

CHAPTER 4

THE CREATION AND UTILIZATION OF BRITISH WEST INDIA REGIMENTS IN THE CARIBBEAN DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY/NAPOLEONIC WARS

The raising of black regiments to be a part of the British Army establishment was originally proposed by Lt. Gen. Sir John Vaughan in a letter to the Home Secretary on 22 December, 1794 (Dyde 1997: 15). This was, however, preceded by an earlier proposal apparently from the government offices in Jamaica, and the later use of freed blacks recruited from the Carolinas at the end of the American War.

The record of this first proposal from Jamaica consists of three pages, with no signature page and no date, although it is collated with documents for the year 1779. The surviving part of the letter suggests the raising of regiments to serve in the West Indies for three years, or during the war. These regiments were apparently envisioned primarily as a self defense force for the island of Jamaica. They were to be recruited only from “free people”; no enlistment of slaves was contemplated. This was probably in recognition of the deep-seated fears of the white population of the potential for rebellion of armed slaves. Officers would be nominated by the Governor of Jamaica, and each officer would be required to raise the men for their commissions at their own expense. Each regiment was to be divided into ten companies and each company would consist of a captain, a lieutenant, an ensign, three sergeants, 3 corporals, 2 drummers and 50 men. The regiment was to be commanded by a major or lieutenant colonel. The officers were to hold rank in the West Indies only, and not become part of the regular British Army establishment. It was proposed that Britain pay, clothe and arm these regiments. The justification being that many fewer men would be required from Europe, and “of course, many lives saved to the mother country” (NA, PRO, CO 138/3/418-420).

Another early instance of the actual use of slaves as a regular part of the British Army, as noted above, was the Carolina Black Corps. It was organized in the Carolinas and in 1782 moved to St. Lucia rather than being disbanded at the end of the American war. They were basically used as an adjunct to white troops for manual labor, not in combat (Tyson 1975: 652).

General Vaughan was anxious to overcome the severe losses to European soldiers that he was experiencing in the West Indies, the majority of whom were being killed by the environment. In 1796 the governors of colonies in the West Indies were instructed to prepare proposals for raising five black regiments. The principal barrier to the raising of regiments of armed slaves as part of the British Army was the strong resistance by colonial planters to the concept of armed slaves. Despite the order from Britain to raise five regiments in 1796, the assemblies of Barbados and Jamaica saw nothing but “ruin and death” in the proposal (Dyde 1997: 91). This was certainly a possibility. O’Shaughnessey (2000: 38) states that there were as many as 75 actual or aborted slave uprisings in the British West Indies before 1837. This fear is further reflected by the action of the Assembly in Jamaica, which on learning that a mulatto regiment known as the Guadelupe Rangers had been transported to Jamaica after the evacuation of St. Domingo, requested its immediate re-embarkation (O’Shaughnessey 2000: 93).

The author was able to locate only two recorded instances of mutinous slave soldiers. On April 9, 1802, the 8th West India Regiment mutinied, killing some officers and non-commissioned officers. The mutiny was suppressed after nearly 100 of the mutineers were killed. In the subsequent investigation, it was discovered that the black soldiers had been severely abused, and Colonel Johnstone, their commander was blamed for the mutiny and suspended. In 1808, some of the black soldiers of the 2nd West India Regiment mutinied and killed two officers. They were subsequently overcome by loyal soldiers of the Regiment, and seven leaders were executed (Burns 1965: 544,552).

The principle justification for using slaves and free blacks for the proposed regiments was the extremely high mortality rate of European soldiers in the West Indies. A concomitant problem was that assignment to the West Indies was extremely unpopular with the British Army, leading to a refusal to serve, as with Lt. Hector MacDonald who was superseded for failing to report for duty with the 4th West India Regiment (NA, PRO, WO 3/17/846). A posting to the West Indies also caused sudden rises in the sick lists and even mutinies in the army in Britain. Assignment to the West Indies became a form of punishment (O’Shaughnessey 2000: 7).

Knowledge of the health hazards in the West Indies were widely known but poorly understood. The primary causes of death were disease and alcoholism. The diseases were

variously described, including: remitting fever and consumption (Reide 1793: 46); and dysentery or “bloody flux” and yellow fever (Moseley 1792: 112). The treatment Moseley recommended was bleeding, followed by purging. Moseley also claimed that the English had a great part of their forces exterminated by the “bloody flux” (Moseley 1792: 10).

