The Anglo-Ashanti Wars

By Laurence Benson

When: 1823-1824, 1863-1864, 1873-1874, 1895-1896, 1900

Combatants: Great Britain and allies vs Ashanti Confederacy

Reasons: Ashanti desire for coastal trade routes, British expansionist policy

Other names: The Ashanti Wars, The Ashanti Expeditions, The Kumasi Expeditions, The War of the Golden Stool

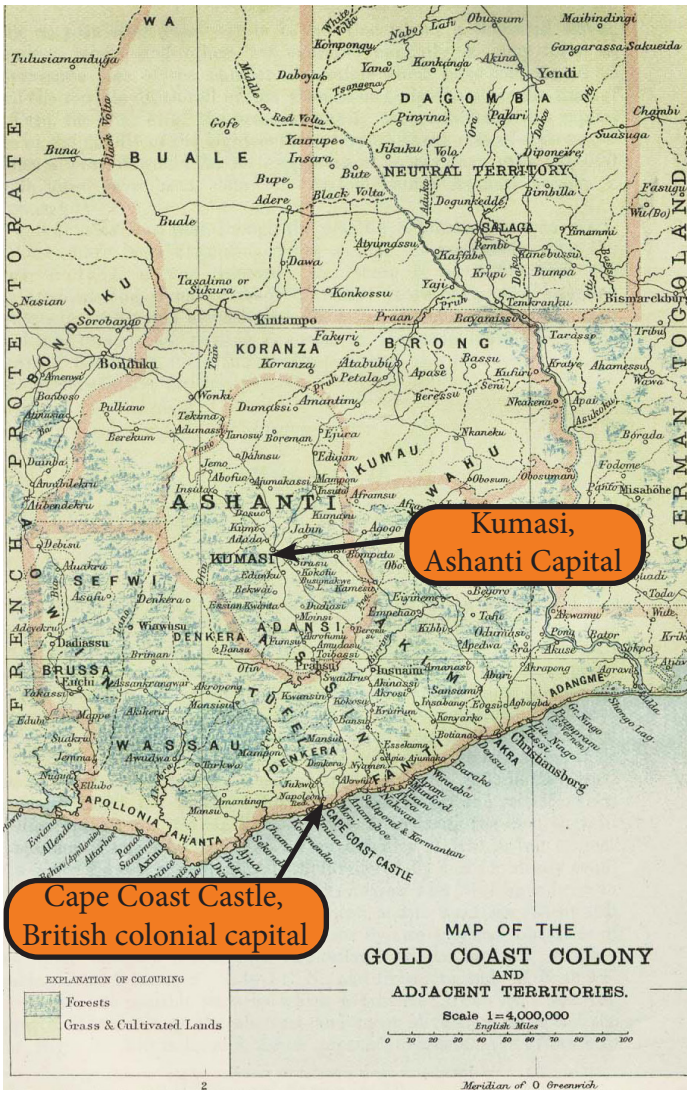
Key battles and places: The Gold Coast, Cape Coast, Elmina, Kumasi

During the nineteenth century, there were a series of wars between the British and Ashanti on the Gold Coast, in what is now modern-day Ghana. The Ashanti were one of the major African powers in the region, drawing much of their strength from the provision of enslaved West Africans for the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

However, the Ashanti territory was largely land-locked with no access to the coast, meaning the Fanti, who controlled the coastal territory and effectively acted as middlemen between the Ashanti and the British, were the dominant local power before 1806. As a result, the Ashanti led an expedition into Fanti territory and, after a successful campaign, they became the dominant local power in the region from 1806 onwards.

However, as Britain's presence in the region increased and as they attempted to assert their political dominance in the nineteenth century, Britain was drawn into colonial conflicts against the Ashanti on the side of the Fanti and other local powers. With eighteen companies from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th West India Regiments stationed in the region, thus forming the majority of Britain's imperial forces in the area, and involved in a host of other colonial expeditions in the nineteenth century, it was inevitable that West Indian soldiers became involved in these conflicts in the 1820s, 1860s and 1870s.

