

Personal Accounts of the Spanish-American War



ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY
HISTORY EDUCATION SERIES



FIRSTHAND HISTORY

The collection of personal accounts compiled here includes a variety of experiences - enlisted men and officers, soldiers in Cuba and sailors in the Philippines, the glory of battle and the hardships of camp life. As you read through these accounts, put yourself in the shoes of the writers and imagine what it was like to experience the war firsthand.

Note that spelling and grammar mistakes in the accounts have not been corrected.



Clockwise from top left: African American soldiers at Camp Wikoff in New York (LOC/U.S. War Department, ca.1898), Rough Rider Bankston Johnson on horseback (LOC./ca. 1898), 16th Pennsylvania Volunteers in Puerto Rico (LOC/John F. Jarvis, ca. 1898), crewmembers of the USS Oregon watching a shot during the Battle of Santiago (LOC/Edward H. Hart, 1898).



Oiler H.J. Walsh USS Olympia

Henry J. Walsh was an oiler on the USS Olympia during the Battle of Manila Bay on May 1, 1898. The battle was one of the most decisive naval battles in history, ending with the Spanish Pacific Squadron destroyed and the American Asiatic Squadron (led by Commodore George Dewey) suffering very little damage. Walsh wrote the letter below to a friend on May 4, 1898, and it was published on June 12, 1898 in the San Francisco Call, a newspaper in San Francisco, California.

MANILA, Philippine Islands.

May 4, 1898

Dear Friend John: Since I wrote you that last letter a great change has taken place on this coast. Where the Spanish flag flew a short time ago there now flies the white flag of truce, and I can assure you that the Spanish will never forget it as long as they live.

I told you in my last letter that I thought we were going to have a scrap with the Spanish, and we had it.

We left Mirs Bay— twenty miles from Hongkong— on the 26th of April at 2 p.m., and proceeded in the direction of Manila, and we never stopped until we met and defeated, the Spanish in one of the most stubborn contests ever fought in modern times, and with modern guns on both sides. It was one of the greatest sights I have ever witnessed, and one of the most brilliant victories in the world's naval history.

I must give them (the Spanish) their dues. They fought a hard fight, and died at their posts like soldiers. In one ship, the Reina Cristina, the Spanish admiral's flagship, were carried 600 all told, and only sixty are accounted for. And they are all in the hospital. We cut that ship all to pieces, and when she went about to try to get away, a shot struck her square in the stern, and went right through her. All at once she was in a blaze of fire. Those that were not shot away were cremated in the burning ship. [CONTINUED]



1898 painting of the Battle of Manila Bay. The USS Olympia is shown in the left foreground., firing on the Spanish Pacific Squadron. (LOC)



Oiler H.J. Walsh USS Olympia



1898 painting of the Battle of Manila Bay. (LOC)

[CONTINUED] We went by the outer forts at 11:40 p.m. In single file in the following routine: Flagship Olympia, Admiral Dewey; Baltimore, Captain Dyer; Raleigh, Captain Coughlin; Concord, Captain Walker; Petrel, Captain Woods; revenue cutter McCulloch, Captain Ellicott; transports Zafaro and Nanshan and the Boston, Captain Wildes, in the rear. The night was very dark, and we were all past the forts but the two transports and the Boston when they discovered us and opened fire on us. The blaze from their guns had not died out when the Boston answered it. As every man stood by his gun with his shirt off and a neckerchief tied around his head they looked like the pictures of old-time fighters. That one shot from the Boston killed forty men in the forts. We then proceeded up the bay until we came in sight of the enemy's fleet. Everything was very quiet until we came within 10,000 yards of them, when the Spanish flagship opened fire on us. We did not answer them until we were within 6000 yards, every man standing by his gun with his lock string in his hand.

The word was given to fire, and you can bet there was no time lost. Their fleet of fourteen ships, the forts, arsenal and navy yard (larger than Mare Island) fired on us all at one time. Their inner fort has ninety large guns, all told, so you can see we were kept very busy for a while. We were fighting one hour and thirty minutes when the Spanish admiral struck his colors. Three hearty cheers went up from our boys, but it was only for a few minutes, as the Spanish admiral hoisted his flag on another ship, the Castilla, as his first flagship was all ablaze. and sinking fast.

We then went at it again, this time with more determination to do or die. In a short time we had their whole fleet on fire and the torpedo boats driven on the beach. At 8:30 the word came to cease firing, as there was not a Spanish flag floating anywhere in sight to shoot at. [CONTINUED]



Oiler H.J. Walsh USS Olympia

[CONTINUED] We then called on the Governor General to surrender all the forts, which he did. One dose was enough for him, and now we have spiked every gun in this harbor.

John, our forefathers may be dead, but if you had seen that battle you would think their spirit as much alive to-day as ever it was. I can tell you that we avenged the deaths of our dead comrades of the Maine in good old American style. Before this battle if they knew you were an American they would spit in your face. But since the bombardment things have changed. When they meet an American now they salute him with both hands.

One man was found with his hand on the throttle, with a shot through his body. We found him on one of the small gunboats that had retreated up the river. During the engagement one of the magazines in the arsenal was struck with an eight-inch shell and exploded, killing 800 men.

We expect another fleet out here soon, and when they do come we will give them a warm reception. We are lying as peacefully here now as if nothing had happened, but we have our weather eye open on the Spaniards.

