vessel. But at some point in the process, they were tricked by the ship's captain and pushed down into the cargo hold themselves. The passage from Little Popo to Grenada was, as Joseph reported that several of the *Fenix* conscripts told him, the scene of intense argument. During the long voyage across the Atlantic, Daaga was berated by the other enslaved people on board who held him responsible for their capture. Some of those conscripted with Daaga into the 1st West India Regiment stated that the seeds of insurgency had been planted while the group was aboard the *Fenix*, with Daaga—the skilled military leader—swearing to lead the enslaved home to West Africa again.[73]

Some of these details emerged during a jailhouse interview between Daaga and the writer

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[71] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 260-262.
[72] Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving 'Port' 1727-1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 171.
[73] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 261-262.

Edward Joseph as the grenadier awaited his execution. In it, Joseph probed for some additional information regarding Daaga's background. He described the imprisoned soldier as Popo royalty, the adopted son of a king and a powerful ruler himself. Additional details from the interview suggest that Daaga may have been part of a coastal ethnic group called the Hula—traditional fisherman and saltmakers who had long inhabited the littoral lagoon region where the ports of Grand and Little Popo were located. Cross-cultural trade was central to Hula economic life, and the group engaged in extensive commercial exchange with Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, and other traders along the western Bight of Benin.[74] This detail would certainly support the contention that Daaga was "Popo" as the term was understood by military officials, while also emphasizing the complexities of this broad, imprecise appellation.

The enslavement of the *Fenix* conscripts during a military expedition into the Yoruba country corroborates Trinidad garrison officials' insistence that army officers in Grenada had sent them several "Yarraba" conscripts from aboard the ship. It also lines up with wider pattens of enslavement and the slave trade from the eastern Bight of Benin in the 1820s and 1830s, which were closely intertwined with Yoruba captive-producing warfare. The backgrounds of the "Paupau" men conscripted from the *Fenix* are more ambiguous. Because the West Africans known as "Paupau" or Popo in the British Atlantic originated a ways to the west of the Yoruba country, it is possible that additional captives who predominantly spoke Gbe languages were added to the *Fenix* from the area closer to Little Popo as the vessel prepared to embark. It also may be that British officials were referring only to Daaga and his associates who had been

[74] Silke Strickrodt, *Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World: The Western Slave Coast, c. 1550-c. 1885* (Rochester: James Currey, 2015), 40-50. I base my suggestion that Daaga was Hula upon his reported belief in a deity called "Holloloo," as spelled by British observers. Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 260-261. This may have been a reference to *hulaholu*, an ancestral Hula ruler and a spiritual figure variously presented as a chief, a priest, or a sacred king who exercised ambiguous yet divine power. See Finn Fuglestad, *Slave Traders by Invitation: West Africa's Slave Coast in the Precolonial Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27-28. My thanks to Olatunji Ojo for pointing me in this direction.

enslaved by surprise while helping to ready the *Fenix* for departure, while referring broadly to the remainder of the conscripted men as Yoruba. Regardless, this vessel provided conscripts to the West India Regiments whom the army divided into two ethnolinguistic groups.

The *Fenix* conscripts had been in Trinidad for about four and a half months before the arrival of the second congregation of African recruits at Saint Joseph. Another 205 new soldiers landed at Port of Spain to boost the 1st West India Regiment in late May, just a few weeks before the mutiny. While we have considerably fewer specifics regarding the enslavement and trans-oceanic passages of the latest conscripts, slave ship data indicate that Yoruba speakers dominated this group. The May recruits had crossed the Atlantic aboard two different slave vessels. Part of the group had been forced aboard the *Don Francisco* after their sale to Portuguese traders at Ouidah, the same West African port to which the *Fenix* captives had first been led under Daaga's command. On capture in the eastern Caribbean, the *Don Francisco* was escorted to Dominica where army officers claimed ninety-three Liberated Africans for the 1st West India.[75] Around the same time, the *Florida* docked in Grenada, steered into port by Royal Navy officers who had intercepted the Cuba-bound ship en route from Lagos, probably the most significant point of embarkation for enslaved Yoruba speakers in the nineteenth century. Major Chads, the same officer who had conscripted the *Fenix* soldiers several months earlier, took 112 recaptives from aboard the *Florida* for the 1st West India Regiment.[76] It is unclear whether separate military transports carried the conscripts from the *Don Francisco* and the *Florida* to Trinidad, or if they all traveled to Port of Spain together on one ship.

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[75] William Colebrooke to Lord Glenelg, 21 June 1837, CO 71/82; "Report on the Case of the Portuguese Brig Don Francisco," enclosed in H.W. Macaulay and Walter W. Lewis to Viscount Palmerston, 30 November 1837, CO 318/133; *Voyages* database, ID #2555.

[76] Enclosure 1 in Evan Murray Macgregor to Lord Glenelg, 3 June 1837, CO 101/83; William Fox-Strangways to the Colonial Office, 16 March 1838, CO 318/133; *Voyages* database, ID #2556.

The May influx of West African conscripts at the Saint Joseph garrison meant a significant addition of Yoruba-speaking soldiers to the 1st West India Regiment. This was, it seems, the final development necessary for the attack on the Saint Joseph station to materialize. Plans allegedly laid on the *Fenix* voyage and developed further after arrival in Trinidad moved forward just a few weeks after the May contingent arrived. And some observers even speculated that the uprising might have happened sooner if not for the redistribution of some of the *Fenix* conscripts away from Trinidad to colonial stations in Saint Lucia.[77] The arrival of a mass of new conscripts from the Yoruba country, men who could immediately communicate with and relate to the previous group of West African recruits, seems to have provided the requisite numbers to undertake the attack.[78]

**West African warfare in Trinidad**

The Saint Joseph mutiny began with a song. The West African soldiers, it was widely reported by various witnesses, raided garrison weapons stores to the tune of a call-and-response chant that haunted the unsuspecting military personnel who heard it. British officers and local observers like E.L. Joseph quickly established that the song originated in the West African "homeland" of the agitators. They also affirmed that it was militant—a "war-cry," Joseph termed it.[79] The soldiers' recitation was a Yoruba war chant, and its provenance points toward clearer understandings of the organization of the garrison attack and the unrecorded aims and thought

[77] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 263-264.
[78] Henry Lovejoy offers a similar example in analyzing a Lucumí insurgency on a Cuban plantation in 1833. Lucumí overseers had plotted out the revolt in advance but were not able put their plans into action until after a couple hundred more Lucumí people had been delivered to the estate. H. Lovejoy, *Prieto: Yorùbá Kingship in Colonial Cuba during the Age of Revolutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 114.
[79] Sources were certainly derogatory and characterized the chant in a way that supported arguments for "savagery." "[H]ighly characteristic of a predatory tribe," Edward Joseph described it, "a kind of imitation of the growl of wild beasts." Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 264.

processes of the West African infantry who took part. The centrality of this significant piece of Yoruba military culture to the Trinidad mutiny shows, in this situation at least, how the African backgrounds of West India soldiers affected their actions in the British army, an essential piece of regimental history that few sources illuminate. At the same time, the embrace of this preparatory tactic of Yoruba warfare in Trinidad encourages a transatlantic analysis of the event, as evidence from West Africa and from Cuba—a major disembarkation point for other enslaved captives of the Yoruba wars—helps to contextualize and explain the actions of the insurgents.

