Exploring the Contributions Made by the Peoples of the West Indies to World War One

A CACOEU Project

Supported by
The National Lottery®
through the Heritage Lottery Fund
What is CACOEU?

CACOEU (Caribbean Communities in Europe) was created in 2000 by a group of academics and community workers to create a community across the growing numbers of people with roots in the Caribbean who are living, working and studying in Europe. The aim is to share and preserve knowledge, culture and tradition for current and future generations. It creates a bridge between the elders and the young people of the community, including those children born in Europe of mixed parentage who may become cut off from their Caribbean culture.

CACOEU develops and maintains links between Goldsmiths, through STaCS (formerly PACE), and the local community, ASCC (Afro-Surinamese Cultural Centre) in the Netherlands and with other Caribbean groups in France, St Maarten etc.

Activities include small scale community-led research, exhibition of findings; workshops; Saturday schools and visits (at members’ expense) to activities in Amsterdam and Paris. These mainly take place at Goldsmiths, in local community centres and in schools (after school projects). There is also a journal ‘CACOEU TALK’ (free to all members).

Membership is open to anyone who shares the aims and objectives of CACOEU. The current annual subscription is £10 (£5 for research students on production of student cards).
The aim of CACOEU’s Heritage Lottery Funded project was to explore the contributions made by the peoples of the West Indies to World War One (WWI) and to discover their untold stories. We found people who shared the stories that had been passed down as part of their family history and documented those stories for future generations.

This booklet together with CACOEU's website and video archives tells those stories. To read more on the project, go to www.CACOEU.net
“The idea for this project resulted from one of our monthly meetings, where we discuss the business of the day and, in addition, we “eat and talk”, in general, thus creating a sociable and informal setting that is conducive to a “learn and share” environment. Ideas from those “eat and talk” sessions have in the past resulted in some highly successful projects, such as the Quadrille Dance event which was held a few years ago.

Any member is free to suggest a topic for discussion, providing it fits in with CACOEU’s remit. If the topic generates enough interest and is held to be viable, we may then look at developing it further.

It was at one of those “eat and talk” sessions that one of CACOEU’s long standing members, Cynthia Gaynor-Bailey, raised the subject of the West Indian peoples’ contribution to the First World War, of which little was being said during the present series of memorial events taking place throughout the UK.

We wondered about the number of Caribbean descendants, living in the UK, who may have information that had been passed on, through their community, about the participation of their relatives in the Great War. A discussion followed about possible ways of tracking down a few of those descendants and bringing together any piecemeal information for sharing, at the same time being mindful of the limitation of such a small group as CACOEU.”
The Contributors

Caroline Arthurs and Lily and Terry Arthurs
Family of Rupert Arthurs

Theresa and Gloria Wyse
Family of Andrew Pierre

Lennox Salmon
Grandson of Aubrey Newman

Gloria Bailey MBE
Talks about her father, Arthur Campbell

Patrick Vernon OBE
Talks about his uncle, Samuel Ruby

Nola Stair
Talks about her grandfather, Stanley Stair
The Stories

Mr Andrew Pierre
Corporal 13513 BWIR

Andrew Pierre's daughter, Theresa Wyse (née Pierre) and granddaughter Gloria, came to Goldsmiths, University of London and were filmed talking about their father and grandfather's contribution to WWI.

Theresa told us that her father Andrew Pierre's decision to enlist was two-fold: one because of the shortage of men signing up for the war and two, despite his training in carpentry, the promise of money and security was persuasive. So Andrew left Grenada for Jamaica where he enlisted and was trained. From there he went to France.

Andrew Pierre was a chef during the war but he also served in the trenches. He spoke about the coldness; how he got frostbite but, even more seriously, how he lost his leg in battle. It was amputated below the knee at Bethnal Green Hospital in London. Back home in Grenada after the war, he would be sent a new leg and a pair of boots every five years, but suffered with excruciating phantom pain in his leg for the rest of his life.