I will give you the full details in my next letter. No more at present. Respectfully,

H.J. Walsh,

U.S.S. Olympia



*1899 photo of the dining area aboard the
USS Olympia. (LOC/Frances Benjamin Johnston)*



Chaplain George W. Prioleau 9th United States Cavalry

*George Prioleau served as a chaplain of the 9th United States Cavalry, one of the four regiments of the Regular Army in which African Americans served during the Spanish-American War. These four regiments – the 9th U.S. Cavalry, 10th U.S. Cavalry, 24th U.S. Infantry and 25th U.S. Infantry – served in the American West during the Indian Wars, where they acquired the nickname “Buffalo Soldiers” and a reputation as fierce fighters. Over the course of the war, Prioleau wrote many public letters and editorials challenging racism and segregation in the United States. In the letter below, published in the African American newspaper *The Cleveland Gazette* on May 13, 1898, Prioleau described the prejudice African American soldiers faced in the American South and wondered “Is America any better than Spain?”*

Hon. H.C. Smith

Editor, *Gazette*

Dear Sir:

The Ninth Cavalry left Chickamauga on the 30th of April for Tampa, Fla. We arrived here (nine miles from Tampa) on May 3. From this port the army will sail for Cuba. We have in this camp here and at Tampa between 7,000 and 8,000 soldiers, artillery, one regiment of cavalry (the famous fighting Ninth) and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth infantries. The Ninth Cavalry's bravery and their skillfulness with weapons of war...is well known by all who have read the history of the last Indian war....

Yesterday, May 12, the Ninth was ordered to be ready to embark at a moment's notice for Cuba....We are here waiting for the order to march. Possibly before you shall have been in receipt of this communication, the Ninth, with the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth infantries and eight batteries of artillery will be in Cuba. These men are anxious to go. The country will then hear and know of the bravery of these sable sons of Ham. [CONTINUED]



1898 photo of soldiers on the dock at Port Tampa, Florida. (LOC)



Chaplain George W. Prioleau

9th United States Cavalry

[CONTINUED] The American Negro is always ready and willing to take up arms, to fight and to lay down his life in defense of his country's flag and honor. All the way from northwest Nebraska this regiment was greeted with cheers and hurrahs. At places where we stopped the people assembled by the thousands. While the Ninth Cavalry band would play some national air the people would raise their hats, men, women and children would wave their handkerchiefs, and the heavens would resound with their hearty cheers. The white hand shaking the black hand. The hearty "goodbyes," "God bless you," and other expressions aroused the patriotism of our boys....These demonstrations, so enthusiastically given, greeted us all the way until we reached Nashville. At this point we arrived about 12:30 a.m. There were about 6,000 colored people there to greet us (very few white people) but not a man was allowed by the railroad officials to approach the cars. From there until we reached Chattanooga there was not a cheer given us, the people living in gross ignorance, rags and dirt. Both white and colored seemed amazed; they looked at us in wonder. Don't think they have intelligence enough to know that Andrew Jackson is dead. Had we been greeted like this all the way...there would have been many desertions before we reached this point.

The prejudice against the Negro soldier and the Negro was great, but it was of heavenly origin to what it is in this part of Florida, and I suppose that what is true here is true in other parts of the state. Here, the Negro is not allowed to purchase over the same counter in some stores that the white man purchases over. The southerners have made their laws and the Negroes know and obey them. They never stop to ask a white man a question. He (Negro) never thinks of disobeying. You talk about freedom, liberty etc. Why sir, the Negro of this country is freeman and yet a slave. Talk about fighting and freeing poor Cuba and of Spain's brutality; of Cuba's murdered thousands, and starving reconcentrados. Is America any better than Spain? Has she not subjects in her very midst who are murdered daily without a trial of judge or jury? Has she not subjects in her own borders whose children are half-fed and half-clothed, because their father's skin is black...[CONTINUED]



1898 photo of Troop A of the 9th U.S. Cavalry. (LOC)



Chaplain George W. Prioleau

9th United States Cavalry

[CONTINUED] Yet the Negro is loyal to his country's flag. O! he is a noble creature, loyal and true....Forgetting that he is ostracized, his race considered as dumb as driven cattle, yet, as loyal and true men, he answers the call to arms and with blinding tears in his eyes and sobs he goes forth: he sings "My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty," and though the word "liberty" chokes him, he swallows it and finished the stanza of "of Thee I sing."

The four Negro regiments are going to help free Cuba, and they will return to their homes, some then mustered out and begin again to fight the battle of American prejudice. Chaplains [Ruter W.] Springer and Prioleau are the only commissioned Chaplains who are so near the seat of war. Chaplain Springer will cross over and engage in the contest, but I will remain here at Port Tampa in charge of thousands of dollars of property of the government. Not a regularly appointed Negro chaplain will be on the field of strife and only one white chaplain. Why, I am unable to state. Perhaps in some instances it was from choice. The colored churches and citizens of Tampa and Port Tampa gave the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth infantries and Ninth Cavalry a grand reception on their arrival. The chaplain of the Ninth was presented with a five dollar pair of shoes and two pairs of silk socks. I trust that my friends will not think because I am on this side while my regiment is fighting that I am a coward. I promised to obey orders. Perhaps this order will be changed by the time Gen. [Nelson A.] Miles gets to Tampa. More anon. I am

Yours truly,
Geo. W. Prioleau
Chaplain, Ninth Cavalry



CHAPLAIN GEORGE W. PRIOLEAU, U. S. A.