The captives aboard the *Fenix*, *Don Francisco*, and *Florida* comprised only a small percentage of those enslaved in the Yoruba country and forced onto slave ships at Bight of Benin ports. Spanish, Portuguese, and Brazilian vessels carried thousands of captives away from the Bight of Benin coast in the 1820s and 1830s as warfare raged in the interior. Cuba, Bahia, and, because of the intense British Naval patrolling of the Benin coastline at the time, Sierra Leone, all absorbed large numbers of Yoruba-speaking people. This diaspora of Yoruba speakers, though, developed alongside what Manuel Barcia has called "near-simultaneous cycles" of conspiracies and insurgencies undertaken in Cuba and northeastern Brazil that were led by—or closely associated with—Yoruba speakers captured during this period of intense warfare. In western Cuba alone, the apparent intended destination of all three ships from which the Trinidad mutineers were conscripted, Barcia counts at least ten revolts led by enslaved Lucumí (Yoruba speakers) between 1832 and 1843, and several additional uprisings or conspiracies with which Yoruba speakers were heavily involved. One particular revolt that took place in Havana in July 1835 was orchestrated by Lucumí *bozal emancipados*—Yoruba-speaking Liberated Africans recently-arrived in Cuba, to anglicize—just like those who led the Trinidad mutiny two years later. Barcia suggests that these military actions in particular regions of the Americas were a

result or a continuation of the political violence unfolding in the Yoruba states.[80] The timing of the uprising at Saint Joseph and the predominance of Yoruba speakers amongst the insurgent soldiers indicates that the transatlantic reverberations of the Yoruba wars reached colonial Trinidad.

Barcia has proposed critical analyses of the preparations, tactics, and ideologies of insurgents in the Americas as a means of exploring connections between West African warfare and military operations undertaken by Africans in the Americas.[81] Applying this approach to the incident at Saint Joseph unlocks new interpretations of this chaotic event. British officials insisted that the uprising was little more than a hasty plan to slaughter white officers and return, somehow, to Africa. But the insurgency was instead a complex military operation undertaken by West Africans with particular and well-developed ideas about warfare that they carried with them from Africa—and specifically the Bight of Benin interior—to Trinidad.

The mutineers' call-and-response chant displayed the clear influence of Yoruba military culture upon the organization of the attack on the Saint Joseph station. As published in contemporary outlets and later reinterpreted by the historian Maureen Warner-Lewis, the soldiers, as they proceeded from the burning huts to the munitions stores, sang over and over again:

| E.L. Joseph's orthography[82] | Warner-Lewis' orthography[83] |
|---|---|
| Dangkarree | Idà ń kárí |

[80] Barcia, *West African Warfare*, 6-7, 163-165. For a similar, contemporary case from northeastern Brazil, see João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
[81] Barcia, *West African Warfare*; Barcia, "'To Kill all Whites': The Ethics of African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba, 1807-1844," *Journal of African Military History* 1 (2017): 72-92.
[82] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 264. This was initially published in the *Port of Spain Gazette* on 21 July 1837.
[83] Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Trinidad Yoruba: From Mother Tongue to Memory* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 178-179; Warner-Lewis, "Ethnic and Religious Plurality among Yoruba Immigrants in Trinidad in the Nineteenth Century," in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (New York: Continuum, 2000), 122. Warner-Lewis has used the field tapes of Melville Herskovits to reinterpret the chant from the original transcription and translation published in the *Port of Spain Gazette* (21 July 1837).

| | |
|---|---|
| Dangkarree | Idà ńkà ré |
| Au fey | Ó fé |
| Olun werrei | Ó lù wéré |
| Au lay | Ó lé |

Although some British observers labeled it "Paupau," likely because they characterized Daaga as such, Warner-Lewis identifies the chant as Yoruba and offers an interpretation that confirms its linkages to militancy and warfare:

| | |
|---|---|
| Idà ń kárí | The sword is sufficient. |
| Idà ńkà ré | Behold the cruel sword! |
| Ó fé | It slices. |
| Ó lù wéré | It strikes without mercy. |
| Ó lé | It is strong.[84] |

Singing and chanting were common practice in West African warfare and amongst enslaved insurgents in the Americas, and clearly the West India Regiment soldiers embraced this tradition. Furthermore, evidence from Cuba provides a specific connection. In 1833, four years before the revolt at Saint Joseph, Yoruba-speaking insurgents engaging in an armed uprising near Havana sang a war song in the call-and-response style. "Oní Oré," shouted one; "O Fé," the group responded.[85] As various Trinidad observers reported in the days after the insurgency, the West India insurgents' chant included the phrases "Ó lù wéré" and "Ó fé."[86] If this wasn't the same song, it was very similar, and it clarifies that the mutineers harnessed Yoruba military traditions as a means of organizing their rebellion against the British army.

Other, more subtle, actions undertaken by revolting West India Regiment soldiers mirror

[84] Warner-Lewis, "Ethnic and Religious Plurality," 122. Contemporary sources like the *Gazette* posed an alternative translation: "Come to plunder, come to slay. We are ready to obey." This interpretation is loose at best. Colonial observers seem to have made up a rhyme after asking some of the other soldiers what the chant meant. The meaning is not terribly important anyway. What is important is the confirmation that this is a military/war chant in the Yoruba language. Additionally, Henry Lovejoy has suggested that some of these phrases signaled warriors seeking the protection of orishas. Henry B. Lovejoy, "Old Oyo Influences on the Transformation of Lucumí Identity in Colonial Cuba," (PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2012), 198.
[85] Barcia, *West African Warfare*, 147; H. Lovejoy, *Prieto*, 114-115.
[86] *Port-of-Spain Gazette*, 21 July 1837. Here I use the orthography offered by Warner-Lewis.

