‘Wolseley’s march to Kumasi’ has been described as ‘one of the military dramas of the Victorian age’. Britain exercised an informal protectorate over parts of the Gold Coast from the early 1830s, the fever-ridden region traditionally known as ‘a white man’s grave’. As two previous British expeditions in 1823 and 1863–64 had suffered serious losses, the Colonial Office resolved not to send another British force to the Gold Coast, even after the Asante (pronounced Ashanti) invaded the protectorate in 1873. Although a composite force headed by a detachment of Marines under Colonel Festing thwarted the invasion at Elmina (13 June 1873), panic gripped the authorities at Cape Coast Castle. On 13 August the British Government appointed Sir Garnet Wolseley as administrator and commander-in-chief on the Gold Coast and despatched him, with twenty-seven special-service officers, to work with the local Fante tribesmen to resist the Asante. Following his arrival in September, Wolseley promptly requested British reinforcements, planned a short campaign over the less hazardous months of December, January and February, and then decisively defeated the Asante in battle before sacking their capital, Kumase (6 February 1874). He earned enormous plaudits for this campaign, which cost under £800,000 and involved minimal casualties. Yet the campaign aroused its share of controversy, both at the time and subsequently. While special correspondents, such as Henry M. Stanley and Winwoode Reade, berated the failure of his transport arrangements and the risks involved in a prompt evacuation of Kumase, some modern commentators argue that Wolseley discounted the military worth of the Fante precipitately. Few deny that Wolseley and his forces conducted a remarkable campaign, overcoming formidable natural obstacles while incurring relatively few casualties, and several commentators, taking their cue from Cardwell, regard this campaign as a vindication of his reforms. In reviewing the experiences of some thirty-five officers and men from all
the British infantry units and support arms, it will be possible to gauge whether they had any insights on these and other aspects of the campaign.

Wolseley’s scepticism about the resolve, reliability and martial prowess of the coastal tribes, particularly if required to fight in the bush, was widely shared by British officers and men. Prior to Wolseley’s arrival in September, Colonel Festing (Royal Marine Artillery) had already engaged the Asante near the town of Elmina. With only 300 men, including light infantry, artillery, sailors and some soldiers from the 2nd West India Regiment, he had first suppressed local disaffection in the town and then repulsed an attack by some 3,000 Asantes. Having routed the Asante in about two hours, killing King Kofi Karikari’s nephew and four of his six chiefs, Festing lacked the men to mount a counter-offensive. As he said after the battle, ‘get me 5,000 native allies at Abbaye, I will undertake to engage the enemy. The native allies were promised me, but they were never forthcoming.’

Like Festing, Wolseley quickly concluded that the Fante tribes could not protect themselves: they had become preoccupied with trading, ‘grown less warlike and more peaceful than formerly’, and their kings could not raise the men required. Hausas were employed in the punitive raids upon the disaffected villages of Essaman, Amquana and Ampenee, but in the raid on Essaman (14 October 1873) they were criticised for a lack of discipline and reckless firing. ‘They are plucky fellows’, wrote Lieutenant Edward Woodgate, ‘probably the best native Auxiliaries we shall get, and it is a pity there are so few of them, their great fault seems to be shyness of bush fighting, and in the difficulty of restraining them in the open when their blood is up.’

Even when the Asantes, suffering losses from smallpox and dysentery, began their retreat to the River Pra, native forces under British command struggled to harass them effectively. Whenever the Fantes gained sight of the enemy or heard their war-drums or even a rumour of their presence, they either broke ranks and ran or cowered at the rear. Officers lamented the fate of ‘poor’ Lieutenant Eardley Wilmot, RA, who was left at the head of his column when the vast majority of native levies deserted during an action north of Dunkwa (3 November 1873). Severely wounded, he kept fighting with a small group of soldiers from the 2nd West India Regiment until shot through the heart.