Theresa says that her father was very proud of having served for his mother country, England, and took the opportunity of wearing his two medals, the Victory Medal and the British War Medal frequently, particularly when taking part in parades. He even got the opportunity of meeting and shaking the hand of King George when he visited the island. However, he would tell his sons not to sign up for the British army as, apart from a small pension and some medical assistance, the British didn’t fulfil their promises of looking after the soldiers when they returned home and Andrew Pierre had to go back to work as a carpenter in order to take care of his family. Sometime later though, aid from the government was given and officials did help veterans to find work and Mr Pierre found work at the Cable and Wireless network where he remained until retirement.

Read more at www.CACOEU.net
Rupert Charles Meredith Arthurs. 
Sergeant BWIR 1562

Born in 1894, Rupert Arthurs was the seventh child of a fairly well off, Belize land-owning family and worked as a teacher from the age of 14.

We visited the Arthurs family Terry and Lily Arthurs, and their daughter Caroline ArthursCooke at their Streatham home where they told us three stories about Sergeant Arthurs their father, father-in-law and grandfather.

Eager to help the “motherland”, Rupert Arthurs was one of the earliest to enlist into the British West Indies Regiment and quickly made his way up to the rank of Sergeant. However, as his granddaughter Caroline recalls, this was not without his having to face racism whilst doing so. Despite his rank, Sergeant Arthurs was not allowed inside the Sergeants Mess because of his skin colour. However, a Major visiting the regiment came across the issue and ensured he was treated with the respect he deserved, including the use of the Sergeants Mess.

Caroline, while doing research on her grandfather, found that regiments such as Rupert Arthurs’ were often posted outside Europe as it was believed that those from the West Indies, due to the colour of their skin, would be able to withstand the heat of North Africa and the Middle East far better than Caucasian soldiers, thus Rupert Arthurs served in Mesopotamia (now known as Iraq).

A brilliant violinist, singer and dancer, Rupert Arthurs was a part of the Entertainment troop during the war whose job it was to lift the spirits of the soldiers.
Caroline tells us how her grandfather was a people’s man, and fitted in comfortably wherever he went. After the war Rupert Arthurs was asked to be the British Honduras's representative of the League of Coloured Peoples. At the first meeting, chaired by Lord Mountbatten, Arthurs found he was the only black representative. Rather than feeling uncomfortable in a room full of white men, he simply smiled and said, “Gentlemen, I feel like a beetle in a glass of milk”, effectively breaking the ice.

After the war, Rupert Arthurs became a master tailor and ultimately married and settled in Brixton, South London. He continued to entertain by singing and playing the violin and Caroline remembers him as the life and soul of many a party. He was often called upon to recite a crowd favourite, 'Gunga Din', at family gatherings, well into his nineties.

Read more at www.CACOEU.net
Patrick Vernon OBE talked to us about the research he has done so far into his uncle, Samuel Ruby, and other Caribbean and African soldiers who took part in WWI.

Whilst attempting to find information on his uncle, Samuel Ruby, Patrick discovered that almost nothing was written about, and very little honour was given to, the contributions of West Indian and particularly African soldiers post-war. However, what Patrick did find out during his research was that his Jamaican uncle enlisted and served his enlistment in North Africa. At the end of the war Samuel Ruby did not go back to Jamaica but moved to Brooklyn, New York.

Patrick was gifted a copy of a rare photograph from the National Archives for work he did in reviewing images of the Caribbean from 1900 to 1950s which included images of the British West Indies Regiment based in North Africa. Patrick is still trying to find out if Samuel Ruby was one of the soldiers in this picture.
Gloria Bailey MBE talked about her father Arthur Campbell.

Arthur Campbell joined the British West Indies Regiment and served his enlistment in the trenches in France. Gloria’s father returned to Jamaica after the war and met his wife who he fondly described as “the most beautiful black woman he’d ever seen”.