some of the particulars of warfare in precolonial West Africa. For example, British officials in Trinidad commented on the way in which the insurgents held their muskets—down near their hips, and not shouldered next to their cheeks and eyes. E.L. Joseph ridiculed the men for this perceived incompetence and scoffed that their "ignoran[ce] of the right use of fire-arms" must have saved the lives of many officers and old soldiers at whom the agitators had inaccurately fired.[87] But Joseph probably misunderstood. Many of the insurgents, likely having military backgrounds in the Yoruba country and elsewhere in the Bight of Benin hinterland, would have been at least familiar with firearms. And some were probably quite skilled. Guns were pervasive in Atlantic Africa, a common import from western Europe exchanged on the coast for gold, produce, and people.[88] Historians of the Yoruba like Jacob Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith note that firearms were omnipresent in the wars that collapsed the Oyo empire, widely handled by the soldiers of Ijebu, Owu, Benin, Dahomey, and various other West African states.[89] The muskets and birding guns imported into the region were dangerous and sometimes exploded on ignition. European manufacturers often shipped defective firelocks off to Africa deliberately, hoping that buyers would ask few questions. Experienced West African soldiers carrying highly combustible weapons thus took measures to protect themselves like wrapping the barrels with cords to help hold them together in case they burst.[90] The insurgent West India Regiment soldiers were likely demonstrating the opposite of incompetence by discharging their muskets at waist level. Their

[87] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 265.
[88] Ray A. Kea, "Firearms and Warfare on the Gold and Slave Coasts from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of African History* 12, no. 2 (1971): 185-213; Robin Law, "Horses, Firearms and Political Power in Pre-Colonial West Africa," *Past & Present* 72 (1976): 112-132; John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500-1800* (London: UCL Press, 1999).
[89] J.F. Ade Ajayi and Robert S. Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Robert S. Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976).
[90] Kea notes that the defective guns being imported into West Africa gave rise to a sub-industry among blacksmiths who specialized in inspecting and repairing firearms. Kea, "Firearms," 203-207.

choice to hold the firelocks away from their faces revealed experience and savvy and clarified West African influences upon the offensive tactics embraced by the mutineers.[91]

As the mutiny unfolded over several hours, the insurgents continuously employed West African battle tactics. On multiple occasions—the skirmish at the police hut outside Saint Joseph and during the firefight with the militia at Arima, for example—they engaged in attack-and-retreat maneuvers that were fundamental to military operations in West Africa.[92] Furthermore, when the West India Regiment mutineers met heavy resistance from colonial forces, particularly the local militia at Arima to the east of Saint Joseph, the insurgents fled into the brushy areas alongside the road. The choice of withdrawal and cover over surrender was omnipresent in West African warfare. While it is true that soldiers of any nationality may choose to turn and run when put on the defensive in battle, the act of fleeing into "the bush" was a standard tactic in West African combat.[93] It also recalls the act of marronage in the Americas which was undertaken by countless Africans who fled New World slavery. And perhaps not coincidentally, when a community of Yoruba-speaking "rebels" skirmished with British colonial officials in Sierra Leone in 1832, the group also chose flight and marronage.[94]

West African ideas about war and honor seem to have impacted West India insurgents' decisions in combat too. In African warfare, surrender was generally a dishonorable action. Militants were to flee and hide out, or, if the situation called for it, to commit suicide rather than allowing themselves to be apprehended. To take one's own life in retreat or defeat was not considered cowardly as it often is in Western contexts; rather, it was a display of honor, and

[91] One question that remains is whether the insurgents chose to hold the muskets this way as a conscious rejection of their training, or if they had not yet been shown how to shoulder and fire guns in the British line infantry style. For the May recruits who had only just arrived, it was probably the latter. For the January contingent, it is unclear.
[92] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 266-268.
[93] Barcia, "'To Kill all Whites,'" 85-86.
[94] Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 236-239.

sometimes even an obligation.[95] As noted earlier, several of the insurgents fled into the woods upon being stopped by the militia outside Arima, and a few elected to hang themselves from trees. Comparable cases from Cuba in the years before and after the event reveal that various groups of Lucumí (Yoruba-speaking) insurgents stopped by Spanish authorities fled into the woods and hanged themselves together.[96]

The West African insurgents' prior experiences in the Bight of Benin hinterland shaped their tactics and approaches to warmaking in Trinidad, and their common ethnolinguistic backgrounds facilitated their organization as an effective group of military actors. But what of their experiences in the British Caribbean? The imperial space that the new West African recruits for the 1st West India Regiment entered was undergoing major social and political changes in the 1830s. Britain had abolished colonial slavery just a few years prior to the soldiers' forced enlistments, leading various observers to assert that conscripted Africans had become the most degraded, unfree people in the British Caribbean.[97] Additionally, abolition encouraged the importation of Liberated Africans into select West Indian colonies as "apprenticed" plantation workers, and Trinidad took in several shiploads of these individuals in the mid 1830s. This meant that the new West African troops arriving in Trinidad were part of a wider, deliberate pattern of forced migration to the island that bound West African people to serve the British empire. To what extent did this context matter? Could these wider imperial dynamics—emancipation and coerced labor migrations—have had any impact on the actions of those who attacked the Saint Joseph garrison? Extant sources offer few firm conclusions. But the circumstances are worth

[95] John Iliffe, *Honour in African History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 71-76; Barcia, *West African Warfare*, 127-129; Barcia, "'To Kill all Whites,'" 86-88.
[96] Barcia, *West African Warfare*, 128-129.
[97] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 262. Notably, it was within the context of the soldiers' uprising that Joseph made this comment.

unpacking further, and, and the very least, they suggest some specific connections between the insurgents and other West Africans living and working in Trinidad.

