

Military units from Bermuda, 1894-1945

Introduction

Bermuda's geographic location off the North American coast gave the archipelago a great strategic importance for many years, with the consequent provision of military units [1](#)). Until the end of the 19th century, units from the English army and navy took care of the security of the archipelago, without the actual participation of the local population.

The English government sought on several occasions to put pressure on the local authorities to get them to participate more actively in local defence, but it was not until the 1890s that the local government relented (among other things in return for permission to build a actual hotel industry) and in 1892 passed a law establishing local militia forces - artillery, infantry and engineer troops [2](#)).

Although the forces remained local, Bermuda did contribute soldiers to the British Army during both the First and Second World Wars. As in other colonies, there was a general reluctance to arm the non-European population groups, which is also reflected in the composition of the units as either purely European or purely colored units, an attitude that only changed in the 1960s.

Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps

Although the Act did not specify a racial restriction on recruitment, the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps only recruited soldiers from among members of local rifle associations that admitted only Europeans.



Regimentsmärke

Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps.

Fra Badges of the British
Commonwealth & British

Overseas Territories (H.H. Booker).

Historical summary

1894: Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps

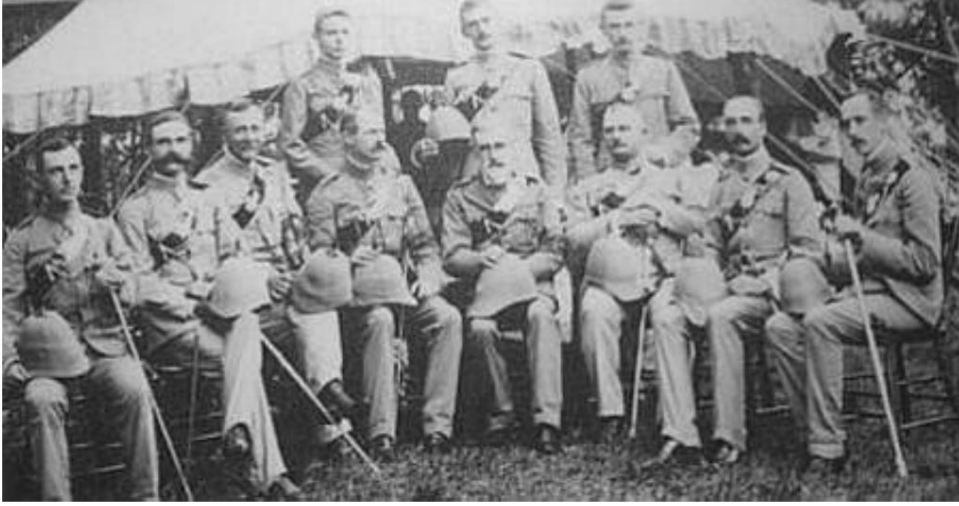
1946: The regiment is reduced to a cadre, but in 1948 recruitment resumes

1951: The Bermuda Rifles

1965: The Bermuda Regiment by amalgamation with the Bermuda Militia Artillery

In 1896 the unit consisted of three companies, designated "A", "B" and "C" Company, and a strength of approx. 300

male. Later (when is not clear) a fourth company was added to "D" Company, and from "B" and "D" manpower was drawn for a staff element.



Officers of the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps, in the 1890s.
From Source 1.

A cyclist platoon was formed from 6 men from each company, just as a band was added to the force when a local orchestra signed up en masse.

The armament was initially Martini-Henry rifles, which in 1987 were replaced by Lee-Metford rifles.