At least his courageous resistance prevented a rout, but one briefly occurred at Fesu (27 November 1873) when an advance party of Hausas, followed by the company of Kossus, broke under Asante fire and stampeded to the rear for 200 yards, carrying a naval officer ‘along in the crowd’ unable to feel his feet ‘for a long way’. ‘That affair’, he reckoned, ‘will make the Ashantees [sic] very plucky . . . they are no
mean enemies in the bush. Had we had English troops it would have been different; we could have followed them into the bush, and bayonet them, as it is not so thick here.11 These preliminary engagements, if not tactically decisive, gave an early insight into the fighting methods of the Asante. The latter’s penchant for decapitating captured enemies prompted one ‘bluejacket’ from HMS Decoy to describe them as ‘barbarous wretches’, adding: ‘but we will give them a lesson they will not forget in a hurry. They are afraid of a white man; one is equal to four of these black fellows.’12

Although Wolseley continued to employ native auxiliaries (two native regiments under Major Baker Russell and Colonel H. E. Wood, VC, would accompany his expedition and several others were supposed to be raised by Captains Dalrymple, Butler and Glover in diversionary columns – only one of which materialised), he requested the dispatch of British soldiers. In doing so, he accepted Cardwell’s instructions that ‘every preparation should be made in advance’, that these forces should
not be disembarked until the decisive moment occurred, and that they should operate only in the most favourable climatic conditions, namely the four months from December to March. Originally Wolseley hoped to land these forces by mid-December, but delays created by the dilatory retreat of the Asantes, and the problems of securing and retaining the services of native labourers, delayed his plans. As the troop-ships arrived in mid-December, he sent the Himalaya carrying the 2nd Battalion, Rifle Brigade, the Tamar with the 23rd Fusiliers (Royal Welch Fusiliers) and the Sarmatian with the 42nd Highlanders (The Black Watch) back to sea until the end of the year.

Soldiers were bitterly frustrated by the delay in disembarkation irrespective of whether they had endured a miserable journey, like Rifleman George H. Gilham, confined to his bunk for seven days, or had experienced, as Private Robert Ferguson (Black Watch) recalled, ‘a grand voyage to the Gold Coast’. Many officers and non-commissioned officers of the Black Watch were so eager to land that they offered to undertake any kind of duties ashore, but in each case they were refused. As in all expeditionary campaigns, the journeys from home had done much more than transport men and equipment. In the case of the Black Watch, soldiers fondly recalled the enthusiastic scenes when the Sarmatian left Portsmouth, with Prince Arthur gracing the occasion, and another salute from the Channel Squadron off Gibraltar. They forged cordial relations with the 135 volunteers from the 79th (Cameron) Highlanders, who had brought the battalion up to strength. The Camerons, who served as a distinct company, were regarded as a ‘very nice body of men . . . anxious to fall into our way of doing things’. During the voyage all soldiers were vaccinated, and they were able to prepare their equipment, attend lectures on the Gold Coast and try out their ‘drab’ Gold Coast clothing. The men were ‘rather proud’ that they were allowed to wear ‘a small red buckle fixed on their helmet’ in place of the regiment’s traditional red hackel. Although discipline had to be enforced at times (Private E. Black received twenty-five lashes for threatening to throw a sergeant overboard), the men were in good heart when they arrived off Cape Coast, and so spending another fort-night aboard ship was remembered by Ferguson as ‘the weariest and dullest days of it’.

Meanwhile the Royal Engineers pressed on with their labours, constructing a path along the 74 miles from Cape Coast to Prahsu, with eight camp sites, two hospitals and 237 bridges. Major Robert Home, RE, who was in charge of the task, recalled that it had to be undertaken despite recurrent tropical thunderstorms. Every day he was wet to the skin and he was eventually hospitalised with ‘a frightful attack of fever’. On 12 December another officer evaluated these efforts:
The engineers have pioneered the road to the Prah, hacking and hewing it through forests of teak and mahogany and across streams and swamps and over hills and valleys. Their advance will get to the Prah the day after tomorrow . . . The permanent stations for the European troops – nine [sic] in number – are nearly completed, with huts for from 400 to 2,000 men each, with officers’ quarters, hospitals, stores, magazines, and defence works. The work has never stopped, and gang after gang of labourers have been worked off their legs. This is a most exhausting service – everything to be done on foot, and I have been moving sometimes twenty to thirty miles in a day, feeling utterly done up at night, not to mention two attacks of fever, during one of which I was delirious for two days.¹⁹

The Naval Brigade, marching ahead of the main body of infantry, provided invaluable assistance. They helped to build a bridge across the Pra in 3 days and spent 17 days, working 4 hours per day, felling trees, clearing a camp site and building huts. A ‘bluejacket’ recalled that ‘it was blazing hot work . . . felling trees in that latitude’.²⁰