The 1st West India conscripts from aboard the *Fenix*, *Don Francisco*, and *Florida* arrived in Trinidad alongside a large-scale settlement of Liberated African apprentices on the island. Across much of the British Caribbean, sugar planters feared economic ruin upon the end of colonial slavery, and clamored for opportunities to take these apprenticed laborers under their control.[98] Many of those settled in British colonies like Trinidad had passed through the busy Anglo-Spanish mixed commission court at Havana, which adjudicated forty-four slave ships captured by Royal Navy patrols in the 1820s and 1830s.[99] The Cuban government, overseeing one of the largest and most intense slave societies in the world at the time, had little interest in welcoming free Africans into the sugar colony and instead negotiated with Britain to remove many incoming recaptives to various British colonies. Trinidad, a large island with plenty of land to be cultivated, emerged as a main settlement location for those liberated from slavery by the Havana court. Between June 1833 and September 1835, over 1,000 recaptives disembarked colonial transports in Port of Spain.[100]

Trinidad's Liberated Africans are particularly relevant to analyses of the Saint Joseph uprising because many were Yoruba speakers and refugees of the Yoruba wars. Captives embarking at Bight of Benin ports—Ouidah and Lagos in particular—met much of Cuba's demand for labor. In February 1834, 207 Liberated Africans arrived in Port of Spain after their release from slavery by the Havana Commission. The arriving recaptives had been selected from

[98] On the transport, settlement, and work undertaken by Liberated Africans in Trinidad around this time, see Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa,"* 63-91.
[99] Inés Roldán de Montaud, "The Misfortune of Liberated Africans in Colonial Cuba," in *Liberated Africans*, ed. Anderson and Lovejoy, 153-173; Henry B. Lovejoy, "The Registers of Liberated Africans of the Havana Slave Trade Commission: Implementation and Policy, 1824-1841," *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 1 (2016): 23-44.
[100] H. Lovejoy, "Havana Slave Trade Commission," 27; Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa,"* 245.

two captured Spanish slave ships; one was almost certainly the *Manuelita* coming in from Lagos. Several weeks later, another 193 recaptives disembarked in Trinidad, apparently all of whom had crossed the Atlantic on the *Rosa* after embarking at Ouidah. Several hundred more Liberated Africans entered colonial Trinidad via Havana the following year. In March, an intercolonial transport delivered an unspecified number of recaptives to Trinidad, many of whom had likely been released from the Ouidah ship *Julita* on escort into Havana. And a hefty proportion of the group of 262 recaptives arriving in September had probably crossed the Atlantic aboard the *Tita* after embarkation at Ouidah.[101] In short, a significant proportion—and very likely the plurality—of the West African apprentices disembarking and settling in Trinidad originated in the same Yoruba-speaking region as those who undertook the attack on the Saint Joseph garrison.

The recaptives arriving in Trinidad were generally contracted out to sugar planters on the island. But despite their distribution amongst several estates, Roseanne Adderley has argued, long-term shipmate bonds were likely to have been maintained, facilitating a strong Trinidad Yoruba-speaking community. Additionally, many African apprentices arriving in Port of Spain via Havana were bound to apprenticeships that expired after six months, meaning that at least some of the incoming laborers worked through their contracts fairly quickly and then settled freely in the colony.[102] When Colonel Bush opened Daaga's trial with a meandering explanation for the mutiny, he spoke at length about burgeoning relationships between the new West African recruits and their Liberated African "countrymen" who lived in Trinidad. The colonel pointed, in particular, to the bustling Sunday markets that West India soldiers attended and highlighted the

[101] H. Lovejoy, "Havana Slave Trade Commission," 27; Adderley, *"New Negroes from Africa,"* 245.
[102] Adderley, "*New Negroes from Africa*," 67-70. On the endurance of shipmate bonds amongst Liberated Africans, see Walter Hawthorne, "'Being now, as it were, one family': Shipmate bonding on the slave vessel *Emilia*, in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the Atlantic World," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45, no. 1 (2008): 53-77; Monica Schuler, "Liberated Central Africans in Nineteenth-Century Guyana," in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 326; Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*, 88-94.

case of a few African regulars who had deserted the garrison not long before the insurgency to live with "a man of their nation." Bush mooted the argument that the soldiers' free "countrymen" had encouraged them to reject their military conscription and release themselves from the British army. Afterwards, he suggested, the insurgent soldiers would engage in a kind of group marronage, with the aid—and potentially in the company—of free Yoruba speakers living in the colony.[103]

Evidence for these claims is all circumstantial, but the ideas are plausible, making this perhaps the only nugget from Colonel Bush's courtroom monologue worth subjecting to serious analysis. In the British Caribbean, West India Regiment soldiers mingled extensively with enslaved and free Africans at markets, about town, and even inside colonial garrisons. Exchanges of information were constant, and alliances of various kinds surely developed sometimes. As the third chapter noted, Muslim soldiers, veterans, and non-military folks living in Trinidad in the 1820s and 30s developed a strong community around their shared faith. The reality that the new conscripts at Saint Joseph shared so much in common with many of those recently apprenticed to Trinidad sugar planters—ethnolinguistic backgrounds and circumstances of enslavement—would seem to increase the likelihood of association between soldiers and free Africans. And furthermore, the recent emancipation of the Liberated Africans also points to a stark contrast in social position, which might have mattered a lot to conscripts bound to the British army indefinitely and encouraged them to resist their circumstances. These points offer a concrete example of how British imperial developments like the abolition of slavery and the forced migration of African apprenticed laborers to Trinidad in the mid 1830s may have played a role in creating the conditions for the uprising.

[103] Statement of Colonel William Bush, Evidence from the General Court Martial for Private Donald Stewart, WO 71/299.

**Conclusion: aftermaths**

In his well-read *History of Trinidad*, published the year after the uprising, E.L. Joseph spun the tale of Daaga and his "savage" co-conspirators as evidence of barbarous Africa that British military men and missionaries had yet to tame.[104] Public officials in Trinidad immediately demanded that plans to remove white troops from the island be abandoned, the clear insinuation being that they felt unsafe around African soldiers, especially new, untrained recruits.[105] And in other parts of the British Caribbean too, concern about armed Africans amplified and reverberated. When a group of sixty-one new recaptive conscripts for the 1st West India arrived in Saint Lucia from Sierra Leone at the end of the following year, the editors of the Castries newspaper, *The Palladium*, did not mince words. "These ferocious Ashantees marched up to Morne Fortuné yesterday," they cautioned, "where they are to be broken in and tamed."[106] The arrival of the Saint Lucia group indicated that the army was either unwilling or unable to change its policies regarding mass conscription and the general gathering of new soldiers of the same "country" together in colonial garrisons. Plenty of British officials had demanded that this practice be halted in the wake of the events in Trinidad, and some historians have even asserted that it did.[107] But it did not. The army, as the first chapter explained, lacked other plausible options for keeping the West India Regiments up to strength. For another quarter-century, the army drew masses of recaptives off slave ships into the Black corps with little option but to keep large groups together in colonial military stations. Notably, though, an event like Daaga's uprising did not happen again.

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[104] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 272.
[105] *Port of Spain Gazette*, 23 June 1837.
[106] *The Palladium* (Saint Lucia), 1 December 1838; Lieutenant-General Samuel F. Wittingham to the Secretary at War, 25 January 1838, CO 318/132. It is unlikely these men had anything to do with Asante. Rather, the newspaper seems to have tagged them with the term because it was negative and provocative, given Britain's ongoing wars with Asante in the nineteenth century.
[107] August, "Rebels with a Cause," 87.

