

EUGENT CLARKE

A West Indian caught out at sea



British West Indies Regiment Cap Badge
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Enlisting in Jamaica

Eugent Clarke was from Jamaica. He volunteered because, “It wasn’t easy to find work in Jamaica, and the pay was nothing. Only one or two factories were in the island. The people couldn’t get work.” When she saw him in uniform, his aunt said, “Look, Eugent’s gone and become a soldier. You’re only a German bait.’ But Eugent went anyway.

Disastrous crossing to England

In March 1916 Eugent left his home in Jamaica and crossed over to England on a

ship carrying 1,115 black soldiers and 25 white officers. The soldiers wore lightweight tropical uniforms on a ship that was unheated. To avoid German submarines, Eugent’s ship took a detour to Halifax in Canada but it ran into a blizzard. Says Eugent: “When we arrived in Halifax nearly the whole battalion was frost-bitten. It was the first time we’d ever seen snow. We, the soldiers going to England, didn’t have on those warm clothes like what the army in Europe wear. We were just wearing thin khaki. After we were caught in the snow they issued the thick khaki clothes, the uniform that the English soldiers wear. By that time we were frost-bitten already.”

600 men were badly frost-bitten and 106 remained in Halifax to have amputations. Eugent was among the 200 who were sent to Bermuda to convalesce: “When we got to Bermuda, I was just creeping. I couldn’t walk. Just creep on my knees. After we were there six weeks some of us feel strong.” After he recovered Eugent, continued his journey to Europe.

On the Western Front

When he finally reached Europe, his regiment were sent to the Western Front in France and Belgium to work as ammunition carriers as it was decided that the fighting on the front line was to be done by the white soldiers. He served in Ypres: “The war was raging in Europe. The Germans never ceased fire. Night and day, bombs. We had to live under the earth in dugouts. The Somme was bad, man. You stuck in the mud. We had a rough time in that country. The wind would cut you. How we cold. We had to have double socks. Every soldier had to wear double or the cold would have killed us.”

Quotations from an interview with a 91 year old Eugent Clarke in the 1999 Channel 4 television documentary ‘Mutiny’.



BWIR Soldiers Stacking Shells on the Western Front

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