*Photo of Chaplain George W. Prioleau from the
1916 Centennial Encyclopedia of the African
Methodist Episcopal Church.*

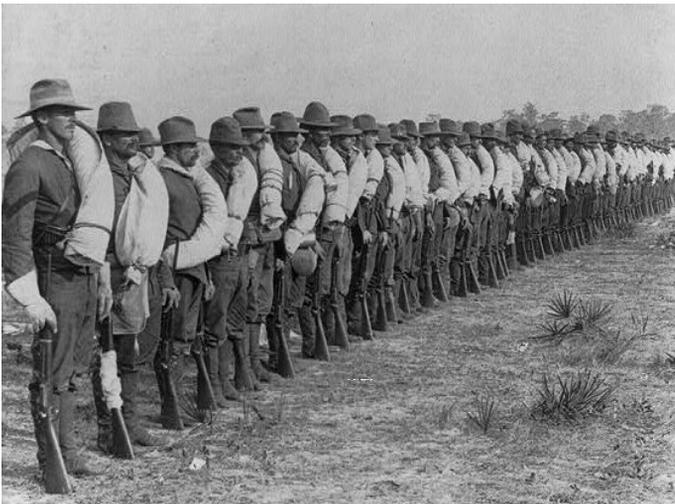


Private John Hammer, Jr. 1st United States Volunteer Infantry

John Hammer, Jr. served as a private in the in the 1st United States Volunteer Cavalry, also known as the Rough Riders. In the letter below, written July 8, 1898, Hammer described the Battle of Las Guasimas (June 24), the Battle of San Juan Hill (July 1) and the beginning of the Siege of Santiago (July 3-17). Hammer's letter was published August 3, 1898 in The Daily Ardmoreite, a newspaper in Ardmore, Oklahoma.

Dear Brother: I have just been relieved from a six hours shift in the trenches, so will write you a short letter and see if I can get to mail it. I had written you on the 23d of last month but on the 24th assembly sounded about 3:30 a. m., and we were marched about eight miles over the roughest country that was ever manufactured and rushed into our first battle or ambushade and had to fight for three hours. Nearly all this time was spent in locating the enemy who were raining lead into our ranks with the Monger rifle and rapid firing guns. It was simply horrible. We were being mowed down with no chance to defend ourselves or return their rapid fire, I dont think there was a man in the engagement but what would have given five hundred dollars, if he had had it, to have seen a Spaniard and had a chance to kill him.

We were marching in column of fours along the road, leading inland. We were marching on the road from where we landed toward Santiago, about seven or eight miles from the coast, when we run into about two thousand five hundred Spanish soldiers and were ambushed. Had they not been so cowardly we would have been all slaughtered. The Rough Riders were alone on this road. Their spies had evidently told them which way we started out of the little town and they took it for granted that all the regiment would follow the same route. But luck would have it the Tenth Cavalry came by another trail and furnished us support. The Ninth and Tenth are colored troops but they don't know anything but fight. The Spaniards were fortified along the hills and the country we were in was more open. We had to charge. We could not go back and had no desire to do so any way. [CONTINUED]



1898 photo produced of Troop D of the Rough Riders before they left for Cuba. (LOC)



Private John Hammer, Jr. 1st United States Volunteer Infantry

[CONTINUED] Our enemy had all the best of us both in equipments and knowledge of the country. It is a wonder we ever gain a victory at all, they use this smokeless powder and we can't locate them even while they mow us down like grass. We captured two Spanish officers the day of the first fight. They said we did not fight fair, that we would shoot and keep on advancing. They are in the habit of firing and falling back.

Our regiment numbered five hundred and sixty-four men when we took up our march that morning. We had nine killed and thirty-three wounded. When they fired on us we dropped to the left of the road in order to lie down. That is all that saved us. We then worked our way forward and made the charge. You can't imagine anything like it. I did not think a single man would live through it. When we were commanded to form skirmish line I felt myself to see if I was truly alive or had been dreaming. We went into camp shortly after and remained the rest of the day (Friday), Saturday and Sunday. Moved Monday.

It was on the first day of July that we had a hard fight but won a glorious victory. Again the Tenth and Rough Riders were side by side. They made one of the most glorious charges that was ever made. Armed only with their little carbines these foreign officers that are along watching and taking lessons in war fare say they never heard of such fighting in their lives. One old English general who was sent along by his government says to Col. Tedy Roosefelt, "Col. there is no use for you to ever tell when you get back about leading that charge," for he says "no one would believe that you could charge an enemy's stronghold (which was a black bouse) with only dismounted cavalry." The enemy was entrenched and had Gatling guns and rifles as good or better than ours. But when the boys make a charge and give a yell the Spaniards go.



Members of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry on top of San Juan Hill, following the battle on July 1st, 1898. Colonel Theodore Roosevelt is in the center, beneath the American flag. (LOC/William Dinwiddie)



Private John Hammer, Jr. 1st United States Volunteer Infantry



Members of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Infantry, Company B, at Montauk Point, New York following their return from Cuba in August 1898. (LOC/Frances Benjamin Johnston)

Brother, this old hero's life in the soil of Cuba isn't what it is cracked up to be. It seems sometimes that it is foolishness to think that I will ever get home alive. I was shot last Friday, July 1st. A shell exploded just in front and a little over me and one of the grape shot hit the ground right in front of me, then struck me right square on the shin bone. The same shell killed one man about four feet in my rear, and shot another to my left. They were shelling us pretty bard, but we had to take it. There was an old house there but I would not go into it for fear of timbers, though it was just about as safe outside. I was lighting a cigarette when I was struck, kneeling down on one knee. It paralyzed my leg for a while. It felt just like it was asleep, and every time I tried to step I went down. A friend of mine, a San Antonio, Tex., boy, named Race Smith, helped me to the field hospital, then went back to the firing line and was torn all to pieces with a shell. He is not quite dead but is in a terriable shape. I am going to see him to-day and try to mail this to you. I had one letter written you when we had the other fight and wore it out, so will try to get this one off. I am not having much fun cut of this life- I would love to see you all, love to eat one good square meal with clean dishes and table cloth, cream and sugar in coffee. It would be a great treat. Think of me when you are eating those good biscuit, steak and gravy. Stay at home where you can eat.