What, exactly, Daaga, Mawee, and the rest of the insurgents had been trying to accomplish is not clear. The most direct assertion came from Joseph, who stated that the men had intended to return to "Guinea" somehow.[108] Still discussing the event with Colonial Office leaders months later, Governor Hill elaborated on potential motives, combining speculation and rumor: "He [Daaga] had persuaded his followers that he would take them back to Guinea—he may have had a hope that he could establish himself in the forests [of Trinidad], and as it has been rumored might upon first success have expected the addition of some of the free negro Population to his party."[109] An act of marronage with the help of others on the island seems the most plausible, but there is little evidence to confirm this suggestion. The talk of returning to Africa picked up the most steam in the press, but largely as a tool for making fun of the soldiers. Regardless, how the insurgents imagined the uprising ending is not clear.

We can, however, explain what kinds of social dynamics propelled this event. The soldiers' similar ethnolinguistic backgrounds and shared experiences of the middle passage from the Bight of Benin to the British Caribbean facilitated communication and collective action. Daaga's and Mawee's backgrounds as military commanders and "chiefs" in West Africa helped to organize the leadership. And the likely experiences of many of the soldiers in the Yoruba wars influenced the group's tactics and approaches to their attack on the colonial garrison. Furthermore, it is possible that, given the large number of free Yoruba speakers arriving in Trinidad around the same time and likely having similar experiences of enslavement in West Africa and release from the slave trade in the Caribbean, the soldiers collaborated in some manner with non-military people too.

Analyzing the Saint Joseph insurgency also encourages a different kind of approach to

[108] Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 262.
[109] George Hill to Lord Glenelg, 10 November 1837, CO 295/115.

the history of the West India Regiments and the lives of the Black soldiers who formed the corps. In particular, it clarifies the significance of the African backgrounds of conscripted regulars and demonstrates how those backgrounds could shape the decisions and trajectories of soldiers. Highlighting these transatlantic connections also shows how political and social developments that unfolded a long way away produced tremors in a small station in central Trinidad.

Epilogue

## Black Soldiers and Tropical Colonialism

By the mid 1820s, retired 4th West India sergeant Abraham Potts was a king. From his home in Freetown, Sierra Leone, he managed a secret society that challenged the jurisdiction of the British colonial government. Potts, an Igbo speaker who had almost certainly been transported to the Caribbean on a slave ship before his induction into the British army, had served at least a decade in the corps. While the details of his career are hazy, army records indicate that had participated in British invasions of French Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1809-1810 during the later stages of the Napoleonic wars.[1] Upon postwar regimental reorganization, Potts and hundreds other men of the 4th and 2nd West India Regiments were released from the military and settled in the nascent colonial villages forming on the hilly Sierra Leone peninsula. The villages were an experiment in "civilization," created to help teach the Liberated Africans settled in the colony to embrace British values and British culture.[2] Retired African soldiers long exposed to the disciplining and "civilizing" effects of the army, British officials thought, were a natural choice to help lead the way. Some African veterans do seem to have exemplified the sober lives of quiet local labor and Christianity that the colonial governor and many others hoped they would.[3] Abraham Potts, though, had grander ambitions.

What possessed the retired sergeant to found "an extra-legal, colony-wide government," as historian John Peterson has described it, isn't clear. He stated that his primary objective was to help—to raise funds and distribute them amongst needy members. The disturbed official who

[1] Register of Black Pensioners, WO 23/154.
[2] Richard Peter Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone: Re-Building Lives and Identities in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Maeve Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance and a British Antislavery World System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022); Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
[3] Statement of the Circumstances of Liberated Africans and Disbanded Soldiers, Appendix A11, CO 267/91.

broke up the society upon learning of it in 1827 claimed that the organization had "denigrated totally from the original object" of mutual aid and that Potts was "committing the grossest abuses" and undermining British control.[4] The governor's comments aside, "King" Potts did rule with a heavy hand. He and his allied headmen enforced "the fundamental Rules of the Society" which banned such disorderly conduct as drunkenness, physical quarrels, and theft, and unleashed hefty fines, imprisonments, lashings, and social shunnings upon members who misbehaved. At its peak, Potts' society sprawled over five villages beyond Freetown. Other retired NCOs served under his authority. Sergeant William Graham headed the Wellington village branch, Sergeant J. Maitland represented Kent, Corporal Crown of the Royal African Corps headed Waterloo. John Thomas and Basil Gouch, whose military backgrounds are not clear, led the Regent and York branches respectively. The society had broken 200 members before long, including dozens of disbanded soldiers and their wives, and numerous Liberated Africans too.[5] For Potts and his associates in the society's leadership group, demobilization opened opportunities for authority and influence divorced from—and, in this instance, in competition with—the ambitions of British imperialism.

But Potts' experience, and accumulation of legitimate political power, was not common for men released from the West India Regiments. Retired soldiers were not supposed to challenge British colonial hegemony but rather were expected to continue supporting the empire—by tilling Crown lands, serving in militia units, and generally carrying themselves as admirable Black Britons. One of colonial officials' main priorities was to ensure that disbanded veterans participated in the colonial cash economy, a key piece of the larger mission to "civilize" Africa

[4] "Declaration of Serjeant [sic] Abraham Potts," enclosed in Neil Campbell to Goderich, 30 July 1827, CO 267/82; John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone, 1787-1870* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 210.
[5] "Declaration of Serjeant [sic] Abraham Potts," enclosed in Neil Campbell to Goderich, 30 July 1827, CO 267/82.

and Africans.[6] The state provided land, farm tools, and pensions to some—5*d* per day for those who could work, and 8*d* per day for those who could not.[7] The lives of the disbanded soldiers living in Sierra Leone villages are difficult to recover. Tales of what went on were only selectively recorded by administrators and missionaries who aimed to present a particular picture of African "improvement" that would please their superiors in the metropole.[8] But those efforts to prove that the empire was successfully exporting "civilization" do provide some details about West India soldiers' post-military lives.

In the village of York, for example, Sergeant Webb of the 4th West India—a Sherbro man who had been lucky enough to return "home" to Sierra Leone after his regiment was disbanded—lived on a productive cassava and cocoa farm with his wife and three children and operated a local shop too. Down the road from Webb's abode, Lord Howe, a retired Igbo soldier, worked for himself as a sawyer and a farmer. At Wellington, another Igbo veteran called Marquis Granby cut shingles to sell in Freetown while his farmhouse was under construction.[9] It is apparent that at least a few retired veterans acted "British" enough for colonial officials to brag about it. But plenty refused to participate in the imperial project. Some, for example, disappeared for months at a time while their homes fell into disrepair.[10] The rotting A-frames, to the enthusiastic village superintendents and missionaries, must have been a bitter reminder of the many challenges they faced in putting British agendas into action. To the retired veterans, perhaps they exemplified an assertion of independence from British control at long last.