Reide noted the conflict in medical opinion about the causes of diseases. His own opinion was that they occurred through uncleanness. He states that about 25% of the 3rd Battalion, 60th Regiment, stationed in the West Indies was in the hospital at any one time (Reide 1793: 68, 75). What is described as “remitting fever” was probably malaria, and it and yellow fever were both caused by the bite of infected female mosquitoes. This disease vector was not recognized as the cause. As late as the middle of the 19th century, the source of malaria was poorly understood, although the efficacy of quinine as a preventive and cure was being recognized (Crewe 1999). In 1832 approximately 83% of the crew of an expedition up the Niger River were killed or invalided (Mitcham 2010: 42). It was recognized that forts constructed at altitude in the tropics were generally healthier (Edwards 1807: Vol II, 310).

The data provided by Edwards stand as justification for the premise that the survival rate of black soldiers was much better than that for white soldiers. Between 1796 and 1802, on an annual average, white soldiers in the West Indies suffered a mortality rate of 41%, while black soldiers suffered only a 6% mortality rate (Edwards 1807: Vol V, Appendix 4).

Alcoholism apparently arose as a problem through sheer boredom and inactivity on the parts of both officers and men. According to St. Clair (1834: 187) the Royals at Demerara, generally healthy otherwise, lost a great number by their own intemperance, indulging too freely in the “vile beverage” rum. He observes that “It has frequently happened that a widow has buried four husbands, but it is rare to meet a man who has survived one wife” (St. Clair 1834: 192).

From 1759 to 1830 in North America, and presumably in the Caribbean as well, rum was a standard item of issue to British Army soldiers, in the amount of 1 gill (4 ounces) daily. It was apparently a common practice to dilute the rum with 3 parts of water, and issue one half of the ration before duty and one half after (Jones 1985: 11). It seems probable that enterprising

soldiers, especially in a busy trade center such as St. Thomas, would be able to supplement this through buying, begging or otherwise procuring as much additional rum as they might desire.

In the limited time available at the National Archives, the author was unable to locate any data on mortality for the troops stationed on St. Thomas, nor on problems arising from alcohol consumption during the periods of British occupation.

The British West India Regiments were established along the lines of the traditional British regiment with eight battalion or line companies and two flank companies for a total of one thousand men, for the 1804 establishment, according to Dyde (1997: 78). This is not in agreement with a letter from Horse Guards to Lt. Gen. Nugent, Commander in Chief, Jamaica, dated 20 January 1804, where the 7th West India Regiment, established at 8 companies of 75 rank and file was augmented to 10 companies of rank and file (NAM 1968-071-83-3-32). Another source states that since the French and Indian War in North America, the left flank company would have been designated as Light Infantry, and such a company would have been useful in what frequently amounted to jungle warfare on some of the Caribbean Islands (Warplay, nd).

It was expected initially that these regiments would be formed by enlisting free colored and purchasing additional slaves from plantation owners to complete the manning requirements. This did not prove feasible, in part because of the high prices the plantation owners demanded for their slaves. The difficulty in procuring slaves from planters led to the direct purchase of slaves, both from ships and from Africa. From 1797 to 1807, when Great Britain abolished the slave trade, the British Army was the single largest purchaser of slaves in the West Indies (Dyde 1997: 23).

A statement of account dated 31 March 1801 for the purchase of 272 new Negro men for His Majesty's 5th and 6th West India Regiments, showed a cost of about £114 per man, together with £771 for clothing and £270 for inoculation against smallpox. On 10 March 1801 the sum of £115 per man was expended for 40 Eboe Negros (NAM 1975-08-55-3).

The black soldiers' status in the Army was equal to that of white soldiers for pay, rations, discipline, uniforms (see Figure 14, below) medical care and pensions. After an Act of Parliament in 1807 abolishing the slave trade, recruitment for the West India Regiments was assisted by a law which permitted the involuntary enlistment of slaves captured from an enemy or taken as prizes. This same Act of Parliament emancipated black slave soldiers. However

they were still enlisted for life, unlike white soldiers who could enlist for seven years (Dyde 1997: 23-29).