Gloria’s father was an active member of his community upon his return and would make a monthly visit to his local police station as a Special Consultant and he would collect twelve men to train. Using his knowledge from the war and his training as a soldier, he would teach men as he was taught, a pre-emptive measure in case another war broke out.
Lennox Salmon, talked to us about his grandfather and his great uncles.

Lennox became interested in his maternal grandfather Aubrey Newman’s war stories in his youth, often wondering how the “little old man could possibly have been a soldier running around the trenches” in the war. Lennox recalls how on his first visit to his grandfather in Jamaica, he found out that Aubrey had in fact emigrated to Cuba after the war ended. Lennox tells us that during and after the war there was a lot of turbulence in Jamaica and returning soldiers were not encouraged to go back to their original homes, but to settle in Cuba and South America where there was work. So his grandfather went to Cuba, worked in a restaurant and learned to speak fluent Spanish. Ultimately though Newman did return to his homeland of Jamaica where he married and had eleven children.

During Lennox's second visit to his grandfather's home, Newman brought out a shoebox of photographs including one of himself as a young man as well as his two war medals, and also recounted his experiences in the war.

Newman told how he enlisted in Jamaica and went on a journey across Europe for his service. It is believed that he travelled to Southampton, England to complete his training, including, according to Lennox's mother, bayonet training. After this he was sent first to France and then to Italy. Lennox believes that he then went back to France and possibly Belgium, only to be sent back again to Italy, this time to Taranto, where he remained until the end of the war.

Read more at www.CACOEU.net
Newman told his grandson of the horrors and desperation of the war. This included the terrible starvation the men were forced to endure which led on one occasion to him and others with him eating the remains of a rotting dead horse in order to survive. He also told his grandson of occasions when soldiers were forced to urinate on stale, hard bread to make it edible.

When first looking into his grandfather's history Lennox visited the National Archives, where he found not only that his grandfather listed as a medallist, but also his great uncle, Aubrey's brother, Veral Newman listed too. Lennox contacted Veral's daughter, Earline, who lives in Canada, who told him that her father had not served in Europe, but had been posted to Palestine. The two brothers did return from the war but unlike Aubrey who sustained no injuries, Veral's daughter told Lennox that he suffered from shell shock, or what is now known as PTSD, and would often have angry outbursts.

Lennox was also delighted to find that further down the National Archives list, his great uncle on his father's side, Claudius Salmon, listed as a medallist as he had also served in the war. Lennox is yet to research Claudius's contribution to the war.
Stanley Stair

Stanley Stair (October 1900 – April 2008) was the eldest surviving British West Indies Regiment veteran when he died. At the end of the war he was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. He died in Animal Hill, Lucea, Jamaica, in April 2008 at the age of 107.

Nola Stair talked to us about her grandfather.

Nola told us how as a child she would sit on her grandfather’s front porch listening to his stories of his time at war and on the front lines. However, because she was only very young, she regrets not asking him more about his time in WWI as she feels that he had many more stories which could have been told and passed on.

As an adult, Nola decided to undertake some of her own research, and she found that her grandfather initially tried to enlist in 1915, but was unsuccessful as he was underage. He tried again and was successful in March 1916, although he was still only 15 and his 16th birthday wasn't until October. He enlisted with his friends. While he returned healthy, many didn't make it back.

Nola is looking to do more research into her grandfather’s contribution to the War and, ultimately, hopes to use her findings to write a children’s book.
Dr Petronella Breinburg:

One of the pivotal people in this project, it was Petronella’s original research that led to CACOEU’s interest in finding out more on West Indian Soldiers’ contributions to the war.

Read more at www.CACOEU.net
Donald Hinds

A former teaching colleague of Donald’s told a story of how after enlisting he was sent to a particularly cold part of the island, Newcastle, in the hills of Jamaica, to train. As part of their training the soldiers were thrown a limited number of blankets to fight over, resulting in only the toughest of them getting one. Donald wondered if this was a lesson in testing their attitude to adversity and the tough life they would be enduring as soldiers.