Well, Brother, I will have to close for the present, I will try and writ some more after a while, but if can't I will send this. Love to all. Will write more from Santiago.

Well, it is now 4:40, I am again in the trenches, again with the flag of truce flying on the Spanish trenches 600 yards away. The truce close precisely at 5 p. m. It was a false alarm, some one yelled that she is down, meaning the flag of truce, but it was a mistake, nevertheless I rolled into that trench just like a turtle rolling off a log. There is lots of the boys that never get out of them from the time they go in until they are relieved. But it is too much for me to stand in one place so long, and the trench is only about two feet wide and four feet deep, so I generally sit up on the back side of the trench or lay down. [CONTINUED]



Private John Hammer, Jr. 1st United States Volunteer Infantry

It was the 6th when I started this letter but never got to finish it and this is the 8th. The truce was extended until the 9th which is tomorrow. I was in the trenches six hours when they came along making up a detail to run a trench nearer to the Spanish lines. I went to help. We run a trench about 150 yards in front of our old one. It was a detail from the Rough Riders, Ninth and Tenth cavalry....

I was shot in the leg last Friday in the fight. It lasted two days, the third day they rested. It was under load they were to go into Santiago on Monday. The doctor ordered me to the boat to be taken back home but I gave him the slip and reported for duty again. The captain of my troop asked me where I was going I told him to San Ta-Go. You ought to have heard the boys around him yell. All shook bands with me when told them that I ran off to keep from coming home, so did the captain. I don't have to limp hardly any now. Will be all O. K. if I get through to-morrow. I dread the whistling, groaning noise those cannon balls make. Father Hall's Ghost stories are as nothing compared with that noise. I don't mind the explosion of the shells or the hum of the bullets. J. S. Hammer. Jr.



1898 photo produced of Rough Riders filling belts with rifle cartridges. (LOC)



Sergeant M.W. Saddler 25th United States Infantry

M.W. Saddler was a sergeant in the 25th United States Infantry, one of the African American "Buffalo Soldier" regiments that served in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. In the letter below, Saddler described the actions of his regiment during the battle of El Caney on July 1, 1898. He wrote the letter in Santiago, Cuba on July 30, 1898, and it was published in the African American newspaper the Indianapolis Freeman on August 27, 1898.

Dear Sir:

I wish to call attention to the heroic part of the Twenty-fifth United States Infantry played in compelling the surrender of Santiago. We have no reporter in the division and it appears that we are coming up unrepresented.

On the morning of July 1, our regiment, having slept part of the night with stones for pillows and heads resting on hands, arose at the dawn of day, without a morsel to eat, formed line, and after a half day of hard marching, succeeded in reaching the bloody battleground at El Caney. We were in the last brigade of our division. As we were marching up we met regiments of our comrades in white retreating from the Spanish stronghold. As we pressed forward all the reply that came from the retiring soldiers was: "There was no use to advance further. The Spaniards are intrenched and in block houses. You are running to sudden death." But without a falter did our brave men continue to press to the front.

In a few minutes the desired position was reached. The first battalion of the Twenty-fifth Infantry, composed of companies C, D, G and H were ordered to form the firing line, in preference to other regiments, though the commanders were seniors to ours. But no sooner was the command given than the execution began. A thousand yards distance to the north lay the enemy, 2000 strong in intrenchments hewn out of solid stone. On each end of the breastwork were stone block houses. Our regiment numbered 507 men all told. We advanced about 200 yards under cover of jungles and ravines. Then came the trying moments. The clear battlefield was reached. The enemy began showering down on us volleys from their strong fortifications and numberless sharpshooters hid away in palm trees and other places....



*1898 photo of the ruins of the fort at El Caney, after the battle.
(LOC)*



Sergeant M.W. Saddler 25th United States Infantry

Our men began to fall, many of them never to rise again, but so steady was the advance and so effective was our fire that the Spaniards became unnerved and began over-shooting us. When they saw we were “colored soldiers” they knew their doom was sealed. They were afraid to put their heads above the brink of their intrenchments for every time a head was raised there was one Spaniard less.

The advance was continued until we were within about 150 yards of the intrenchments; then came the solemn command, “Charge.” Every man was up and rushing forward at headlong speed over the barbed wire and into the intrenchments, and the Twenty-fifth carried the much coveted position.

So great was the loss of officers that Company C had to be commanded by its First Sergeant S.W. Taliaferro, the gallant aspirant for the commission from the ranks....The Company’s commander was wounded early in the action by the explosion of a bombshell.

Thus our people can now see that the coolness and bravery that characterized our fathers in the 60’s have been handed down to their sons of the 90’s. If any one doubts the fitness of a colored soldier for active field service, when the cry of musketry, the booming of cannon and bursting of shells, seem to make the earth tremble, ask the regimental Commanders of the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth infantries and Ninth and Tenth Cavalry. Ask Generals [Henry W.] Lawton, [Jacob F.] Kent and [Joseph] Wheeler, of whose divisions these regiments formed a part.

The Spaniards call us “Negretter Solados” and say there is no use shooting at us, for steel and powder will not stop us. We only hope our brethren will come over and help us to show to the world that true patriotism is in the minds of the sons of Ham. All we need is leaders of our own race to make war records, so that their names may go down in history as a reward for the price of our precious blood.