When allowed to disembark, British units did so in order and moved immediately into the interior. The Naval Brigade, requiring the least transport, had landed on 27 December, the Rifle Brigade and more engineers on New Year’s Day, the Black Watch on the 3 and 4 January, and the 23rd Fusiliers on the following day. Soldiers, armed with their short Snider rifles and sword–bayonets, marched in the early mornings, covering some 7–10 miles per day, before resting during the heat of the day and the close, sultry evenings. They found the smell appalling: Lieutenant Ernest N. Rolfe, RN, greatly appreciated a bottle of eau de Cologne, ‘which, with a bit of camphor in the corner of my handkerchief, I find most useful, as the stench along the road of the newly turned soil and dead Ashantees [sic] beats Paris’. ²¹ Nevertheless, many marvelled at their first sight of a tropical rain forest. As an officer wrote:

The vegetation is more glorious than anything I have ever seen. As underwood there are groves of plantains with huge green leaves and flowers of the most brilliant scarlet, masses of convolvuli of all colours, and palm trees with their trunks covered with exquisite ferns. Shooting up here and there are bamboo plants looking like bunches of huge green ostrich feathers. Above all this tower the gigantic trees, their stems bare for the first 100 or 150 feet, then leaves spreading out above like clouds of bright emerald green.²²

Sapper Arthur Richards wondered how this ‘beautiful green bush’ with its ‘magnificently coloured birds and butterflies’ and an abundance of cocoa nuts, oranges, figs and other fruits could be so unhealthy.²³

Soldiers and sailors were mightily impressed by the organisation on their behalf, particularly the regular supplies of food (1lb of preserved beef, 1lb of biscuit, tea, sugar and rice each day, with grog at night) and
medical support (both preventive measures, such as the periodic issue of quinine and lime juice and the rapid removal of fever-ridden cases). Yet the entire support network depended upon native bearers, whose incapacity continued to bedevil the operation. Lieutenant H. Jekyll, RE, who was in charge of erecting the telegraph, struggled to find labourers despite being ‘authorised to spend unlimited money’. ‘One difficulty’, he wrote, ‘is the stupidity and laziness of the natives, who require a great amount of supervision. I thought of giving them piece work, but that won’t do, for the nigger doesn’t care for money, he only cares for idleness.’ Sergeant-Major Benjamin Bennett (23rd Fusiliers) regarded the Fantes as ‘the most debased wretches I have ever seen’, while another officer feared for the supply system itself ‘as the Fantees, who are our carriers, are frightened to death of the Ashantees’, and so had to be placed under ‘a very strong guard’. Although the Fante women were much admired for their stoicism, carrying 60lb loads on their heads in addition to children on their hips, the laziness of their menfolk and the recurrent desertions along the line of march gave rise to profound concerns. As the transport system became increasingly problematical, Wolseley had to seek carriers from the 2nd West India Regiment and required most of the Fusilier Battalion and the Royal Artillery still at Cape Coast to re-embark on their ship. Captain A. J. Rait would have to rely on the 60 Hausa gunners that he had trained so well, and only Lieutenant-Colonel the Hon. Savage Mostyn, his adjutant, Lieutenant W. Phibbs, 7 officers and 100 volunteers from the 23rd were retained initially, although another 200 were brought forward later to replace the sick. At the central depot of Mansu 135 Black Watch under Captain Moore volunteered to carry stores, mainly 50lb boxes on their heads and shoulders, over the next 11 miles to Suta.

What really alarmed the soldiers and sailors, however, was the possibility of a premature peace. At Prahsu the sailors were perturbed when ‘eleven niggers came down with a message from King Coffee, begging us to stop and palaver a bit’. Once Wolseley had dismissed these emissaries, insisting that he would sign a peace treaty only in Kumase and that King Kofi must release all his prisoners and pay an indemnity of 50,000 ounces of gold, he played a ruse on them by sending the Naval Brigade ahead, so that they would pass the sailors supposedly marching en route north of the Pra. ‘Bluejacket’ recalled:

We had a little Gatling gun with us, which, just as the ambassadors hove in sight, we managed to fire off at nothing particular. Either the noise of the gun or the sight of us was too much for one of the ambassadors, for that same night he shot himself dead in his tent, and left the others to carry to the King the news that the Naval Brigade was coming along.
As the news of the meeting filtered back, many soldiers were delighted. Sapper Richards, manning his telegraph office at Dunkwa, relished the prospect of the Union Jack flying ‘on the highest house or hovel that Coomassie holds’. When the Black Watch reached Prahsu on 21 January 1874, one of its non-commissioned officers recorded in his diary:

Met a good number of sick coming down country – mostly seamen and riflemen; many of them look very bad. Our men hanging out very well, but about 40 complaining. They are afraid of being left behind, and say they are better than they really are.

The main body of Wolseley’s expedition began its crossing of the Pra on 20 January and proceeded towards the town of Fomena, north of the Adansi Hills, where it planned to create a forward supply depot. Lord Gifford’s Assin scouts, followed by the engineers, their labourers and Major Baker Russell’s Hausa auxiliaries, had crossed the Pra some fifteen days earlier to cut a path through the undergrowth and establish some camping sites. Captain J. Nicol, one of Russell’s officers, recalled: ‘our duties are various – road-making, bush clearing, throwing up earthworks, carrying provisions and ammunition, surveying, fighting, making camp, etc’. He found clearing villages particularly time-consuming: in one case, ‘I had 150 men with me, and it took us three hours to clean out enough to house the Naval Brigade. One house was a Fetish house; the state of affairs there was remarkably nasty.’ Although the following soldiers had to struggle along a rudimentary path, make their own huts and cope with further desertions from their Fante bearers, they found consolations on the line of march. A commissariat officer described the climate as ‘much less enervating than on the southern side of the Pra’; indeed Captain Nicol found a cooling breeze when he reached the summit of the Adansi Hills, some 1,500 feet above sea level, although there was little to see but a mist-lined canopy of the tropical rain forest. Sergeant Charles Lewis (Rifle Brigade) described the wood as ‘not so thick as on the other side of the Prah, but, of course, it is nothing but wood everywhere’. Lewis, like others, was impressed by the signs of civilisation in Asante territory, especially by comparison with the villages south of the Pra: ‘the houses’, he noted, ‘are built in a kind of square, with a court in the centre and open – I mean with no covering – the walls are built and thatched, having the front or side facing the court open . . . the floors are about 3ft. from the ground, and made of red clay’. On the other hand, meeting the prisoners released by the Asantehene (King Kofi), including a German missionary, his wife and child, gave a powerful insight into Asante practices. They had been held prisoner for five years, and ‘the poor woman’, wrote Nicol, ‘had been subject to some
horrible indignities’, while the missionary, as the commissariat officer learned, ‘had got little to eat but snails, and was in constant danger of losing his head’. They were delighted to be free.38

More Asante envoys, suing for peace, accompanied the released prisoners; they informed Wolseley that the king would agree to all his terms if only he would halt his advance. Entering Kumase, though, had become a sine qua non for Wolseley. His reply that he was determined to do so, whether as friend or foe, delighted Captain Nicol, as ‘we expect all to be settled in a fortnight’.39 Sergeant Lewis yearned to engage the enemy and ‘soon let King Coffee know what we came here for’, and there was apparently ‘great glee’ among the Black Watch as it became clear that the king was going ‘to dispute our entry into Coomassie’.40 Once Wolseley had accumulated his reserve supplies, he resumed his advance towards Kumase, but had to remove initially a threat to his flank from at least 1,000 Asantes moving towards the village of Boborasi. Colonel John McLeod (Black Watch) led a mixed European and native force against the village, and a sailor from the Active described the ensuing engagement. ‘As we took them by surprise, and were not aware of their position being so close’, he recalled, ‘it was a regular set out for a few minutes. Then we went to work in earnest, and after about an hour, we cleared the village’. On the return march the Asantes counter-attacked:

> their dreadful war yells and drums sounded right and left of us, and they made a desperate attack on our rear. But they reckoned rather too soon, and as the Active’s company was rear guard, we gave them a warm reception, and their war cry turned to wailing, for they retired cut to pieces. . . . That was the first battle since we landed; and the Naval Brigade consequently had the first rub, as we were first into the village and last out of it.41