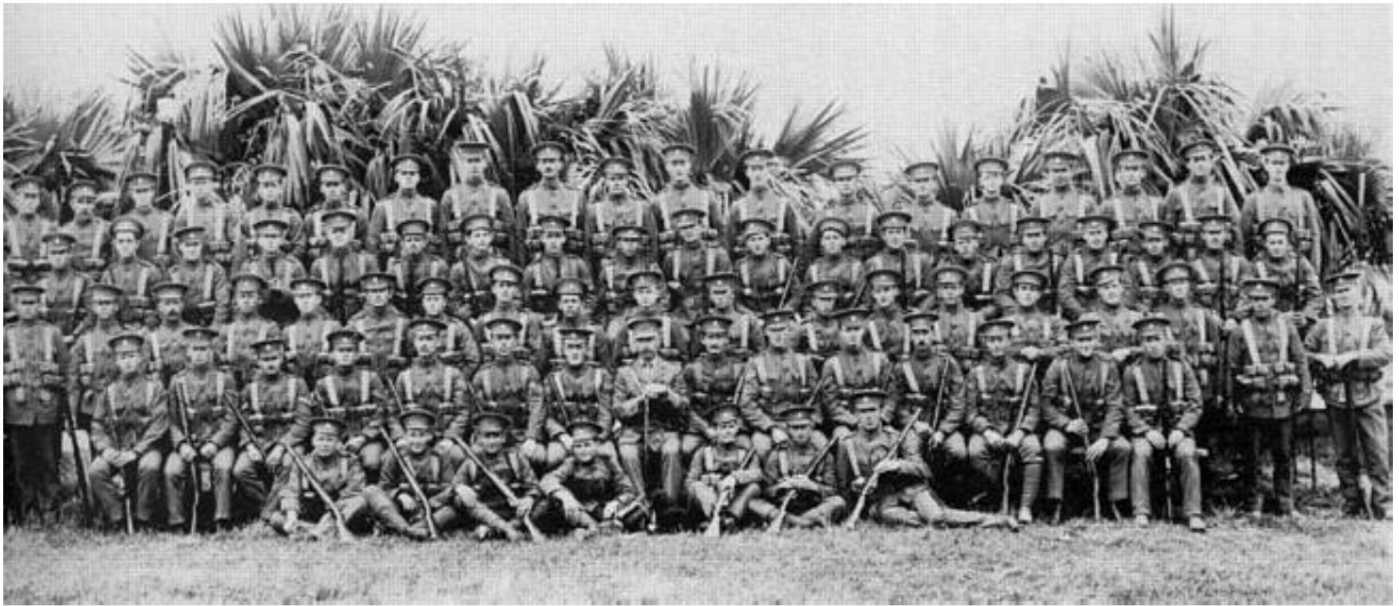
In 1899 the regiment received its first Maxim machine gun.

The regiment's tasks included i.a. securing the archipelago's coastal batteries and harbor facilities, duties which were practiced alongside the regular English army and navy units stationed in Bermuda.

World War One

In December 1914 it was decided to create a company-sized unit to be sent to the Western Front; the company was to be attached to the 2nd Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment, which until 3 October 1914 had been garrisoned in Bermuda.

A good 100 men initially signed up for this company, and after completing training, 1 officer and 86 men, under the command of Captain Richard J. Tucker, were sent via Canada to Grimsby in England, where they arrived in May 1915.



The first contingent of the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps, photographed in Bermuda, before leaving for England.

From Source 1.

Both the 1st and 2nd Battalions of The Lincolnshire Regiment were already in France, and the regiment wanted instead to disband the contingent and to incorporate the soldiers from Bermuda into the Lincolnshire Regiment as replacement personnel.

However, there was an agreement between the authorities in Bermuda and the English Ministry of War that the company of the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps should operate in its own name, and it was therefore decided that the company should be subordinated to the 1st Battalion, as an additional company, which took effect from June 1915.



The second contingent of the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps, photographed in Bermuda, before departure for England, 1916.

From Source 1.

During the next year, the company distinguished itself brilliantly. However, the loss figures meant that the company's ability to function as an independent unit was again in the danger zone, but then the second (and last) contingent from Bermuda appeared.

The other contingent consisted of 1 officer and 34 men, all trained to operate the two Vickers machine guns brought with them.

This reinforcement would have been a good addition to the company, but at this stage of the war, the medium machine guns 3) were separated from the infantry battalions and brought together in The Machine Gun Corps.



The Lincolnshire Regiment.

Cigarette card No. 45 from the

Army Badges series, issued in

1939 by the tobacco company Gallaher Ltd.

The battalions were instead equipped with Lewis light machine guns, and it was now decided that the company of the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps should be converted into a light machine gun unit, consisting of 12 machine gun groups, which for the rest of the war continued to function as an auxiliary unit, subordinate to the 1st Battalion of The Lincolnshire Regiment.

The following is written on the back of the card:

The Lincolnshire Regiment. This historic county regiment was formed in 1685, and its connection with Lincolnshire was recorded in the name a hundred years later. The regimental tune is the famous "Lincolnshire Poacher", and provides their nickname "The Poachers". Their service in Africa under Lord Kitchener earned them the sphinx, so prominent in their badge. "Blenheim", "Ramillies", "Oudenarde", "Malplaquet" among their honours indicate their great fighting record under Marlborough.

The Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps maintained links with the Lincolnshire Regiment and during the Second World War soldiers from Bermuda also served with the Lincolnshire Regiment. The contemporary tradition-bearing units - The Bermuda Regiment and The Royal Anglian Regiment - retain the affiliation.

Bermuda Militia Artillery



Bermuda Militia Artillery, menig, ca. 1900.

From Source 1.



Bermuda Militia Artillery, corporal, ca. 1900.

Fra NYPL Digital Gallery.

Where the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps was reserved for the European population of Bermuda, the Bermuda Militia Artillery was reserved for the colored part of the population.

The corps' task was to support the English artillery units manning Bermuda's coastal forts.

The volunteer artillerymen were issued two uniforms - a khaki colored service and field uniform. as well as a dark blue gala uniform

World War One



Saint David's Head Battery, Bermuda, ca. 1950.
From Source 1.

The volunteer artillerymen were mobilized and formed part of the staffing of the permanent coastal defense as well as a number of mobile batteries that could be deployed as needed.

Information about the coastal defenses of Bermuda can be found on the website [Bermuda's British Army forts from 1609](#) (Bermuda Online).

The fort was active until 1953 and in its heyday was equipped with 2 6-inch and 2 pcs. 9.2-inch guns [4](#)).

The Bermuda Contingent, Royal Garrison Artillery



*Officers and NCOs of The Bermuda Contingent, Royal Garrison Artillery,
photographed in England prior to deployment on the Western
Front.*
From Source 3.

In March 1916, The Bermuda Contingent, Royal Garrison Artillery, was established and in May 1916, 4 officers and 197 men, under the command of Major TM Dill, left for the Western Front, where from June they were deployed in the ammunition supply service.

In May 1917, the contingent was reinforced with 2 more officers and approx. 50 men.

Considering the four officers, it must be the first team.

As far as the sources go, the artillerymen from Bermuda did not wear special uniform characteristics.



African troops off to the trenches on The Somme.

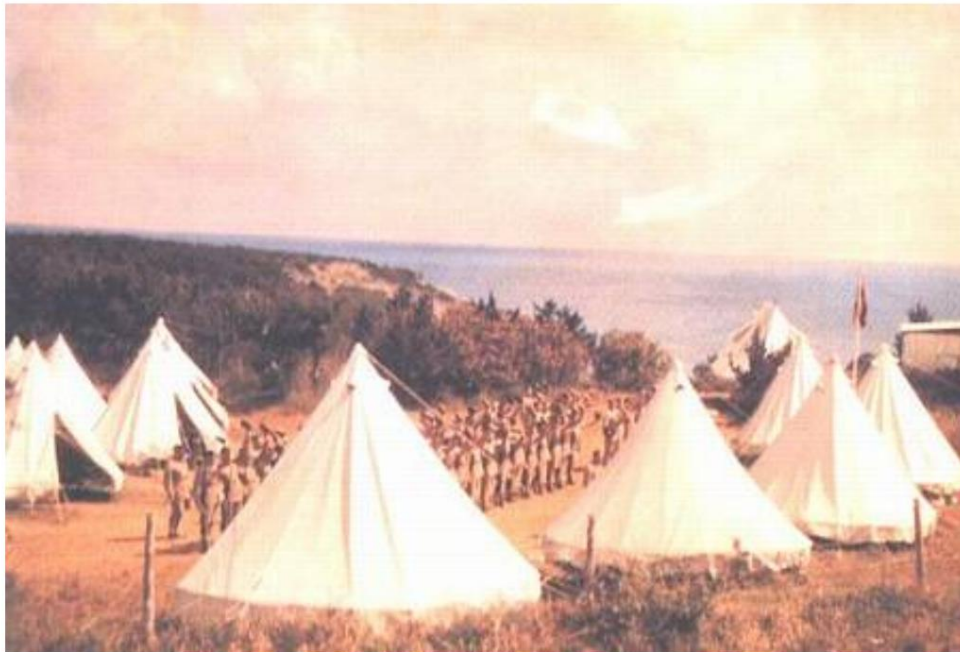
From a simultaneous postcard.

Major Dill wrote in 1917 to the Governor of Bermuda that the artillerymen, who were the first (English) African soldiers to be deployed on the Western Front, quickly gained a good reputation.

