

## The last salute

By Judge Irving Andre

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**Roseau, Dominica (TDN)** — Mr. Wendell McKenzie Christian, who was born on March 5, 1921, stood tall throughout his life. He stood tall while growing up in the 1920s in the village of Delices. He stood ramrod straight while clothed in the army fatigues of the British Army, Windward Islands Battalion, "C" Platoon, South Caribbean Forces, where he trained in St. Lucia for a war which ended before he fixed his bayonet on the killing fields in Europe and Africa.



Wendell served in the second World War.

He later stood proud as he took the oath of office as a police constable in the Dominica Police Force and later as a fireman when he was seconded to the Dominica Fire Service. In 1977, he stood alone, the only fireman on duty in Roseau, as a strike by the Civil Service Association crippled the country. One year later, he stood alone, at least within his family, as the Union Jack was slowly lowered over Dominica and lamented that his countrymen would end up throwing the baby out with the bath water.

In later decades, this man of great moral rectitude witnessed the triumphs of his children as they soared to great professional heights in North America. He also endured the tragedy of a fallen son, Dr. Welsworth Christian, who predeceased him in 1990.

His moral fortitude remained unwavering right to the end. Even while advanced age confined him to a wheelchair, Wendell Christian maintained a twinkle in his eye, purity of spirit and a clarity of mind that defied death until the very end.

Wendell Christian was an exceptional member of a generation of West-Indians born between the two great wars. He and his generation did not experience the ostracism to which most West-Indian soldiers were subjected during World War One as they were relegated to labour battalions in Europe and North Africa.

Indeed, growing up in Delices, Wendell Christian was weaned on a belief system that was quintessentially British although the modest means of his family posed a silent rebuke to colonial rule.

However, he was surrounded by a wealth of a different kind. What the family lacked in material comforts, they made up in those qualities that nurtured success; discipline, respect, hard work, pride and loyalty.

Wendell also grew up with wealth that uplifted his spirits; the redemptive qualities of music. In his "Gatecrashing Into the Unknown," elder brother Henckell Lockinvar Christian, the distinguished educator and Minister of Education, wrote that his policeman father, William Mathew, was the only one who played the guitar in Delices. Their mother had a treasure of hymns and Christmas carols that they sung regularly.

In the 1930s, they formed the Christian Family Orchestra with Wendell playing the mandolin, his elder brothers playing the guitar and harmonica while their mother was the group's vocalist. Dominica later became the beneficiary of this rich, musical legacy when brother Lemuel Christian penned a musical gem called "Isle of Beauty."

Wendell Christian, according to son Gabriel Christian, was an unrepentant British colonial. To the very end, he could recite the soaring rhetoric of Sir Winston Churchill and fondly recall his army training under white or "high coloured" officers at the Vigie barracks in St. Lucia, along with more than 50 young Dominican men.

He became a police officer after the war and gravitated to the Fire Service, in 1955, attaining the rank of Station Officer.

But his true calling and strength of character emerged not in the Vigie Barracks or on the frontline of firefighting in Dominica but within the halls of the modest family home in Pottersville.

He and his wife, Alberta, nourished and nurtured seven children, Hildreth, Wellsworth, Lawson, Samuel, Gabriel, Esther and Christalin. The Christian siblings thrived under the tutelage and example of their parents. Hildreth is a well respected environmental engineer, Wellsworth eventually became Dominica's first local veterinary surgeon and Chief Veterinary Officer, Lawson qualified as an electrical engineer, Samuel, a battalion surgeon and Major in the U.S. Army Reserve, while Esther is both an authoress and Certified Public Accountant.

Author, community leader, attorney and Caribbean nationalist, Gabriel Christian, has been a monumental force in the Dominica Cadet Corps and has been involved in numerous initiatives such as the Dominica Academy of Arts and Sciences that have inured to the benefit of Dominica and indeed the West-Indies. Wendell Christian fervently believed that example was better than precept and if his children's extraordinary success is any indication, he was a fine example.

He achieved vicarious success through his children. But his prodigious efforts in moulding a professional Fire Service in the 1960s, along with the likes of WWII veteran, Wordsworth Plenderleith, did not go unnoticed.

He received a Long Service Medal for more than twenty five years with the Fire Service while Alberta was granted the Meritorious Service Medal for her twenty years served at the Workshop for the Blind. Fittingly, son Gabriel co-authored For King and Country, a book which featured his father's service in the British West-Indian military with the likes of Mr. Twistleton St. Rose Bertrand, Mr. G.O.N. Emanuel, Mr. Cletus Angol and West-Indian greats such as former R.A.F. pilots Ulric Cross, DFC, Honourable Dudley Thompson and the late Flight Lieutenant, Cy Grant.

But the accolades that mattered most to Wendell Christian are those most overlooked. He was a doting husband for 57 years, an exceptional father, a devout Christian and a distinguished ex-serviceman.

Wendell Christian made his final salute in the afternoon of October 7, 2011. We stopped, stood at attention and saluted him in return. The old Christian soldier who had never abandoned his post, has finally marched home. And as this last member of the old Christian Orchestra approached the pearly gates of heaven, he fittingly sang an old English hymn in the best musical traditions of his illustrious family:

"Onward Christian soldiers  
marching as to war,  
with the Cross of Jesus,  
going on before."