For the loss of only three men (including Captain Nicol), Mcleod’s detachment had routed at least twice its number of Asantes. They had taken fourteen prisoners and captured muskets, powder and the state umbrella of General Asamoa Kwanta. More importantly they had gained valuable experience in bush-fighting and a morale-boosting victory. ‘Bluejacket’ recollected:

> The Ashantees [sic] stuck to their ground like bricks . . . before we moved them. I don’t know in what order we were formed. I only know there was a man of ours on my left and another on my right, and I had orders to keep in line with them, and so I did. As for the Ashantees, you precious seldom got a sight of them, for you couldn’t make anything out ahead of you more than a dozen feet. Our orders from the General were to ‘fire low – fire slow, and charge home’.42
Similar tactics would be employed by the main body of the expedition when it moved on to the village of Insafu (30 January). Acting on information that the enemy were deployed in their thousands nearby (actually in a horseshoe formation along a strong defensive position – a ridge near the village of Amofao – overlooking a mud-filled swampy ravine into which the only path descended and then ascended on the slope beyond), Wolseley decided on a frontal assault with some 2,200 soldiers while guarding against the enemy’s tactic of attacking the flanks and of trying to surround the opposing army. ‘The plan of operations’, wrote Rolfe,

was to advance in a hollow square, the 42d Highlanders forming the front face extending 300 yards on either side of the road, where Rait’s guns were to move, and the rear face being composed of the Rifles, while the left was composed of 100 sailors and Russell’s Regiment, and the right face of 100 sailors and Wood’s Regiment . . . In the centre the carriers for hammocks and ammunition were to move. The plan looked excellent on paper, but no one thought it would come off as wished in practice. The Chief of Staff [Colonel John McNeill] added a final order, somewhat in German style – ‘If you can’t carry out your orders, do the best you can.’

At about 7.40 a.m. on 31 January, the Black Watch under the command of Brigadier Sir Archibald Alison, a one-armed veteran of the Crimea, engaged the enemy. With their pipers playing, company after company descended into the ravine, meeting with a ferocious fire from the Asantes. Private Ferguson recalls:

This was a trying way for us, young soldiers, to get under fire. The Ashantees [sic] were swarming in advance on our flanks in thousands, and I almost felt my time was up, and that I was to be potted like a rabbit in cover . . . We were fighting in sections, every man in his place, and doing his best. Seldom we got a right shot at a black fellow, they kept so well under cover, but they did keep popping at us! And so close it was too! They were mostly armed with the old flintlocks, and loaded with pieces of ragged lead, rusty iron and stones. Had they been better armed, more of us would have fallen . . . In such circumstances, we kept on firing and advancing as best we could . . . most of our men were getting wounded, but only a few were going to the rear . . . When we had a moment to speak and look at each other we would glance along the files to see who were hit and if any were down. Such is the way we had to fight in the bush; it was all against us, and if a couple of big guns had not been brought to our assistance I doubt we would have fared worse.

Ferguson’s account of the battle is only one of several that have survived, and, like all such narratives, is limited in perspective. None of the individual recollections compare with the tactical understanding of Brackenbury’s authoritative work, based on all the reports sent to
him as Wolseley’s assistant military secretary during the twelve-hour engagement. Yet neither Brackenbury nor the unit commanders, nor the special correspondents, who also wrote accounts of the battle, had any overview of how the battle was fought. As Rolfe recalled, all information was ‘secondhand, for nobody could see anyone at 50 yards’ distance from him’. So the insights of front-line soldiers and sailors have some enduring value, not least when they all pay tribute to the resolute courage and fighting attributes of the Asantes. It took over four hours before the Highlanders broke through the enemy’s lines to enter their base at Amoafu. The Asantes had defended all the intervening villages and thereafter redoubled their flank attacks and later mounted several assaults on the baggage train (prompting the Fantes to flee and requiring a redeployment of Riflemen to secure the baggage and the depot at Kwaman). ‘The Ashantis’, wrote one naval officer, ‘fought well, and had to suffer severely before they gave in’; and among the wounded afterwards, ‘many were the expressions of admiration of the undaunted courage and good fighting properties of the Ashantees [sic]’.47

‘British pluck and the Snider’ had prevailed, asserted another sailor. Pluck, in the sense of spirit, courage and commitment, was certainly evident on the British side. Many officers and men were wounded but kept on firing as best they could. ‘Bluejacket’ was close to Wood when he was ‘hit full in the chest’ but he kept ‘blazing away for half an hour after’ until he could stand no more.49 The Highlanders bore the brunt of the casualties, with two dead (one of whom, Private Thomson, became separated from his unit and was decapitated by the enemy) and 129 wounded (nine of whom later died of their wounds) – or about one in four of those engaged. Their discipline, zeal and determination won praise from comrades in other units, even if one thought that they had been too erect and conspicuous at first – ‘they got more cautious afterwards, and got more undercover, which is the chief thing in this warfare’.50 When interviewed after the war, one Black Watch sergeant recalled:

I got hit twice – once in the neck here, and then in the breast, and thought it was worse than it really was when I saw blood come streaming over my grey coat. Did I fall out? No, sir, I didn’t. Lieutenant Mundy [sic, probably Mowbray] got a severe wound on the head close by, and as it didn’t seem to occur to him that there was any need to fall out, I stuck by him at the front.51

British fire-power was widely regarded as the other key ingredient in the victory. The breech-loading Snider was a far superior weapon to the flintlock muskets possessed by the Asantes, with one sailor even suggesting that it was ‘murder, not a fair fight’.52 That on the following day
the Royal Engineers claimed to have buried some 3,010 Asantes, and that those were only the corpses in and around the road, testified to the carnage inflicted. Inevitably in bush warfare, where the square formation, as Rolfe had feared, split apart as it began to manoeuvre (with gaps appearing between the front and both flanks), friendly fire will have added to the confusion. Sailors found themselves ‘firing into the 42nd, and they were firing into us, we were in a fix, and had to cease firing. But we soon found our mistake out, and we gave it to them [the Asantes] again; and so we kept on all day.’ Although the Gatling machine-gun was not used, Rait’s field guns, which had to be manhandled across the swamp and up the path, provided invaluable support for Russell’s Hausas, the 42nd and the Rifles. Even a solitary field gun could have a powerful effect on enemy morale; as Gilham observed: ‘A small field gun which was got into position did good work among the enemy, as did the rockets which were sent among them, and no doubt astonished them’.

Notwithstanding the victory at Amoafo, officers like Rolfe realised that the Asante had mounted attacks ‘all down the line of communications’. With Fante bearers refusing to move from Fomena after the attack on the depot, one officer asserted: ‘The chief source of anxiety is now getting supplies along, the convoy which went this morning [2 February] having been stopped yesterday.’ Once five companies of the 42nd and the Naval Brigade had cleared some Asantes from a nearby village, the expedition, minus baggage, pressed forward. They swept aside various ambushes and fought another pitched battle on the northern bank of the Oda River. In this six-hour engagement, in which the Asante again ‘stood well’, Wolseley’s forces seized the next village, Odasu, and repulsed three counter-attacks upon it. Thereafter Wolseley sent the Highlanders forward, and they advanced, as described by Dr Troup, surgeon to the 42nd, ‘with pipes playing, the men shooting everything before them, and cheering along the whole line’. Having left the artillery and the Rifles trailing in their wake, the Highlanders, after a brief halt, completed the last few miles, whereupon, as Ferguson recalled, ‘we entered Coomassie in the grey dark[ing] sic, our pipes playing the ‘Highland Laddie’. We gave three cheers for old Scotland after all was over.’

If the soldiers’ descriptions of Kumase hardly compare with the evocative accounts of the special correspondents, especially Melton Prior’s remarkable drawing ‘Sketches From Coomassie: The King’s Slaughtering Place’, they at least indicated their own priorities. For soldiers, who had been caught in a tropical downpour on the eve of entering the city and had to clamber through a swamp near Kumase, shelter and drinking water were key requirements. In this respect the
42nd were particularly fortunate as they met Asante women on entering the city, and the latter ‘could not have been kinder to us, if it had been Edinburgh we were marching into’. They found water for the conquering intruders before disappearing at nightfall. When the Naval Brigade belatedly entered the largely deserted Kumase, they found shelter, if not water, on their arrival. As Wolseley clung to the forlorn hope that the Asantehene would return to sign a treaty, he banned looting, and so soldiers had to uphold this order, flogging their Fante bearers whenever they were caught in the act. They also guarded the royal palace, which was described as ‘really very fine, full of beautiful things of marvellous sorts, untidy and dirty to a degree, but still fairly large and full of valuable things’. As the Asante did not reappear after a couple of days, and as the weather continued to deteriorate with another thunderstorm, Wolseley chose to abandon the capital. Having seized some royal treasures for auction, he left on 6 February, ordering the engineers and native labourers to burn the city while the Black Watch acted as rear guard.

Within two days the expedition had reached Amoafo, whereupon Dr Troup reflected on the exploits of the Highlanders:

We have had over 100 wounded, and about 10 officers – the majority, however, slight. We have had the brunt of the whole thing, and the regiment has behaved splendidly. I am proud to have served in the field with it, and to have earned my second medal in its company. I would not be surprised if two or three officers got the Victoria Cross [Lance Sergeant S. McGraw did receive the VC] . . . I have been six days lying in the open, and two days drenched with rain, had to cross a river naked with my clothes over my head, [the Oda had swollen above the bridge across it] and to sleep without a change. It is all over now, and we can scarcely avoid a laugh occasionally.

During the swift return to Cape Coast (units re-embarked from 19 to 27 February), few paused to reflect upon Wolseley’s triumph. As several of the letter writers, and those interviewed later by the press, succumbed to fever or dysentery on the return journey, they could hardly comment on the terms accepted by the Asantehene’s messengers at Fomena on 13 February. Many of the others, all too aware of the burgeoning number of sick, simply wished to reach the coast as quickly as possible. They took credit for a successful campaign, fought on inhospitable terrain against a much more numerous enemy, but did not attribute their success (as some modern scholars have) to Cardwell’s recent reforms of the army, notably the abolition of purchase and the introduction of short-service enlistments. As the expedition contained many purchase officers (all but one of the Royal Welch Fusilier officers had purchased their commissions) and long-service soldiers,
while many of the youngest, newly enlisted, soldiers remained at home or had never disembarked, Rait challenged the significance of the Carwellian legacy. In accepting the freedom of Arbroath on 18 April 1874, the indefatigable gunner declared:

With regard to the abolition of purchase, I hope that it will not deter the same class of officers who have always joined the service from continuing to do so . . . I do hope, gentlemen, that the same type of men will still continue to serve Her Majesty for I am sure with such gentlemen in the service the rank and file will always be keen to follow . . . I also think that medical testimony will bear me out when I say that it is a mistake in having soldiers too young. They will not stand the experiences of hardships of a campaign in the same way as older men would do.69

Notes
7 ‘Colonel Festing’s Story of the War’, *Morning Post*, 27 March 1874, p. 6.
8 PRO, WO 33/26, Sir G. Wolseley to the War Office, 13 October 1873.
9 King’s Own Royal Regiment Museum, Lancaster, KO LIB 137, Lt E. Woodgate, journal, 16 October 1873; see also I. Harvie, ‘The Raid on Essaman, 14 October 1873: An Account by Lieutenant Edward Woodgate of an Operation during Wolseley’s Ashanti Expedition’, *ISAHR*, 77 (1999), 19–27.
11 ‘The Ashantee War’, *Army and Navy Gazette*, 3 January 1874, p. 3.
13 PRO, WO 33/26, Cardwell to Wolseley, 8 September 1873; Wolseley to Cardwell, 13 October 1873.
14 PRO, WO 33/26, Wolseley to Cardwell, 15 December 1873.
16 ‘Diary of a Non-Commissioned Officer of the 42d Regiment’, *Kinross-shire Advertiser*, 28 March 1874, p. 2.
17 ‘A Stirlingshire Soldier’s Account of the War’, p. 6.


21 ‘The Ashantee War’, *Morning Advertiser*, 28 February 1874, p. 5. Although described as a ‘Naval Officer’ in the article, Rolfe mentions his appointment as Wolseley’s naval aide-de-camp and so his identity can be found in Commodore W. N. W. Hewett’s despatch of 29 January 1874, Parliamentary Papers (PP), *Gold Coast. Further Correspondence Respecting the Ashantee Invasion*, No. 5, (1874), XLVI, pp. 869–72; see also *Daily News*, 25 March 1874, p. 3.