In conversation with a former soldier he met whilst visiting the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, this soldier, who was serving in the Middle East, did not talk of the fighting but told Donald instead of a particularly moving moment where he took the opportunity to swoop down and drink from the River Jordan - a remarkable moment for the religious man.
A World War Two veteran himself, James fondly remembers a time when a man in his district would go and sit atop a hill, play his bamboo flute and sing an old war song, “Soldiers going to war, soldiers going to war, some will never return” - in relation to his time in World War One and just before the outbreak of World War Two.

There was a certain sense of pride with the men in going to war. James retells the story of Norman Washington Manley, the first Prime Minister of Jamaica, who left Oxford University, where he was studying Law to serve in the Royal Field Artillery.
The 28th July 2014 marked one hundred years since the outbreak of the First World War (1914-1918). During the First World War, 15,600 men enlisted into the British West Indies Regiment and fought on the side of the Allies. Over 700 officers and soldiers from British Guiana (now Guyana) voluntarily enlisted and travelled overseas as members of the British West Indies Regiment. Gershom Browne was one such soldier. This article looks at his experiences in the Great War, the social life in British Guiana leading up to the war, and the reasons why many volunteered to fight in a war considered by many as the “white man’s war.”

Reasons for enlisting

When the Great War began in 1914, the majority of people living in British Guiana and the West Indies were experiencing great economic hardships because they had been forced to live below the standards necessary to maintain them. Some middle-class people of African descent in their struggle for political and constitutional change welcomed the war. Furthermore, in September 1914, the founder of the UNIA-ACL, Marcus Garvey, in a letter to the governor of Jamaica endorsed the war effort. He wrote: ‘Being mindful of the great protecting and civilising influence of the English nation and people of whom we are subjects, and their justice to all men, and especially to their Negro subjects scattered all over the world..."
CACOEU supporter Elsa Pascal, compiled a paper on The Dominican Contribution to the WWI effort. Elsa travelled far and wide and conducted extensive research, going as far as travelling to the Dominican Republic to get first hand information.

The following is an extract from her paper, ‘The Dominican Contribution to the World War 1 Effort’, where Elsa compiled a comprehensive collection of information from a wide number of sources, including ‘Voice of Dominica’ and the BBC Archives.

‘The Voice of Dominica reported on 6 January 1915 of ‘a wonderful war now raging in Europe naturally caused very much consternation of the inhabitants of the island’ and that Dominicans were ‘ever ready to do all that lie in their power to ensure victory for England and her allies’ as ‘Dominica is second to none in loyalty to its King and Motherland.’

In June 1915, the Home Government consented to allow contingents from the British West Indies to fight at the front; contingents from Barbados, British Guiana, Jamaica and Trinidad. Earlier the government had declined to accept the offer of a contingent of men from the West Indies stating that they would be best placed ‘serving their country by assisting in the defence of their own shores.’ The newspaper was adamant that as ‘loyalty permeates all classes, all creeds and all races in the West Indies’, it was only right that West Indian men be allowed to enlist. Soon after 12 young men left Barbados on the SS Crown of Granada bound for England with the sole intention of enlisting into the British army. (Voice of Dominica, 16 & 23 June 1915)

Why did they enlist?
For some, it was the desire to escape from poverty; for others it was an affinity nurtured by the belief that they were proud members of the British Empire; whilst for others it was a golden opportunity for political aspirations.

Read more of Elsa’s research at www.CACOEU.net
Carol Pierre conducted research on the history and participation of the British West Indian Regiment in WWI as part of her History Masters degree. Please find below her findings which she kindly presented at CACOEU’s Black History Month event:

**The British Colonial Contribution to WW1**

- Over 4 million colonial soldiers were employed by the British army from: The Falkland Islands, China, Canada, NewFoundland, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, India, Africa and the Caribbean.
- The BWIR was established on October 26th 1915, as a new infantry formation within the British Army, consisted of 12 battalions.
- Most battalions served in France, while others served in Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere.
- By the end of war over 15,000 West Indians had served.
- The British West Indian Regiment was a purely black regiment separate from other British regiments.
- Soldiers were not permitted on the front line, instead forced into labouring positions.
- No black soldier could rank any higher than a sergeant.

