



De Last Post in het landschap

The Last Post in the landscape

01/10/2023

LIJSSENTHOEK MILITARY CEMETERY POPERINGE



TOERISME
VLAANDEREN

westtoer

de **Westhoek**
TOERISTISCH GEBIED


1914-18
Flanders Fields

Norman and Roy Manley

Jamaican brothers Norman and Roy Manley had a somewhat atypical war experience for non-white men from the British Caribbean. After all, they did not serve in the British West Indies Regiment, but in the primal British Royal Field Artillery. Born into a well-to-do Jamaican family - father was a white businessman and mother half-Irish - the 'light-skinned' Manley brothers were studying in England when war broke out. Despite having attended a good public school, his younger brother Douglas Roy, known as Roy, was initially refused in an Officers Training Corps because of his skin colour. Subsequently, in September 1915 the two brothers signed up together in the Royal Field Artillery, doing so in working class Deptford where non-white men were more easily accepted by locals and army officials alike. When four months later he went overseas, Norman Manley did so as a corporal. Yet, his rank proved to be a disadvantage as the ordinary gunners *'disliked taking orders from a coloured NCO and their attitude was mild by comparison with that of my fellow NCO's... They were more spiteful and later conspired to get me into trouble'*. When this indeed happened, he managed to escape court martial through a deal with his sympathetic commanding officer: Manley was transferred with his brother to "D" Battery of the 174th Brigade of the RFA and - on his own proposal- reverted to the rank of gunner.

The Manley brothers: Roy (left) and Norman (right)



In the run-up to the Third Battle of Ypres, Roy was killed on 26 July 1917, aged 21. This happened during heavy German shelling, probably near Wilson Farm north of Ypres is. In no time, half the men were wounded or killed. According to Norman, Roy was carrying a wounded comrade on his back who later turned out to be dead, when

he in turn was hit by a small piece of shrapnel in the heart. Norman was not around when his brother died, but did help bury him the next day. Today, Roy Manley is buried in Poperinghe New Military Cemetery (grave II.E.41).

Some months later, still during the Third Battle of Ypres, Norman Manley was awarded the Military Medal for conspicuous bravery in the field. Without his brother, he felt more alone as ever and he attributed this to his skin colour. After the war, returning to Oxford, Manley faced problems adapting to civil life, maybe suffering from war neurosis, finally graduating in 1921 and marrying his cousin and love for some years, the English artist Edna Swithenbank. After his return to Jamaica, he became the leading lawyer of the island and in 1938 he founded the People's National party, championing universal suffrage and self-government. The former would be granted in 1944, the latter gradually culminated in Jamaica's independence in 1962. Manley eventually became Chief Minister of Jamaica from 1955 to 1959 and Premier from 1959-1962. Shortly after his death in 1969, he was given the title of National Hero, one of seven Jamaicans to whom the title was conferred. According to his granddaughter Rachel, throughout his life Norman Manley always wore a black tie in memory of his beloved big brother with whom he had joined the army in England but who never returned.

Herbert Morris

One row beyond Roy Manley's grave at Poperinghe New Military Cemetery, is that of another Jamaican, Herbert Morris (grave II. F. 45). Herbert Morris was only 17 when he was killed. In the British Empire, the minimum age for war volunteers was 18, but quite a few of the Caribbean recruits were younger. A very young Jamaican soldier, Herbert Morris served in the 6th Battalion. He had disembarked in France in late April 1917 and on 21 June that year his unit moved into a tent camp at Pezelhoek, just north of Poperinge. His battalion had by then been attached as corps troops to General Ivor Maxse's XVIII Corps (Fifth Army) with the task of supplying ammunition. On 20 August 1917, while on his way to Essex Farm, near Ypres, Herbert Morris went 'Absent Without Leave' and was arrested shortly afterwards. At his court-martial on 7 September, he told the court that he could no longer bear the sound of artillery, that he had consulted the doctor about this but that he had been unable to help him. Despite a positive character report stating that Herbert Morris was more intelligent than most of his platoon mates, he was still given the death sentence. It is not known whether the military authorities knew his true age, but if they did not, it is clear that

they did not think to inquire about it either. In any case, on 20 September 1917, the boy of 17 was shot.