Sierra Leone wasn't the only place of settlement for those discharged from the West India

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[6] Peterson, *Province of Freedom*, 86-87.
[7] Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 136.
[8] Padraic X. Scanlan, "The Colonial Rebirth of British Anti-Slavery: The Liberated African Villages of Sierra Leone, 1815-1824," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 4 (2016): 1101.
[9] Statement of the Circumstances of Liberated Africans and Disbanded Soldiers, Appendix A11, CO 267/91; Register of Black Pensioners, WO 23/154.
[10] Thomas Cole to village managers, 21 June 1828, SLPA, Liberated African Department Letter Book 1827-1828.

Regiments during the wave of post-Napoleonic wars disbandments. British officials assigned other soldiers released from the corps to construct villages and farms on Crown lands in the underpopulated frontiers of Trinidad and British Honduras, relatively new British colonies in need of labor and development. In Trinidad, colonial officials readily accepted demobilized soldiers. The government settled hundreds of West India veterans of the 3rd and 6th West India Regiments along the wooded and brushy eastern coast of the island. Trinidad officials had high hopes that disbanded men would contribute to the colony's economic infrastructure, cultivating land and laying roads that would connect the backwater eastern parts to urban trading centers to the west.[11] The soldier-settlers, though, got little support from Trinidad officials and struggled to make their farming plots productive. The governor at the time, Ralph Woodford, committed to sending clothes, blankets, plantains, and salt cod out to the group every once in a while, but the distant location of the veterans' villages meant that provisions rarely came.[12] Few of the demobilized troops had much interest in meeting the colonial state's demands anyway. Many fled the isolated settlements altogether.[13]

Hundreds of African soldiers released from the 5th West India Regiment occupied Crown territory in British Honduras. As in eastern Trinidad, making undeveloped land productive and drawing its crop into the colonial economy were the main assignments for demobilized soldiers on the Central American main. The lieutenant governor, though, acknowledged that the state was not setting the men up to succeed. The best land that he could provide was "a considerable way back in the Country," which immediately isolated the veterans-turned-farmers. Under some

[11] David V. Trotman, "Africanizing and Creolizing the Plantation Frontier of Trinidad, 1787-1838," in *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy and Trotman (London: Continuum, 2004), 232-234.
[12] Ralph Woodford to Lord Bathurst, 12 December 1819, CO 295/48.
[13] Trotman, "Plantation Frontier," 234.

limited supervision, and with hatchets and hoes provided by the government, the retired soldiers began clearing their land. The lieutenant governor declared that the men shouldn't need more than a year to get their agricultural plots going, but challenges were immediate and steady, making this an impossible ask. Torrential summer rains washed out the farms and huts and sickened many over the first several months.[14] Some abandoned their tracts of land and disappeared from the record. Those who stuck around were subjected to the endless complaints of colonial officials who declared that military "civilization" had failed and demanded that the group be placed under the watchful eyes of a couple of missionaries.[15]

A few disbanded men released from the army in the Caribbean actually orchestrated a return to Africa. The conditions under which the Colonial Office supported repatriation requests clarify imperial aspirations for retired veterans. Mohammedu Sisei, of the Port of Spain mutual-aid society discussed in Chapter Three, managed a voyage home to the Gambia in the late 1830s after a stop in Britain. In London, Mohammedu was sent to meet members of the Royal Geographical Society who had advocated for his visit after hearing that Mohammedu claimed to remember meeting the Scottish explorer Mungo Park on one of Park's voyages up the Gambia River in the 1790s. Society members walked Mohammedu through the Zoological Gardens and the British Museum, asking him to name animals and objects in Mandinka and English before putting him to work creating a "vocabulary of his native language" that could be sent to missionaries and colonial administrators working in the Gambia. After a while, London officials sent Mohammedu off to Bathurst, expecting that he would serve as a translator and a guide for

[14] George Arthur to Lord Bathurst, 12 June 1817, 30 August 1817, CO 123/26.
[15] George Arthur to Lord Bathurst, 26 June 1821, CO 123/30. The same thing happened in eastern Trinidad. See Reverend D. Evans to Reverend D. Dakins, 8 February 1837, CO 295/118; Reverend D. Evans to Lord Glenelg, 3 June 1837, CO 295/119.

the colonial governor, especially around the upriver states from where Mohammedu had come.[16] Philip Findlay and Jackson Harvey, also of the Trinidad Islamic society, secured a return to West Africa for themselves and their families around the same time. The Colonial Office, though, only agreed to help after convincing themselves that the men "might speak the praise of us."[17] Specific objectives for Findlay and Harvey are less clear than they were for Mohammedu Sisei, but a general advancement of Britain's mission to "civilize" the Africans of the Victorian empire was an essential piece. One military official summed up the government's hopes for the retired veterans: "Should they succeed in reaching their several homes … we may hope that the quarter of a century passed in a midst of civilization will not have been entirely lost upon them, but that they may carry with them some useful arts, at least, which may tend to raise their countrymen from their present degraded state."[18]

In short, even in retirement the work of West India soldiers wasn't done, at least as British officials saw it. But the extent to which African veterans contributed further to British imperialism and "civilization" is in doubt. For Abraham Potts and the headmen of his society, all retired sergeants and corporals, disbandment opened opportunities to transform the privileges of non-commissioned officership into legitimate political authority that challenged the colonial state. The farmers, carpenters, sawyers, and traders featured in the colonial summary of African "industriousness" in Sierra Leone may have felt some connection to the ambitions of the empire, or they may have seen themselves as simply using the tools available to them to pursue individual or household autonomy regardless of what the colonial state wanted. Most, in Sierra Leone, Trinidad, and Honduras, struggled to subsist on the meager produce of their plots, much

[16] Captain John Washington, "Some Account of Mohammedü-Sisei, a Mandingo, of Nyáni-Marú on the Gambia," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 8 (1838): 448-454.
[17] George Carden to Lord Howick, 27 July 1837, CO 295/119.
[18] Washington, "Some Account of Mohammedu-Siseï," 453.

less turn the underdeveloped regions to which they were sent into productive farmland that supported colonial economies, if they stuck around at all.

