



History of the Rough Riders and the Spanish American War

In 1898 troubles in Cuba between the Spanish who had controlled the island nation since the 1600s and Cuba boiled over. The United States, which had been concerned about many issues in Cuba including Human Rights violations, sent the Protected Cruiser *Maine* to Cuba as a show of force and to protect the Americans there.

When the *Maine* mysteriously blew up in Havana harbor, the outcry of Americans against Spanish treachery caused the United States to declare war on Spain. There was only one problem: the US had a standing army of about 27,000 troops. In Cuba, 200,000 Spanish awaited them. To solve this, President McKinley issued a call for volunteers.

Within weeks over 20,000 Americans had volunteered. Theodore Roosevelt, then Secretary of the Navy was offered his own regiment but acknowledged that he had no real military experience and proposed his friend, Leonard Wood take command with Roosevelt second in command. Thus was born the First United States Volunteer Cavalry that would go down in history as the "Rough Riders"

Among the 1000 first selected to go train in San Antonio, Texas, were 35 men from Prescott, Arizona territory led by William "Buckey" O'Neill. Alexander Brodie was their overall commander. After a few weeks of training and outfitting, the regiment was ordered to Florida for the impending invasion of Cuba.

The Army was not well prepared for an operation of such magnitude and there was much confusion in Florida as the military struggled to deal with the logistics of the United States largest ever amphibious landing in another country. Only 542 troops were able to cram aboard a hastily acquired troop transport and the regiment had to leave behind most of its supplies and most of its horses. The 1st US Volunteer Cavalry suddenly became infantry!

On June 22, 1898 the V-Corps landed over 17,000 men at a small port called Daiquiri southeast of Havana and near a town called Santiago. The U.S. Army's objective was the port of Santiago and the Spanish ships there. If the U.S. Forces could destroy the Spanish Fleet and control this part of Cuba, the Spanish would have to surrender.

The first action came at a crossroads in the jungle called Las Guasimas, which was about 3 miles north of the landing area. The Spanish were waiting with 2000 troops that had entrenched in 3 lines. General "Fighting Joe" Wheeler, an ex- Confederate officer who was in charge of the cavalry troops decided to do an early reconnaissance and led the Rough Riders and the 10th cavalry along with some US Regulars thru the steaming jungle in two columns until they encountered the Spanish and a fierce battle erupted. The Rough Riders were in the thick of it and sustained many casualties but won the day and forced the Spanish to retreat even though the US forces were outnumbered.

As the rest of the U.S. forces disembarked and made ready for battle, the Army moved toward Santiago. There was a line of Spanish trenches on a series of hills between the city and the U.S. forces. One of these hills was called San Juan Hill. Another was Kettle hill.

The U.S. Forces moved slowly through the jungle along fairly narrow roads as dictated by the thick undergrowth. After establishing a camp on a hill overlooking the Spanish lines, on July 1st, 1898 General Shafter, the overall commander of the U.S. forces in Cuba, ordered the troops to attack the Spanish.

Again funneled by the jungle, the U.S. Forces had little choice but to follow the roads and trails leading to Santiago. As they came out of the jungle and crossed a river below the Spanish trenches, the Spanish let them have it. The U.S. Forces stalled and piled up along the river's edge, lashed by Spanish bullets and cannon fire. Here, Buckey O'Neill was killed as he walked among his troops assuring them that they would get their chance at the Spanish. And, as Leonard Wood was promoted to the overall cavalry commander, Theodore Roosevelt became the

commander of the Rough Riders.

After more delays, Roosevelt was just about to order an attack of his own when orders finally came down and the command, "Forward men!" was given. The Rough Riders were on the right flank of the Army and so charged up Kettle Hill, knocking down barbed wire fences and jumping trenches before finally forcing the Spanish to retreat down the reverse slope and into Santiago. The Rough Riders then turned and helped the rest of the U.S. forces drive the final Spanish defenders off the San Juan heights and into the city beyond. The U.S. forces then began to dig their own trenches on the backside of the hills in preparation for the invasion of Santiago. Meanwhile, the Spanish Commander of the Naval Fleet in Santiago harbor realized the end was near. The U.S. Navy had arrived offshore and was waiting outside the harbor. On July 3rd, 1898 the Spanish Naval Commander, Admiral Cervera lead his flotilla of 6 ships out of the harbor at ten minute intervals and into the waiting guns of the U.S. Navy. Out gunned and out run by the U.S. forces, the Spanish naval vessels were either sunk or run aground in a battle that lasted less than 4 hours. The U.S. Navy immediately began rescue operations to help the Spanish sailors to safety.

Then began an uneasy two week period as the politicians took over and began to negotiate a peace. Meanwhile the U.S. troops began to battle another foe- disease. Typhoid, malaria and other tropical diseases began to take their toll and Roosevelt had to go outside the chain of command and send word back to mainland that the soldiers needed to be returned to the states. Fortunately, a peace accord was reached between the two countries and Spain surrendered, handing over not only Cuba but Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam.

The Rough Riders were transported back to the United States, arriving at Camp Wycoff, New York in August where they were quarantined to make sure they were all well before they were discharged from the service on September 15th, 1898. The regiment had been in service for 117 days.