This makes Herbert Morris one of the two youngest executed in World War I.

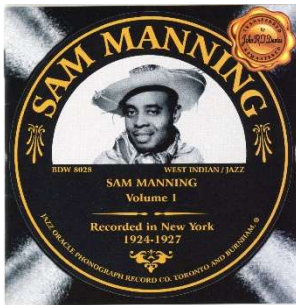
He is also the only African-Caribbean soldier executed on the Western Front and the only one shot for an offence that did not involve violence.

The news of Herbert Morris' execution must have resounded throughout the West Indian battalions. Seventy-five years after the events, Bahamian veteran journalist and politician Etienne Dupuch wrote in his memoirs that it was a Jamaican that had run away under fire and that 'his last message to his mother was that he could not stand the soul-searing noise made by exploding shells'. It was something Dupuch, who had undergone and witnessed men's reactions in a violent bombardment, could perfectly understand.

Music in the British West Indies Regiment

Music was very important and ubiquitous in the military units recruited in the Caribbean. Thus, each battalion had its own music band. This not only played established military tunes and marches, but also had new ones composed. And those new tunes were given titles referring to the places where they resided such as "Poperinghe", "Ondank" or the "Tannery March".

Of particular importance was also the music of home, and chaplain Alfred Horner wrote to his readership in the Bahamas full of melancholy about the memories that came to mind on hearing "Farewell, my sunny home", played "through the historic ruins of shell-swept Ypres".



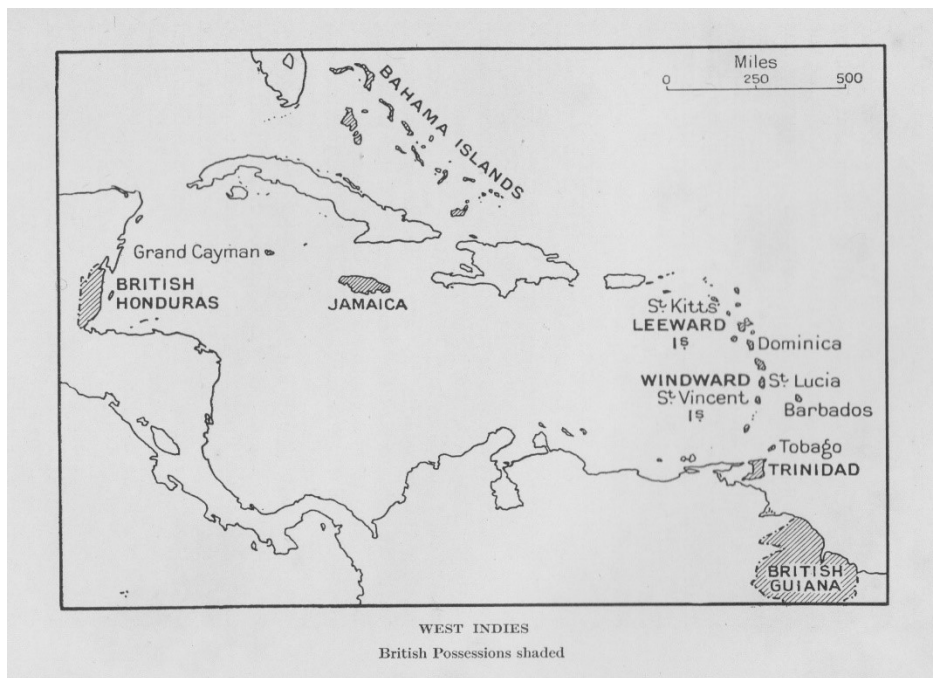
The best musician in British West Indies Regiment was probably Sam Manning (c. 1898 - 1960) from Trinidad, who initially served with the Middlesex Regiment before being transferred to the BWIR. He would later become an icon of African-Caribbean culture in New York, London and many other places. Manning was not only a black pioneering recording artist, one of the world's best Calypso players, and an actor, but also active politically.