Of course, thousands of West India soldiers walked out British Atlantic garrisons for the final time under different circumstances entirely, unrelated to the mass demobilizations and military settlement schemes that followed Britain's victory at Waterloo. The army steadily released Black troops into numerous Atlantic colonies over the course of the nineteenth century. We can surmise that the men, and their families if they had them, tried to make it as traders, farmers, day laborers, and craftsmen, depending of course on their physical condition. When the War Office bound and filed away its 1837 census of Black pensioners living in the Caribbean and West Africa, it counted retired soldiers settled in sixteen total colonies.[19] For virtually all of these demobilized veterans we know next to nothing. Perhaps some set the example of the "civilized" Black Briton that metropolitan officials had in mind. But most probably focused on building new lives and livelihoods, regardless of the imperial vision they were supposed to make a reality.

This dissertation has been, amongst other things, a story of Atlantic military labor. Much of it has been specific to the experiences of soldiers of African descent. As Black men, West India regulars were made to endure specific tasks tailored for troops of color—manning the most "miasmic" tropical stations, undertaking particular fatigue labor assignments from which white soldiers were often protected, and engaging in combat in rugged environments in which the army believed that colonial troops were best suited to function. But this has also been a story of colonial military labor more generally, aiming to illuminate the quotidian experiences of those

[19] Register of Black Pensioners, WO 23/154. Pensioners are recorded to have lived, in alphabetical order, in Antigua, the Bahamas, Barbados, Demerara, Dominica, Gambia, Grenada, Honduras, Jamaica, Montserrat, Sierra Leone (including the Isles de Los), Saint Kitts, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, Tobago, and Trinidad.

bound to work for a British empire that relied so heavily upon unfree people to function.[20] My intention has not been to present white and Black experiences in the British army as diametrically opposed. Rather, I am working off what I see as a two-circle venn diagram which depicts both the significant experiential overlap and the small outer crescents in which white and Black soldiers' circumstances diverge. The West India Regiments are in many ways unique, and I have leaned into explaining and analyzing what makes them so. But the preceding chapters are also intended to illuminate life in the British army more broadly. I hope that the sources, methods, and ideas upon which this dissertation has been constructed point toward more explorations of the relationship between military labor, race, disease, war, and empire building. Any regiment in the British army, and the experience of any soldier in Britain's global military establishment, can help us to understand these essential themes in modern world history.

The West India Regiments link Atlantic slavery, abolition, and emancipation to the British military and the growth of the British empire. The transatlantic slave trade brought the corps to strength, and abolition and slave-trade suppression were carefully designed to continue funneling Africans into colonial forces. The West India Regiments, though, were only a preliminary step in an extended, nineteenth-century imperial tradition of recruiting enslaved/emancipated Africans for tropical regiments and paramilitary units. As Britain committed further to extending its political, economic, and cultural influence in parts of West Africa, local recruitment of people of enslaved origin boomed. Enslaved African enlistment on the continent collapsed two key imperial ambitions—antislavery and careful, deliberate territorial acquisitions—into one another. By recruiting Africans of enslaved backgrounds in coastal West Africa, military officers could say they were working to eradicate African slavery *and* building up the local paramilitary units

[20] Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600-1850* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

that would defend and extend British imperial claims in the region. On the Gold Coast, the British officials constructing the Gold Coast Corps took to "redeeming" *odonko* men, a vague term for enslaved people from the interior, paying a few pounds per head to "emancipate" and immediately enlist them for the nascent GCC starting around mid-century. They also granted asylum to *odonko* runaways in exchange for their enlistment. After Britain annexed the coastal kingdom of Lagos in 1861, in the name of halting an illegal slave trade, colonial officials embraced similar practices. They constructed a local paramilitary force, the Armed Hausa Police, that was initially populated by hundreds of Muslim runaways from the interior willing to exchange slavery for military service.[21] West India soldiers didn't have much to do with recruits for the Gold Coast Corps, the Armed Hausa Police, or other similar paramilitary units. To the contrary, these localized colonial forces generally replaced West India companies on the Gold Coast and at Lagos, as governors preferred the home-grown units that operated under their sole command. But the West India Regiments had clarified that British antislavery could, and *should*, feed the global military establishment, and that it could do so for a very long time. From that point, it was just a matter of adjusting the formula to fit local circumstances.

West India soldiers served almost exclusively in the Atlantic tropics. Only during the First World War did the reorganized, consolidated, and soon-do-be-disbanded-entirely British West Indies Regiment see substantial time elsewhere—in Europe, the Middle East, Egypt, and East Africa.[22] Eighteenth-century concerns about the "miasmas" of the Caribbean that massacred "unseasoned" whites, and concomitant observations of the comparatively healthy Africans on the

[21] For a quick summary of these practices, see Timothy Stapleton, *West African Soldiers in Britain's Colonial Army, 1860-1960* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 31-55. For a comparative case from the Dutch empire, see Ineke van Kessel, "West African Soldiers in the Dutch East Indies: From Donkos to Black Dutchmen," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 9 (2005): 41-60.
[22] A.A. Cipriani, *Twenty-Five Years After: The British West Indies Regiment in the Great War* (Port of Spain: Sport and General Press, 1940).

plantations and in colonial ranger units, had led military officials to establish formal Black regiments for tropical service in the 1790s. The martial success and reasonably low mortality rates of West India soldiers, for many imperial officials, not only demonstrated the value of the corps to the empire but also cleared a path for firmer assertions about race and the differences between white and Black bodies and constitutions. Indeed, the Black corps link eighteenth-century theories about toxic air and environments that seemed to affect white and Black people differently with the "race science" that legitimated early Victorian imperialism and "civilization," much of which was constructed upon mortality data from the West India Regiments.[23] But the medical necessity didn't endure.[24] By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, quinine, mosquito nets, and other medical advancements had made it so that the tropics were not nearly as deadly to white soldiers as they had once been.[25] Manpower, though, remained a serious issue for Britain, as the expansion of empire in Africa and Asia developed alongside shifting power dynamics in Europe. In his 1885 *History of the First West India Regiment*, Major Alfred B. Ellis asserted that colonial soldiers were perhaps more essential than they ever were, noting the "constant drain on the Home Establishment" that the occupancy of colonial garrisons across the world, from Bermuda and Saint Helena to the Straits and Hong Kong, had caused. In addition, and clearly troubled by the rapid rise of a unified Germany, Ellis commented that "our Continental neighbours are outvying each other in the completeness of their military organizations and the size of their armies."[26] In his book, the major showed what good soldiers the men of the West India Regiments had been, and used the example to advocate for the

[23] Tim Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race: Life and Death in the West India Regiments, 1795-1874* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
[24] And, as Lockley shows, the imperial image of the "superhuman," illness-resistant Black soldier collapsed around the 1870s. Lockley, *Military Medicine*.
[25] Philip D. Curtin, "'The end of the 'white man's grave'? Nineteenth-century mortality in West Africa," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21 (1990): 63-98.
[26] Major A.B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), 1-2.

expansion of colonial forces as a response to the challenges that global imperialism was causing for an overextended Britain.