The First Anglo-Ashanti conflict was from 1823 to 1824. After the Ashanti campaign against the Fanti in 1806, some local groups who resented Ashanti dominance began to look to the British as a perceived alternative. Consequently, the Ashantehene, leader of the Ashanti, directed his soldiers to invade the British Protectorate, an area formed of local powers aligned with Britain. The British Governor of the region, Sir Charles MacCarthy, led a group of British soldiers against the Ashanti, which included detachments of the West India Regiments, but was ambushed and killed at the Battle Assamcrow in January 1824.



After this encounter, there was no truly effective British military opposition to the Ashanti. Indeed, for large periods of time, the British forces, composed of the West India Regiments and local militia forces, were entrenched along the River Prah which effectively formed the border between Ashanti territory and the local powers aligned with the British. However, at the Battle of Beulah ninety-nine men from the 2nd West India Regiment helped to fight off an army of supposedly 10,000 Ashanti. Later, Colonel James Caulfield, who was a lieutenant in the 2nd West India Regiment at the time of the Third Anglo-Ashanti War in the 1870s, said of this action that "[the West Indian soldiers] *conducted themselves with praiseworthy steadiness in this engagement*".

By the 1860s, British dominance in the Gold Coast area had greatly increased. In 1852, they had even imposed a tax of one shilling per person in the Protectorate. Once more, cut off from the coast and having lost a lot of territory, the Ashanti so resented such displays of British colonial power that in 1863 they again invaded the Protectorate. As with the First Anglo-Ashanti War, the British did not present an effective opposition to the Ashanti forces, again becoming embroiled in a stalemate along the River Prah. As a result, during the Second Anglo-Ashanti War West India Regiment troops were confined to outpost duty and were prevented from active service against the Ashanti.

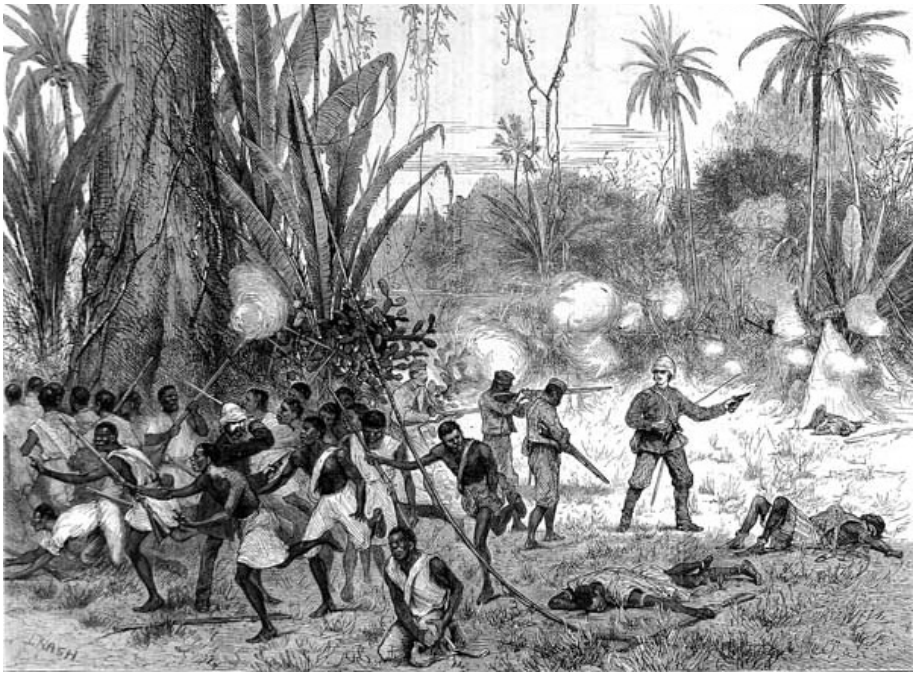
Caulfield writes that this was in a large part due to the 'unhealthy season', the part of the year when the tropical diseases were most dangerous, being unusually difficult, thus meaning "[West Indian] *troops suffered most severely, especially from want of shelters from the heavy rains*". Whilst the role and experience of WIR soldiers in the Second Anglo-Ashanti War was drastically different to those of West Indian troops four decades earlier – they were effectively side-lined because of their severe reaction to tropical diseases – they were nevertheless praised for their conduct. Indeed, the then governor wrote, *"I take this opportunity of recording the esteem in which I hold the services of the 2nd WIR … while attached to this Government, under circumstances of peculiar difficulty"*.