Speaking in that context, for instance, is his perhaps most famous song 'Lieutenant Julian' dedicated to the black pilot Hubert Julian who became known as the "Black Eagle of Harlem". In the song, he calls on "Negroes everywhere, negroes in this hemisphere" to be proud: "Let us all be proud, when he conquers the waves and air, in his glory we are going to share".

Caribbean men on the Western Front



The presence of men from the British colonies in the Caribbean - the British West Indies - has been largely forgotten and certainly underexposed. This is remarkable as the Great War is not only actively commemorated in the Caribbean but it is also generally considered a watershed in the region's history. One explanation is that the West Indies was a very diverse, fragmented and vast area consisting of not one, but many British colonies.



Today, these include the independent island states of Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, the Bahamas, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, St Lucia, Antigua and Barbuda, St Kitts and Nevis, and Dominica; Belize and Guyana on the American mainland; and Anguilla, Montserrat, the Cayman Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Cayman Islands, which are British overseas territories to date. Some islands barely had contact with each other. However, these scattered islands did share their Britishness, one same national feeling. For, unlike e.g. Maori and Canadian First Nations, the black population was not 'indigenous' but descended from African settlers (who unlike the white migrants had been forcibly brought to the Caribbean). Nor were they a minority, like 'Indians' and Maori, but a (vast) majority. Despite their obvious subordination to white fellow-countrymen and colonial administrators, African-Caribbeans were generally loyal and affectionate to The Empire, the British monarch and to the British worldwide. Being quasi-directly governed by London, they felt more British in culture, language and upbringing than some Canadians or Australians. For many educated black West Indians, taking up arms was a sign of their British self-awareness. But recruitment also offered an economic opportunity for many black islanders as thousands of them, mainly from Jamaica and Barbados, had found jobs digging the Panama Canal. When that opened in 1914, they were without work and income. That distant war in Europe seemed a good alternative; the pay was attractive, so was the adventure.

While white inhabitants of the British territories in the Caribbean could enlist without difficulty and were incorporated into the regular British army, black residents were denied this opportunity. White and black, side by side in the same regiment, was out of the question. Army pundits in London even doubted whether black men could handle hand grenades: 'they would be a greater danger to their friends than to the enemy.' Yet, in 1915, under pressure from black public opinion, a separate African-Caribbean unit was formed and in October of that same year, it was given the name British West Indies Regiment (BWIR). This did not mean, however, that black soldiers were considered equal to their white comrades. Even King George V, whose support had been vital for the establishment of the BWIR, suggested that non-white men were best not deployed in Europe. In Egypt, they might prove useful, so that's where the first battalions were sent to. In the end, only the first battalion would briefly gain some combat experience. As from summer 1916, most of the BWIR would be deployed on the Western Front, but in Europe even militarily trained African-Caribbean infantry troops were denied combat experience and only used to carry ammunition to the artillery. Later battalions were considered labour units from the outset.

The non-combatant and menial duties they were given, did not spare the West Indians from danger and the horrors of war. From the 15,000 men in the BWIR, almost 10% would not survive the war. Besides the cold winters of France & Flanders, it was particularly the harsh racist and condescending treatment by many white officers which fell hard on the African-Caribbean servicemen. These and other war experiences would forever change the lives of the BWIR-men: upon their return to the Americas, many veterans became influential journalists, businessmen, activists and politicians who would strengthen the self-awareness of black islanders. Through them, the First World War forever changed life and politics in the British Caribbean.