**Recruitment**

- King George V forced the War Office to recruit West Indians following allied losses and fearing that rejecting volunteers because of their race would cause agitation in the Caribbean.
- The War Office were hostile to the idea of large numbers of black men arriving in Britain, fearing enlisting black men would have short-term and long-term consequences on imperial hierarchies.
- Blacks could potentially outshine whites undermining colonial rule.
- A black soldier could use weapons against the English.
- The 41% of West Indian soldiers rejected by the War Office, considered undesirable, and those injured were sent back to the Caribbean with no compensation upon their return.
• The Halifax incident: March 1916, a ship carrying over 1000 Jamaican volunteers encountered a blizzard, 5 men died and more than 700 were injured, due to a lack of adequate heating and sufficient clothing. This interrupted British recruitment campaigns in the Caribbean.

• Seeking support at wartime rallies, the British used the argument that a ‘Prussian Victory’ could terminate the ‘benign rule of Empire’ and lead to slavery once again.

Race

• BWIR Veteran Blackman: ‘when the battle starts…we're all the same. When you’re there you don’t care about anything. Every man is under the rifle’.

• Reports from white officials praise the discipline, loyalty and devotion. Many black soldiers received medals.

However...

• Black soldiers were excluded from technical operations and the front line.

• They were not considered rational enough to undertake active duties.

• They were given below standard pay, living conditions, recreational and medical facilities

• Despite Caribbeans being considered British under the 1914 British Nationality Act.

• Army officials took the stance that ‘to be British was to be white’.

• Wartime propaganda represented British colonials as children of Empire ‘paternally led by Britain’.

The end of War

• Trade Unions demanded white English soldiers retain previous employment, leaving numbers of black men without work.

• Black men who had settled with white women and raised mixed race families faced abuse.
• The Taranto Mutiny, Italy, December 6th 1918, unfolded when black soldiers were ordered to wash the lavatories of white labourers.
• BWIR refusal and built up frustrations led to violence and intimidation against whites for four days, after which mutineers surrendered.
• BWIR soldiers were forcibly disarmed and court-martialled, many given harsh sentences and the ringleader received a death sentence, changed later to a twenty-year sentence in prison.
• More than 1000 Caribbean soldiers lost their lives in the war and nearly 700 were permanently injured.
• The BWIR were excluded from the Victory parades held in London and Paris in July 1919, celebrating the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Indians and other British colonial troops marched.

West Indian troops stacking shells at Ypres, October 1917.
E(AUS) 2078
Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following organisations for their support in delivering this project:

CEN8
Nonesuchmedia
Goldsmiths, University of London
Vista Reminisce
Caribbean Forum

With thanks to the following volunteers:

Sarah Carroll
Corrine Chan
Diane Cummings
Nike Eyinla
Sum Yee Fong
Seohyun Jeon
Alexander Ktorides
Danny Lane
Ellinda Langdon
Jungeun Lee
Esther Myers
Nathaniel Nicolas
Layla Pacha
Imogen Rawe
Lennox Salmon
Vincent Spareboom
Adam Thornton
Greta Westwood
Harriet Wynter
Fang Lan Ye
Jia Hui Zhou

External sources:

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zRCu1gjXg0&feature=youtu.be&list=PL0AR1CLr5RJGpJ5ff9WwfJ22U1Ni-qlkx&t=991
• Read more on Norman Manley, the former Prime Minister of Jamaica and Sergeant in WWI at: https://www.theguardian.com/law/2010/oct/20/blackhistorymonth-jamaica
CACOEU
Supported by The National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund