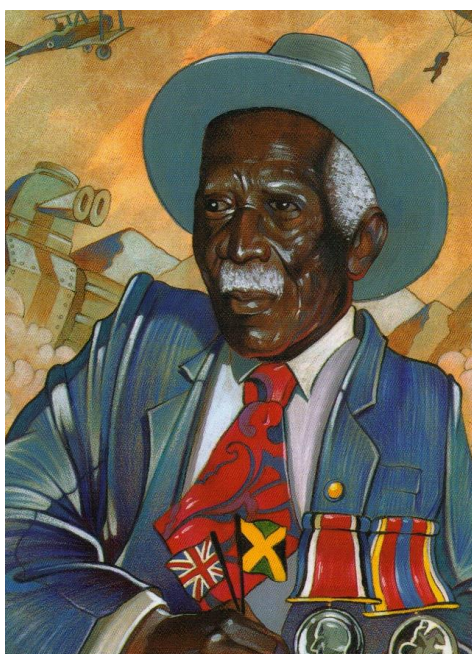


# IWM Collections and West Indian Soldiers in the First World War

Arthur Torrington, 2012

My brief work on the museum's collection focused on the First World War and the contribution of West Indian soldiers. I did discuss, generally with staff, their SWW contribution and know that there is much more material within the collection on the SWW than on the FWW, but work is required to collate the information. Then it has to be interpreted, and presented accordingly. The museum's collection is of high educational value for the researcher, and the visitor.



From *Race, War and Nationalism*, Glenford Deroy Howe (2002)

This image typifies the loyalty of the West Indian soldier in the First World War. He always wanted to show his ability, but his expectations were often not realised. Not many of them were allowed on the front line; most of them served as labourers. In fact, Lord Kitchener was initially in favour of their service, but gave way when King George V intervened. There were more West Indian soldiers per thousand in both FWW and SWW than in any of the British or Commonwealth countries, whether India, Canada or Australia.

From the discussions I have had with museum staff, there is open willingness to interpret their collection in the best possible way, and the involvement of a diverse groups of people in this project is clearly the way forward.

In view of Government cuts, more work on the museum's collection cannot easily be done. Nevertheless, improvements are evident in the way the museum conducts its business.

There are opportunities in the next five years for the museum to show an ethnically diverse British public a better and clearer view of British history and heritage. Generally speaking, what most national public institutions, including the media, have done before the advent of millions of migrants is to present a history that reflect how the Empire sees the story, a history written and presented by British conquerors. Today we have a generation of Britons, a younger generation that is changing things for the better - working for a better and more inclusive Britain.

My own view, from talking with museum staff, is positive about their approach to understanding and interpreting the perspective of the colonial troops. Suzanne Bardgett and her Research team are doing a grand job having worked with them over the past weeks. I am impressed with the Department of Access Librarian Sarah Paterson; her work titled, *Tracing West Indian Service Personnel*, has a lot of useful information for the researcher, and for anyone.

The museum collection offers larger scale research questions. I see no problem with the museum's cataloguing of its material, and if additional funding can be raised, much more can be done.

The museum has a responsibility to produce educational material for schools and young people. It can consider applying in partnership with ethnic minority community groups for lottery funding for specific research that focuses more on the contributions of the colonial troops, especially Africa. The African contribution especially now needs attention. The London Borough of Southwark, in which the museum is located, has the largest concentration of African settlers in the UK, and the leaders here should be approached.

Oral History projects should be ongoing, and it is important that recordings of the memories of our older (as well as the younger) generation of soldiers, men and women are made.

The museum's *War to Windrush* Gallery on the lower ground floor raises the awareness of visitors, especially young people, of the contributions of West Indian soldiers to Britain over the years. The Gallery is a major tool in sharing the knowledge and assisting our understanding of the history and heritage of the British Empire.

In the former colonies, there is limited awareness of this contribution. A copy of the *War to Windrush* exhibition is now in Kingston, Jamaica.

The role of film, television, fiction, music, poetry and other art forms in enlightening people often does not now assist our understanding of the history of Britain's past war efforts. Film footage, etc reflects how producers and others use material and they often show the producers' own values rather than the whole truth.

The British public should see that IWM and the National Army Museum are working together, producing educational material, especially for young people. There should be more publicity given to museum collections that show the contribution of former colonial soldiers before the first World War.

*Arthur Torrington* - 26 July 2012