M.W. Saddler
First Sergeant, Co. D.
25th Inf.



1898 photo of soldiers of the 24th U.S. Infantry regiment marching. (LOC)

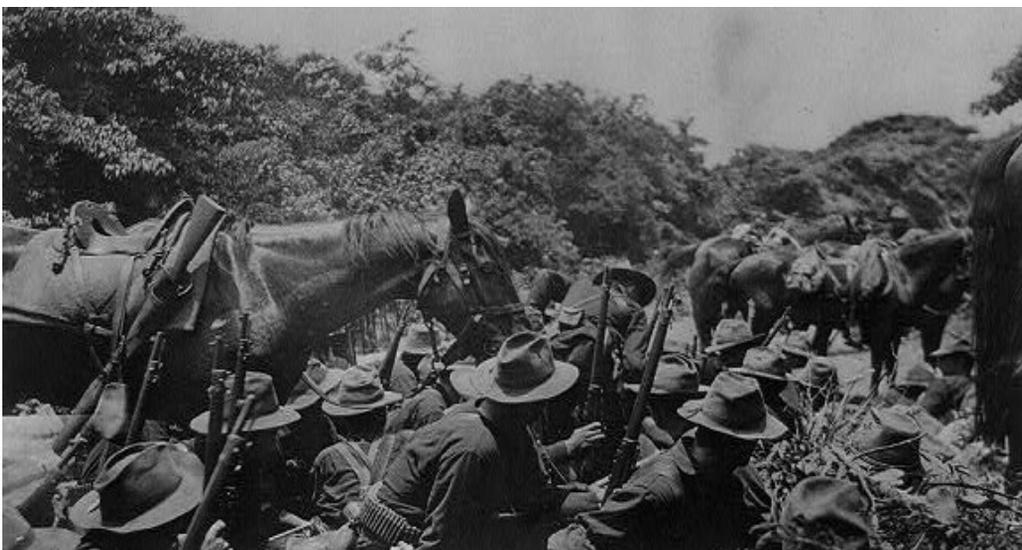


Private John McNeil 1st United States Infantry

John McNeil was a private in the 1st United States Infantry, which served in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. McNeil wrote the letter below on July 25, 1898, describing the siege of the city Santiago de Cuba. While the letter was originally written to McNeil's relatives, it was published in the Dalles Daily Chronicle, a newspaper in Dalles, Oregon, on August 21, 1898. Note that McNeil's estimates of the battle casualties were not accurate – there were about 1,600 American soldiers and 2,000 Spanish soldiers killed or wounded.

SANTIAGO DE CUBA, July 25, 1898

I thought I would write and let you know that I am alive and well. Was afraid you might be worrying about me after hearing of the big battle we had. It was surely a hard fight. The first shot was fired at 6:20 on the morning of July 1st, and it was a continuous fight until 12 on the 3rd, when a flag of truce went up and a conference (a council of war) was held. Gen. Shafter gave them a week to get out of the country – that was to turn over their arms to us and be ready to surrender and leave for Spain; but when the time was up they had not done so, and at 4 p.m. on the 10th we turned loose on them again. Talk about a celebration! May be you think we didn't have one. There were dynamite guns, seige guns, and we had thirty-six field guns, besides big shell. When they are going through the air you would think an overland express was coming, and when they light you would swear a machine shop had exploded. Everything you could think of flies through the air, from a monkey wrench to a steam hammer. I'll tell you we gave them a merry time. One of our dynamite shells hit a big gun they were shooting at us and blew Spaniards, gun and all up in the air. I don't believe half of the Spaniards have lit yet; but you can bet we paid for the fun we had with them. They sent back very nearly as warm a fire as we sent, and many a comrade got killed or wounded. [CONTINUED]



*Members of the 16th U.S. Infantry during the Battle of San Juan Hill on July 1st, 1898.
(LOC/William Dinwiddie)*



Private John McNeil 1st United States Infantry



1898 photo of American soldiers in the trenches during a truce in the siege of Santiago de Cuba, which lasted from July 3-17, 1898. (LOC/William Dinwiddie)

[CONTINUED] There were four wounded out of our troop (troop E). But when we got a bead on one of them, down went his meat house. I think the whole loss on our side was about 1800 killed and wounded; the Spaniards had over 6000 killed, and mercy only knows how many wounded. I tell you the buzzards lived for awhile. I think we had revenge for them killing our sailors on Maine. When the last charge was made every soldier's battle cry was "Remember the Maine!"

One evening about 5 o'clock about 1200 Spanish cavalry made a charge on us. The First and Tenth U.S. Cavalry were dismounted and we waited until they were about 500 yards from us when we poured it into them. Not one got to our line, and I don't believe that over 200 got back to Santiago.

Well, I have told you all about the fight, but that they surrendered on the 14th and we are now in Santiago.

I had one pretty close shave. A bullet hit a rock at my feet and bounced up and went into my canteen. I have the bullet yet and am going to keep it as a souvenir. One went through my hat, but I did not know it until in the evening. There was many a one whizzing around my ears.

As I write this letter I am on guard, sitting on the steps of an old Catholic church that was built in 1722. All the people here are Catholics.

Well, it is time for me to go on post, so good-bye.

John



Lieutenant Thomas Brumby USS Olympia

Thomas Mason Brumby served as Admiral George Dewey's flag lieutenant aboard the USS Olympia. Brumby wrote the letter below on August 17, 1898, and in 1960 it was published in the Proceedings of the Naval Institute magazine. In the letter, Brumby described the battle of Manila, which was not much of a battle. The Spanish realized they could not hold the city, but did not want to surrender outright, so they negotiated with the American fleet to hold a "mock" battle. The American ships bombarded a nearly empty fort on the outskirts of Manila, and after enough show was made, the Spanish surrendered. After the "battle," Lieutenant Brumby went ashore as Admiral Dewey's negotiator, and it was he who raised the first American flag over Manila.

Manila, August 17, '98

My darling Sister,

News, news, my gossiping friends! I have wonderful news to tell. Some will be old when it gets to you in this letter, and there is so much of it that I hardly know where to begin. Still I hope it will prove interesting to you in the telling, so I will write whatever comes into my mind, without order or method.

To begin with, Manila is ours, and that, wonderful to relate, without the loss of a life on the part of the Navy, and only a very few in the Army. So we have gained two important victories without the loss of a single man in the naval forces. This is absolutely without a parallel in history, and the more one thinks of it, the more marvelous it seems. It demonstrates the value of sea power as nothing else in modern times has done. The 1st of May secured the complete protection of the west coast of the United States which otherwise might have been harrassed by the enemy's cruisers. The 13th of August the Navy made it possible for General Merritt to take Manila with the most insignificant loss—10 killed and 40 wounded—when it would have been impossible for him to have taken it, had the Navy not assisted, without terrible loss of life. It was only our guns and the diplomacy of Admiral Dewey that planted our banner on the walls of Manila, where with only a short interval, had proudly flown the Spanish flag for nearly three hundred years.

On Sunday, the 7th inst., at the urgent request of General Merritt, a joint letter was sent from the General and Admiral of our forces to the Governor of Manila stating that any time after the expiration of 48 hours the bombardment of the city might be expected and asking that the non combatants might be sent out of the city. The Governor replied that there were thousands of sick, women and children in the city, that he was besieged by land and sea and had nowhere to send them....[CONTINUED]

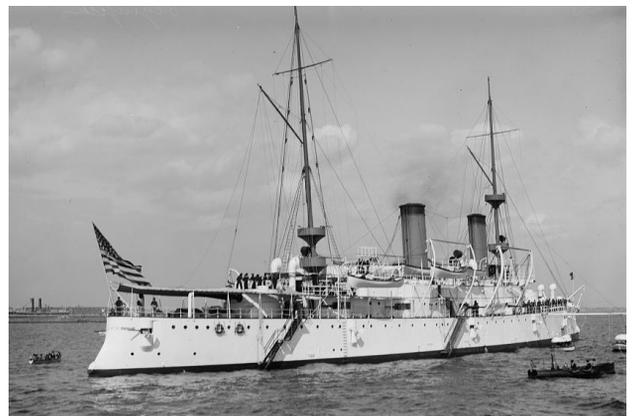


Photo of the USS Olympia, taken between 1895 and 1905. (LOC/Edward H. Hart)



Lieutenant Thomas Brumby

USS Olympia

[CONTINUED] So it was not until Saturday 13th that the attack was made. In the meanwhile the Belgian Consul had been an intermediary between the Admiral and the Governor General of Manila and had made every effort to get the Spaniard to surrender. But the honor and reputation of one man had to be maintained at the expense of the soldiers in the trenches and, as we thought, the women and children. Profiting from his predecessor's example, Jaudenes was determined to surrender only after some display of resistance. Accordingly he arranged with Dewey that the batteries of Manila would not fire upon the American ships if they did not shell the city but only the southern shore batteries. In case of surrender, a white flag would be flown from a selected spot inside the city walls after the flagship had hoisted the signal flags calling for surrender. Sketches of the building and the signal flags to be flown were exchanged. But still he made concessions. He said the batteries in front of the city, and where most lives would have been lost, would not fire unless we fired upon them....

All these vessels were soon hard at it. The fire was short at first, but soon the range was obtained and then a hail of shell fell on the doomed Fort, batteries and trenches, making it impossible for the enemy to remain in them. In the meanwhile the Monitor (Monterey), Charleston, Baltimore, Boston, and Concord had moved up opposite the main batteries of the City, ready to go in at the signal from the Flagship. That signal was not made, as it was not necessary. Not a shot was fired from those batteries. We soon saw the enemy deserting their positions at Malate, and our troops coming out of their trenches ready to advance. The little Callao and the tender had gone inshore in shoal water and were doing splendid work with their rapid fire guns, protecting the left flank of our troops. At 10:32, the enemy being seen in full retreat and our troops as now advancing rapidly and gallantly to take the enemy's trenches the order was given "cease firing" and the day was won. The Flagship then advanced up the coast

toward the walled City, hoisted the International signal "Surrender" and soon the white flag was hoisted on Fort San Juan, and also International signal "I want to parley." I was ordered by the Admiral to signal for the Belgian Consul's boat which was some distance portside of us, to take it and go alongside the Zafiro and take from her one of General Merritt's staff, then go into the city and make the conditions of surrender....

As we drove along we passed regiment after regiment and battery after battery going into the walled city; having evidently come from the lines where we had just been shelling them.

[CONTINUED]



1899 photo of Escolta, the principal business street in Manila. (LOC)



Lieutenant Thomas Brumby USS Olympia



Photo of American troops on ramparts of a fort in Manila, taken some time between 1898 and 1901. (LOC/Edward H. Hart)

[CONTINUED] They looked tired and dirty from the mud of trenches. We were evidently objects of curiosity to them, but we were not only unmolested but often saluted.

When we arrived at the governor's palace the streets, lobbies, halls and antechambers were filled with officers—military and naval, as the latter had since May 1 served in the Army. We were immediately ushered into a large room where were assembled the Council and dignitaries of the place.... A Spanish officer acted as interpreter, assisted by the Belgian Consul. The interpreter began then to translate from a written paper that had evidently been hastily drawn up stating the conditions under which they (the authorities) were willing to surrender....

Just as soon as the capitulation was completed, I demanded permission of General Merritt to have down the official flag of Spain which had all this time been flying on the walls. He immediately granted it. I had taken an American flag and two signal boys ashore with me. We at once proceeded to the ramparts, hauled down the Spanish flag amid the audible crying of a number of Spanish women and scowls of Spanish soldiers and hoisted the Stars and Stripes. As the latter went up a U. S. regimental band that I had not seen outside the walls played the Star Spangled Banner, just as if the band had been placed there by design. You could hear the cheers from the ships as the Spanish flag came down and ours went up, and a salute from all our ships greeted the hoisting of Old Glory. It was a most dramatic scene. An empire had changed hands....

[CONTINUED]



Lieutenant Thomas Brumby

USS Olympia

[CONTINUED] I believe the campaign at Manila will have a great effect on future wars. Admiral Dewey has shown that it is possible to conduct war on humane principles. What a grand thing it is to have taken Manila without the loss of life of a single non combatant! Compare his methods with that of the Spaniards themselves against Barcelona, or more recently in the Philippines at Cebu when thousands of innocents were killed, the ships firing down the streets of the town killing right and left. The victory of August 13 is greater than that of May 1. This is an epoch-making war. The French Admiral said to me yesterday Admiral Dewey was humane to the last. He had the power to utterly route the Spaniards and destroy their city, yet he fired not a shot against it.

The news that will interest you the most probably is the fact that Admiral Dewey has in strong terms urged my promotion. Nothing could have come to me in this war more gratifying. Even if Congress does not give me my promotion, I will still have the satisfaction of having the approbation of the foremost naval officer of the day; and that is enough honor.

Send this to Gus when you have read it. I have too much work on hand to write another such description, and I know she will be pleased. Do not destroy this, when she returns it. For after the war I may conclude to use the material in it for an article.

With best love

Tom.



1898 photo of Lieutenant Thomas M. Brumby aboard the USS Olympia. (Naval History and Heritage Command/George Grantham)



George King

6th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry

George King joined the 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment in April 1898. The regiment arrived in Cuba in mid-July, and after a few weeks continued on to Puerto Rico, where they remained until October 1898. 30 years after the war, King published his letters home as the book Letters of a Volunteer in the Spanish-American War. The excerpt below comes from a letter sent from Utuado, Puerto Rico, on September 8, 1898.

Our boxes and trunks all came today by way of Arecibo. Everything was well selected and sure to be useful. The underclothes are fine—decidedly in contrast to both the native article and the army issue.

Today is a red letter day. Nearly every company has a box, and nearly every man is happier by some new possession. Dozens of boxes of Red Cross supplies are stored in my back room. Among them are cans of chicken and beef extract. I have just had a supper of boullion and chicken sandwiches.

I don't know that I told you that orders had come from the office of the War Department directing a daily report by cable showing the strength of the regiment. I feel certain that this will operate in our favor, and more certain that it indicates that pressure is being exerted in our behalf. It seems humiliating to see a regiment of volunteers so intent on getting out of their country's service, but there is much to justify it. There is no use equivocating. I haven't, although you apparently think that I have. This morning's telegram, showing yesterday's

strength, reports 1014 enlisted men on the island, and of these 334 men sick either in hospital or in quarters. In other words, 32 per cent of the regiment are sick. Our total strength is in round numbers 1300. Of the 300 that are not here, probably 100 have been transferred, or have been discharged or are away on furlough. At least 200 have gone away on sick leave; of these possibly 50 have recovered and reported.

[CONTINUED]



1899 photo of members of the 5th U.S. Cavalry, Troop D lining up for dinner in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. (LOC/Benjamin West Kilburn)



George King

6th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry

[CONTINUED] The proportion of sick apparently increases; but I think that the apparent increase is really a deception. There are many men in every company who have put off reporting at sick call from day to day. The record is swelled—I know for a fact in many cases—not by men who are newly sick, but by men who have at last given in. Very generally these obstinate fellows prove to be the candidates for the hospitals. There are scores of men who won't go near the surgeons unless something serious changes their minds. The day after a death the sick list swells amazingly—simply because men who should have reported sick days ago, have at last been scared into it. This week there is no difficulty in getting out the right men; they all know that their salvation may depend on a sensationally big sick list and they line up by dozens. One company sent down 48 yesterday, and 43 of them were sent to hospital or to quarters.

This sick call is a part of the day's routine that I may never have explained. It is a cheerless but an important event of an army day. Each company has what is technically known as a sick book. It is an ominously big book, with pages ruled transversely into uniform lines, and vertically into columns for the men's names, the date of their first reporting sick, their ailment, and their disposition by the surgeons. Each morning, at sick call, which sounds soon after breakfast, a sergeant in each company enters in his book the names of all the men who want to see the surgeons, including the men who are in the hospitals or in quarters for a period longer than one day. Then the captain signs the page, as a guarantee that the men are serious in their inclination to have medical advice, and the sergeant book in hand leads his collection of lame, halt, and blind, a quarter of a mile or a half a mile as the case may be from the barrack to the dispensary. Inside, the chief surgeon is sitting on a box, hurrying through the line; outside, from the door of the hospital to the corner of the plaza, there are other sick men waiting their turn. Then comes a wait—sometimes of two or three hours. When finally the turn comes—often the lines have worked up, like a file of ticket buyers in the foyer of the Boston theatre—the sergeant gives the surgeon the sick book and the first man of a company steps up. The surgeon says, “What is it?” and has the poor fellow by the wrist or by the cheeks before he is half through his answer. Then it's generally “two bismuth,” or “camphor and opium,” and an unceremonious hustling along to a conveniently handy hospital steward who with equal celerity fills the prescription and stands ready for another. With each man the operation is repeated; sometimes he is told that he is all right; sometimes he's told to come back in the afternoon to have his temperature taken; sometimes he is ordered to a hospital forthwith; and sometimes he is told to stay quiet in quarters for a week or so. But the line is never delayed by ceremony; no one ever gets a second's attention that isn't required by the circumstances. When the company's list is completed the sergeant gets his book back, with the proper entry by the surgeon opposite each man's name—“Hos”—“Qu”—“light duty”—“Dis”—“Not ex”—as the case may be. Then the feeble procession reforms and creeps back home.

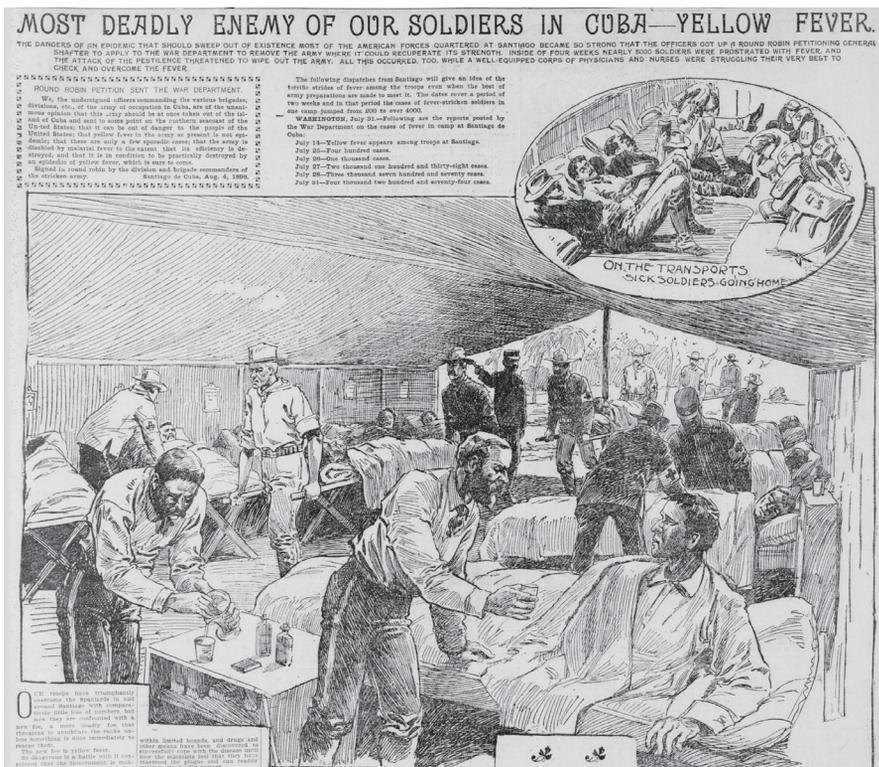
[CONTINUED]



George King 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry

[CONTINUED] The result of this, expedition has a very considerable effect on the company's morning report. Each man who is ordered to hospital, or to quarters, or on light duty, is not required to drill or do guard duty during the period indicated. The company's strength is cut down just so much, as far as the record goes. For instance, a company may have 75 privates on its rolls. Of these ten may be on duty that exempts them from drill or guard duty—men with jobs like mine, or men on detail as nurses. This is called daily duty. Fifteen more may be “sick” technically—excused by the process I have just described. There will then be 50 men “present for duty.” The totals of the twelve companies will be the basis of reckoning for all such things as guard details. Suppose the regimental total is 500, and a guard of 20 is needed, the company that is 50 strong, 10% of the regiment, will be computed by the adjutant to be liable to a detail of 2 men,—10% of the regimental guard. Our company total present for duty has been as low as 31; I have known of companies reaching as low as 21. We have about 19 men on daily duty—out of 88 present, sick, on detail, and present for duty. This is a fair illustration of how a company becomes split up in service. This was to be a note—just to acknowledge the boxes. Nothing stops me even now but a long-standing whist appointment in the Adjutant's office.

It seems needless to say that I am still well. Even my hay-fever has deserted me—if indeed it was hay fever, in a land where the horses die for the want of hay.



Newspaper article published in the San Francisco Call on August 7, 1898 describing the toll yellow fever was taking on American soldiers in Cuba. (LOC)



INTERESTED IN MORE?

This collection was only a small sample of the many firsthand accounts available on the Spanish-American War. If you are interested in learning more, check out:

- George King's book *Letters of a Volunteer in the Spanish-American war*, available online here: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbpr.12858/>
- Richard Harding Davis' book *Notes of a War Correspondent*, available online here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3050>
- Theodore Roosevelt's book *The Rough Riders*, available online here: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13000>
- Willard Gatewood's book *Smoked Yankees" and the Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898-1902*
- Action Reports and First Hand Accounts on the Spanish-American War Centennial Website: <http://spanamwar.com/action.htm>



1898 photo of a soldier standing at the camp cook area in the Rough Riders military camp at Montauk Point, New York. (LOC/Frances Benjamin Johnston)



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