During the first two Anglo-Ashanti wars, West Indian troops had very different experiences – in the 1820s they had played a more active role in the conflict, whereas in the 1860s they had been limited by forces outside their control. However, these first two conflicts had been indecisive and the tensions between the two powers persisted and continued to escalate, meaning another conflict in the 1870s was inevitable. In the Third Anglo-Ashanti War (1873 to 1874), the British tried to take Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti territory, and, in doing so, attempted to neutralise the Ashanti as a serious threat to British colonial dominance in the area.


Sir Garnet Wolseley

Whilst the previous two campaigns had been unsuccessful from a British perspective, the West India Regiments had played a central role in both. Nevertheless, Sir Garnet Wolseley, who was the commander of British forces during the Third Anglo-Ashanti War, believed that the only way to take Kumasi was to use European troops. However, the season's incumbent health issues were a major concern for Wolseley. Tropical diseases, which had been a problem for the West India Regiments previously in the 1860s, were more prevalent in the early months of the year and were particularly dangerous for European troops. Writing to his wife in December 1873, Wolseley complained about this, saying that he seemed, *"always condemned to command in expeditions which must be accomplished before a certain season of the year begins"*.

For Wolseley, the main concern was to minimise his use of European troops and complete the campaign in as short a period of time as possible. This required the creation of supply lines along the route to Kumasi before the beginning of the expedition in order to most efficiently accommodate the advance of Wolseley's European troops. With various methods of supplies transportation proving unfeasible, Wolseley decided to use 8,500 local Fanti people as carriers. However, high levels of Fanti desertions saw the supply of carriers exhausted by the fourth day, meaning Wolseley had to turn instead to the West India Regiments, who were converted from a fighting force into a supply transportation unit.



Soldiers of the West India Regiment standing their ground in the Third Ashanti War

Caulfield wrote that the, *"action [of the men as carriers] on their part had a most important influence on the future of the campaign*". This was a sentiment reiterated by Wolseley, who, in his farewell general orders, wrote that he "*wishes to convey to the soldiers of the 1st and 2nd West India regiments his appreciation of their soldier-like qualities, and of the manner they have performed their duties during the recent campaign*". The efforts of the West Indian troops as supply carriers led media outlets in Britain to praise Wolseley's management of the campaign; the Third Anglo-Ashanti War was held up as a model for how to employ white troops in tropical territories where there was a significant threat of disease.

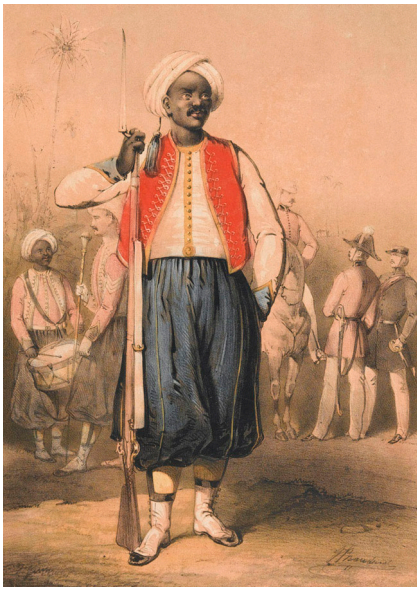
Whilst the major role of West Indian troops in this conflict was as supply carriers, there were a few occasions when they were able to demonstrate their capabilities as soldiers in a more conventional sense. For example, towards the end of 1873, Privates Robert Fagan and James Lewis of the 2nd West India Regiment volunteered to go on a reconnaissance mission into enemy territory, tracking the movements of the Ashanti forces after they had retreated across the River Prah. G.A. Henty, special correspondant for the *Standard*, later wrote of this episode that, risking death and torture, *"this feat appears to me one of the most courageous, if not the most courageous, which was performed during the whole campaign*". Indeed, Fagan and Lewis's actions saw them win medals for distinguished conduct in the field in 1875 after the end of the campaign, along with several other West Indian soldiers.

In this conflict in the 1870s, the experience of West Indian soldiers was more complicated than it previously had been. In the 1820s, they had been recognised very much as a fighting force and in the 1860s, whilst they had not been utilised as an active force due to the impacts of the 'unhealthy season', they were still very much expected to be used as such. However, despite the example of Privates Fagan and Lewis, West Indian troops in the Third-Anglo Ashanti war were effectively relegated from a position of active duty to a supporting role.