22 *Morning Post*, 14 February 1874, p. 5.


26 ‘Newport Letters from the Gold Coast’, *South Wales Evening Telegram*, 24 February 1874, p. 3.

27 *Morning Post*, 14 February 1874, p. 5.


30 ‘A Bluejacket’s Campaign in Ashantee’, p. 3.

31 *Ibid.*, see also PP, *Further Correspondence Respecting the Ashantee Invasion*, No. 5 (1874), pp. 869–72, Wolseley to the Earl of Kimberley, 6 January 1873 (*sic*).


33 ‘Diary of a Non-Commissioned Officer of the 42d Regiment’, 4 April 1874, p. 2.

34 ‘The Ashantee War’, *The Times*, 7 March 1874, p. 10.

35 ‘On the March’, *Scotsman*, 27 February 1874, p. 5.

36 *The Times*, 7 March 1874, p. 10; see also Gilham, ‘With Wolseley in Ashanti’, p. 80.

37 ‘The March Through Ashantee’, *The Times*, 6 March 1874, p. 10; see also *The Times*, 7 March 1874, p. 10, and ‘Diary of a Non-Commissioned Officer of the 42d Regiment’, 4 April 1874, p. 2.

38 *The Times*, 7 March 1874, p. 10; ‘On the March’, p. 5; ‘Diary of a Non-Commissioned Officer of the 42d Regiment’, p. 3.


40 ‘Diary of a Non-Commissioned Officer of the 42d Regiment’, p. 3.


43 *Morning Advertiser*, 28 February 1874, p. 5; see also Keegan, ‘The Ashanti Campaign’, p. 190.

44 ‘A Stirlingshire Soldier’s Account of the War’, p. 6.


46 *Morning Advertiser*, 28 February 1874, p. 5.

47 ‘The Ashantee War – Letters from Officers’, *Grimsby News*, 13 March 1874, p. 3; see also ‘A Bluejacket’s Campaign in Ashantee’, p. 3; ‘The Services of the Naval Brigade’,
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Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle, 28 March 1874, p. 8; ‘Reception of the 42nd Highlanders’, Crieff Journal, 27 March 1874, p. 4; and Brackenbury, The Ashanti War, 2, pp. 175–7.

48 ‘Services of the Naval Brigade’, p. 8.
50 ‘Services of the Naval Brigade’, p. 8; see also ‘A Bluejacket’s Campaign in Ashantee’, p. 8; Morning Advertiser, 28 February 1874, p. 5; Black Watch Archive [BWA] 0683, ‘The Advance on Coomassie’ [letter from a colour-sergeant in the Rifles, 5 February 1874]; and NRA 0080, ‘Record of Service of the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment’, p. 23.

51 ‘Reception of the 42nd Highlanders’, p. 4.
52 ‘Letters from Welshmen Engaged in the Ashantee War’, p. 6.
53 ‘Services of the Naval Brigade’, p. 8.
54 Ibid., see also Brackenbury, Ashanti War, 2, pp. 171–2.

56 Morning Advertiser, 28 February, 1874, p. 5.
58 ‘Services of the Naval Brigade’, p. 3; Gilham, ‘With Wolseley in Ashanti’, p. 84; ‘A Bluejacket’s Campaign in Ashantee’, p. 3.
59 ‘Letter from a Surgeon of the 42nd’, Yorkshire Telegraph, 28 March 1874, p. 3.
60 ‘A Stirlingshire Soldier’s Account of the War’, p. 6.

62 ‘Reception of the 42nd Highlanders’, p. 4.
63 ‘A Bluejacket’s Campaign in Ashantee’, p. 3.
64 ‘Ashantee War – Letters from Officers’, p. 3; see also ‘A Stirlingshire Soldier’s Account of the War’, p. 6; Gilham, ‘With Wolseley in Ashanti’, pp. 84–5.
65 ‘Letter from a Surgeon of the 42nd’, p. 3.
66 ‘Reception of the 42nd Highlanders’, p. 4; ‘A Bluejacket’s Campaign in Ashantee’, p. 3; ‘A Stirlingshire Soldier’s Account of the War’, p. 6.

68 Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum, 407, ‘Digest of Service: Historical Register, 2nd Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers’; and Major E. L. Kirby, Officers of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, 16 March 1689 to 4 August 1914.