However, the postcard most likely depicts soldiers from *the British West Indies Regiment* [5](#)), which, along with the contingent from Bermuda, were, as far as I know, the only (English) African units on the Western Front.

Bermuda Volunteer Engineers

Although the 1892 legislation provided for the creation of an engineer unit for use in coastal defence, the Bermuda Volunteer Engineers do not appear to have taken shape in earnest until the 1930s.



Bermuda Volunteer Engineers' Camp at St. David's Head Battery.

From Source 1.

It is possible that a smaller engineering unit has entered the sea mine service before this time [6](#)). In any case, this service was taken over in 1928 from the English Defense, after which the Bermuda Volunteer

Engineers are created.

This unit, which was also reserved for the European population group, is then included in the staffing of the coastal defense searchlights and the signal service.

The Caribbean Regiment



Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, The Caribbean Regime, photographed in Egypt, August 1945.
Fra WIR Photo Center

(The Ex-West Indian Servicemen Association).
Information about the photograph comes from
Public Records (St. Kitts-Nevis History Page).

During the Second World War , *The Caribbean Regiment* was established in April 1944 , consisting of colored soldiers from the British possessions in the West Indies and Bermuda. The battalion commander was Lieutenant Colonel H. Whitehorne, Jamaica Reserve Regiment.

Volunteers from Bermuda formed, as far as is known, one of the battalion's companies.

After a few months of training in America - Fort Eustis, Virginia - the 1st Battalion departed in June 1944 with North Africa as their target.

The focus of the war had shifted in favor of Western Europe and Italy, and the battalion was now sent to Naples in July 1944.

It was apparently difficult to fit the battalion into the structure of the army - an English-speaking battalion with African personnel who were more English than "native" did not easily fit into an infantry brigade 7) . Thus, to the great disappointment of the soldiers, the battalion was not deployed at the front, but functioned as a work force and guard unit.



Inspection of guard force from 1st Battalion, The Caribbean Regime, Egypt, approx. 1945.
Fra Commonwealth contribution to World War 2.

Additional reasons for this situation are also stated to be that the battalion's level of education was not sufficient, just as there were fears of repercussions in the West Indian communities in the event of heavy losses.

In October 1944, the battalion escorted approx. 4,000 German prisoners of war to Egypt.

The battalion remained in North Africa for the rest of the war, i.a. deployed in demining along the Suez Canal, thereby freeing other units for action in Italy.

In 1946 the battalion returned to the West Indies where it was disbanded.

Closing

In 1965 it was decided - i.a. under the impression of developments in America - to merge the Bermuda Rifles and the Bermuda Militia Artillery, which since 1953 had functioned as an infantry unit, thus ending the previous racial segregation of the soldiers.

The Bermuda Regiment, which became the unit's name, remains an active part of the defense of Bermuda, the oldest remaining overseas part of Great Britain.

The paper here has shown some glimpses of the military units from Bermuda and if you are further interested in this, the following sources can be recommended

Sources

1. ARMA Imperial and Colonial Military Units, 1612-2002 (The Somers Isles).
2. Bermuda Volunteer/Territorial Army Units 1895-1965 (Wikipedia).
3. Bermuda's War Veterans (Keith Archibald Forbes).
4. The Caribbean Regiment (Regiments of the British West Indies).
5. The Bermuda Rifles (Land Forces of Britain, the Empire and Commonwealth).

6. Recollections of World War II by Rebecca Tortello (Jamaica Gleaner).

7. The Bermuda Regiment by Larry Burchall (Bermuda Official Website).

To note

1) It's Bermuda (Wikipedia).

2) Se Bermuda Volunteer/Territorial Army Units 1895-1965 (Wikipedia).

3) Source 1 states that the authorities in Bermuda had purchased their machine guns from Vickers Factories at a price of £200 per PCS. Accused of profiting unreasonably from the war, Vickers was forced in 1915 (1916?), though hardly for the sale to Bermuda alone, to lower the price to now £80 per PCS.

4) Pamphlets of similar types are discussed in About English coastal artillery, 1910-1940.

5) See About the British West Indies Regiment during the First World War.

6) The unit may have been analogous to the Volunteer Submarine Miners that formed part of the English volunteer units up to 1907, as discussed in About English Coastal Artillery, 1910-1940.

7) See also A Force of their own by Joanne Buggins (Imperial War Museum), in which there is reference to discussions between the English Colonial Office and the War Office about the possibilities of the respective interest in units from the West Indies taking an active part in the war.