The British empire presented particular environments and particular enemies for which metropolitan officials saw Black colonial soldiers as an ideal counter. The eighteenth-century Caribbean, from the viewpoint of British army officers, had been the scene of mountain skirmishing against maroons, Caribs, and enslaved insurgents who embraced the "bush tactics" of ambush and retreat. Colonial wars in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa and Asia were envisaged in much the same way, with non-white colonial soldiers often seen to be best suited to destroy non-white enemies. General John Vaughan, who advocated hard for the establishment of the West India Regiments, argued in the mid 1790s that Britain needed to "oppos[e] Blacks to Blacks."[27] More than a century later, the British officers charged with subduing the people whose territory Britain had claimed in Africa were making the same kinds of statements. "One of the great advantages of being able to employ native soldiers—men born and bred in the country," wrote Captain Charles Braithwaite Wallis in the "Bush Fighting" chapter of his 1903 military memoir, *The Advance of Our West African Empire*, "is that we are then enabled to a great extent, to play the enemy's own game, to follow him into his fastnesses and favourite haunts, and generally to adopt his own strategy and tactics."[28] Wallis was thinking about his own experiences leading units of the Sierra Leone Frontier Force during the Hut Tax War, but he was well aware that the lessons he'd learned were portable.[29] The global contexts had changed substantially in the century since the establishment of the West India Regiments, but

[27] John Vaughan to Henry Dundas, 25 December 1794, WO 1/83.
[28] C. Braithwaite Wallis, *The Advance of Our West African Empire* (London: T. Fisher, 1903), 282.
[29] Many of Wallis' contemporaries likewise published guides for how best to undertake "small wars" against the "uncivilized" people of the British empire. See C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996 [1896]); William C.G. Heneker, *Bush Warfare* (London: Hugh Rees, 1907).

the imperial convictions were much the same: African soldiers functioned well in rough terrain and they knew how best to engage non-white forces too. Iterations of the West India Regiments had rooted out African guerilla bands in the mountains of eastern Caribbean islands in the 1790s, and in the 1890s, they participated in Wallis' campaigns into the Sierra Leone hinterland. The corps illuminates a very long history of ugly, irregular warfare against those who challenged British hegemony and connects the violent engagements of the old Atlantic empire and the new one that centered Africa and Asia. The methods of warfare, and the men upon whom Britain relied to flex imperial muscle, weren't so different.

During the Second World War, Britain's colonial soldiers took on another non-white foe who supposedly excelled in guerilla combat: the Japanese. Enormous African regiments engaged the army of Japan in the jungles of Burma, Malaya, and elsewhere.[30] By the time that African divisions were hacking through the humid forests of southeast Asia, complex and textured (though also endlessly contradictory) hierarchies of Africa's "martial races" were well-refined in imperial minds and dictated many of the particulars of colonial recruitment on the continent.[31] The West India Regiments predate British obsessions with Hausa, Kamba, Yao, Nubi/Sudanese, and many others as natural fighting men. But as Britain's first formal line regiments of Black soldiers, they do represent the turn toward mass African recruitment that would not only recalibrate the lives of hundreds of thousands of supposedly-militant recruits, but also fashion and harden some of the ethnic hierarchies by which Britain would organize its empire in Africa. As British officials constructed dozens of local regiments and paramilitary units across the

[30] David Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 141-178.
[31] Stapleton, *West African Soldiers*; Timothy Parsons, "'Wakamba warriors are soldiers of the queen': The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890-1970," *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 4 (1999): 671-701; Risto Marjormaa, "The Martial Spirit: Yao Soldiers in British Service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895-1939," *Journal of African History* 44, no. 3 (2003): 413-432; Ronald M. Lamothe, *Slaves of Fortune: Sudanese Soldiers and the River War, 1896-1898* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2011).

continent, colonial soldiering increasingly influenced the social and cultural history of modern Africa.

The soldiers of color who fought for the empire are often not recognized in Britain. The popular British-American war-epic *Dunkirk*, for example, which premiered to great fanfare in London in 2017, pans across lines and columns of young white faces, presenting an image of Great Britain defended and saved by heroic white men that was lauded by nationalists and Brexiteers despite loud challenges to the accuracy of its depiction of the empire's regiments.[32] The myth of an all-white British military is alive and well. Over the last several years, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, a group of researchers hired to "correct any gaps in commemoration" of those who died in service to Britain during the World Wars concluded that African and Asian servicemembers have been "commemorated unequally"—effectively erased from national memory and memorialization.[33] They are, apparently, overseeing the correction of this oversight. Perhaps this dissertation and some of the recent scholarship with which it engages will help to reframe understandings of who served the British empire, and mount, in many different ways, a challenge to the whitewashed image of British military heroics that remains popular and seductive.

The Royal Navy commander and historian Brian Dyde published his own history of the West India Regiments in 1997.[34] He begins and ends his book by lamenting the insufficient appreciation that Britons have shown for the many thousands of Black soldiers who served in the corps between 1795 and its disbandment in 1927. Memorialization is a good thing, but it seems

[32] Sunny Singh, "Why the lack of Indian and African faces in *Dunkirk* matters," *The Guardian*, 1 August 2017.
[33] *Report of the Special Committee to Review Historical Inequalities in Commemoration* (Maidenhead: Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2021), 4, 6.
[34] Brian Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve: The Story of the West India Regiments of the British Army* (Saint John's, Antigua: Hansib Caribbean, 1997).

to me worth thinking about the context in which West India soldiers *should* be remembered. Is the addition of the West India Regiments to the national (often national*ist* and sometimes jingoist) memory of Britain's former global hegemony and the many wars that supported it what is actually needed here? Are West India soldiers better situated within some of the ongoing public research projects on the legacies of slavery and the myriad ways in which the torment and cajolement of African people facilitated British national wealth and global dominion?[35] Maybe both are appropriate, or perhaps the answer lies somewhere else altogether. In any case, illuminating West India soldiers' trajectories, experiences, friendships, struggles, and successes feels like a good place to start.

[35] See, for example, *Legacies of British Slavery*, University College London, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/.

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