The 2nd West India Regiment being presented with medals for the Third Ashanti War

The comments of the British officers above suggest that the efforts of West Indian troops as carriers were appreciated by the Army, and even implies that West Indian troops were happy to comply. However, Caulfield recognised the mistreatment of the West India Regiments when speaking about the final assault on the Ashanti at Kumasi. He wrote that, "*the regiment which had borne the brunt of the campaign for over eight months were not allowed to participate in the honour of entering it* [Kumasi]*; the regiment deserved better luck than it got on this occasion*". This does not necessarily betray a sense of injustice at the manner in which the West India Regiments had been treated regarding their relegation to a mere supporting role, but it does demonstrate how the reputation of the West India Regiments diminished throughout the nineteenth century and indicates how the West Indian troops were considered inferior to their white European counterparts, reflecting the rigid racial divides borne out of colonialism.

After their creation in the late eighteenth century, the West India Regiments had been held in high esteem by the Army. For instance, after a small group of the 2nd West India Regiment mutinied in Jamaica in 1808, General Villetes stressed the *"loyal and proper feelings and spirits shown by the body of the* [2nd] *regiment"*, as more than 900 soldiers suppressed a recently arrived contingent of 33 enslaved conscripts. To calm fears that this incident and others like it would encourage enslaved labourers to revolt in the Caribbean, General Villetes' successor, General Carmichael, used them as his personal house-guard, therefore publicly stating the British Army's confidence in the West India Regiments.



A soldier of the 3rd West India Regiment
Image © National Army Museum, London

By the 1850s, this public confidence had not entirely disappeared, but there were moves towards greater racial and social divides amongst white soldiers and West Indian troops. In 1858 the West India Regiments were presented with new Zouave uniforms, inspired by French military forces raised in North Africa, who had fought in the Crimean War. The oriental design of the new uniforms set the West Indian troops apart, creating a divide between them and their white European officers and counterparts in other regiments, who continued to wear the traditional uniforms.

In 1872, the Acting-Governor-in-Chief of the Gold Coast settlements, John Pope-Hennessey, wrote that *"experience shows that they [West Indian soldiers] were not physically fit for any purpose in the interior"*. This was a sentiment clearly shared by Wolseley who, in 1873, wrote in personal correspondence that the *"moral effect of their* [West Indian soldier's] *presence upon the Ashanti is not to be compared with that which a similar number of Europeans would exert"*. This points to what was becoming a commonly held belief amongst British Army officers in the latter half of the nineteenth century – the West India Regiments were full of 'excessively pampered' soldiers who were not capable of a similar level of performance as white European troops.

In the 1890s, the British attempted to annex Ashanti territory into their Gold Coast colony, but Ashanti resistance resulted in a further expedition to Kumasi to force the issue. However, in 1888 the 1st and 2nd West India Regiments had been merged, completing the decline of the regiments from twelve units at their height to simply one. This meant that in the Fourth Anglo-Ashanti war (1895 to 1896), the role of West Indian troops was extremely limited, with the majority of the expeditionary force comprising European troops and locally raised forces like the Hausa Constabulary. The Fifth Ashanti War (1900), also known as the War of the Golden Stool for the symbol of Ashanti Royal authority, only saw a limited role for the 3rd Battalion's artillery section. The role of the West India Regiments was so limited in these final two conflicts that in 1904, Colonel James Willocks, who had been a lieutenant in the West African Frontier Force during the campaign, said of the West Indian soldiers, *"I am convinced you will never get their proper value out of them so long as they are treated in the same way as Europeans"*.

Officers and Men of the West India Regiment outside the officers' quarters at the Kumasi garrison 1898

In the First Anglo-Ashanti war during the 1820s, the West India Regiments had been at the height of their powers and played a prominent role in that conflict. However, through the second and third conflicts in the 1860s and 1870s, their role had been incrementally reduced and changed, coinciding with their diminishing reputation in the British Army throughout the nineteenth century. This was such that by the 1890s, the West India Regiments had been reduced in number to only one unit, which saw their role in the Fourth Anglo-Ashanti War severely limited. The experience of West Indian soldiers in this period varied from conflict to conflict, but certainly they had played a prominent role in Britain's military campaigns in West Africa during the nineteenth century.