*Lads of the West, with duty done, soon shall we parted be
To different land, perhaps no more each other's face to see,
But still as comrades of the war our efforts we'll unite
To sweep injustice from our land, its social wrongs to right.
Then go on conquering – lift your lives above each trivial thing
To which the meaner breeds of earth so desperately, cling;
And Heaven grant you strength to fight the battle for your race,
To fight and conquer, making earth for man a happier place.*

Henry B. Monteith, Acting Warrant Officer Class 2, British West Indies Regiment,
Jamaica Times, 28 June 1919

Memorial sites of the British West Indies Regiment in Flanders

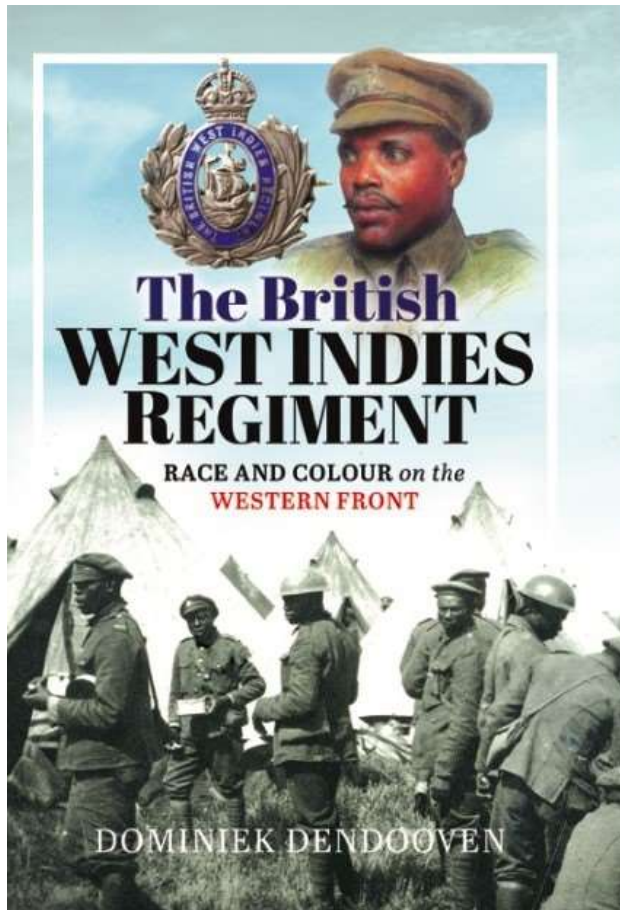
Two hundred and thirty members of the BWIR lost their lives as a result of acts of war in Belgium during the First World War. Of them, 181 are commemorated in cemeteries in West Flanders and at the Menin Gate. The following cemeteries have the largest concentration of Caribbean graves: Adinkerke Churchyard Extension, Bedford House Cemetery, Canada Farm Cemetery, Dozinghem Military Cemetery, Gwalia Cemetery, Haringhe (Bandaghem) Military Cemetery, La Clytte Military Cemetery, Poperinghe New Military Cemetery, Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Mendinghem Military Cemetery, Ypres Reservoir Cemetery, and, of course, the Menin Gate where the Last Post also resounds for them every evening.

The panel at the Menin Gate



Dominiek Dendooven, In Flanders Fields Museum

This text is based on the book *The British West Indies Regiment. Race and Colour on the Western Front* (Barnsley, Pen and Sword Military, 2023).





Organisatie / Organisation: Last Post Association

Productie / Production: Events Outside The Box
Tekst en regie / Text and director: Bart Cafmeyer
Research: Dominiek Dendooven (IFFM)

Artiesten - Deelnemers / Artists - Participants:

Lady Linn Trio
Chorus Youth Choir conducted by / Jeugdkoor Chorus o.l.v. Tine Devoghel
Frans Grapperhaus (Cello) / Mattie Archie (Gitar/Gitaar) / Fernandez Trio
Rien Deleu & Baptiste Cobbe
Klaroeners / Buglers Last Post Association

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Commonwealth War Graves Commission
In Flanders Fields Museum Ieper
Stad Poperinge & Stad Ieper
Talbot House

Volgende evocaties / Following evocations

Mei / May 2024: De Palingbeek - Zillebeke
Augustus / August 2024: Hill 60 - Zillebeke

Meer informatie / More information:

www.lastpost.be