Springfield’s Citizen Soldiers in the Spanish American War

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On the night of February 15, 1898, the Battleship Maine was rocked by an explosion while at anchor in Havana Harbor. The loss of American lives was great. The Spanish government in Cuba denied any involvement in the incident; many United States citizens refused to believe that. War with Spain seemed inevitable. For several years, the Spanish authorities in Cuba had been waging a war against Cuban revolutionaries. The contest was generally one-sided, as the Spanish government had the equipment and men necessary to retain control of the island. However, American public opinion sided with the native Cubans. The average American could see a parallel between the Cuban fight for independence and the American Revolution.

In a message to Congress on April 11, 1898, President William McKinley insisted that the Spanish government was oppressing the Cuban people, and McKinley could find no other solution than American intervention. He wrote:

I ask the Congress to authorize and empower the President to take measures to secure a full and final termination of hostilities between the Government of Spain and the people of Cuba, and to secure in the island the establishment of a stable government, capable of maintaining order and observing its international obligations, insuring peace and tranquility and the security of its citizens as well as our own, and to use the military and naval forces of the United States as may be necessary for these purposes.¹

In effect, McKinley was declaring war on Spain.

On the 23rd of April, President McKinley called for troops from each state militia. Six days later, Governor Roger Wolcott of Massachusetts echoed that call. On that same day, the governor placed Colonel Embury P. Clark in command of the Second Regiment Massachusetts Infantry, United States Volun-
teers. Clark was a veteran of the state militia, having served for almost thirty years. He was born in Buckland, Massachusetts, in 1845. In 1859, his family moved to Holyoke. During the Civil War, Clark served with the 46th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers, seeing action in North Carolina and Virginia. Following the war, he returned to Holyoke to accept the position of registrar of the water works. He joined the state militia in 1868. His service with the Holyoke Water Works ended in 1893, when he was elected sheriff of Hampden County. Clark had been appointed a colonel in the state militia in 1889.

Colonel Clark was ordered to report to Framingham with Companies B, G, and K of the Second Regiment. On the rainy morning of May 3, 1898, the Springfield companies marched past the local citizens on their way to Union Station. Mayor Henry S. Dickinson was in attendance, along with a large crowd. At a few moments past nine, the train pulled out of Union Station, heading for Worcester.

Sergeant Lewis Kelley of Company K had been contracted to report the war for the Springfield Homestead, a weekly newspaper. Through his personal reports Springfield would get a true picture of the war. Kelley wrote that the Springfield send-off had lifted the spirits of the men. This same scene was repeated in Worcester later that same day. By late afternoon, the Springfield men had arrived at Camp Dewey, in South Framingham.
Prior to being accepted as volunteers, the men had to undergo a rigorous Army physical. Many were nervous at this prospect, and their fears were justified. A large number of men from Company B were found unfit for service, and a call was sent back to Springfield for more recruits. Companies G and K suffered a similar fate. Finally, on May 8, 1898, Company K was mustered into active service as a volunteer unit. Two days later, Companies B and G were mustered in.6

In command of Company B was Captain Henry McDonald. Born in New York City on May 19, 1852, he had served with the Regular Army from 1870 to 1875. Upon discharge, he came to Springfield, where he found employment with the Armory and at Smith and Wesson. In 1886, he was appointed deputy sheriff of Hampden County. In 1897, he was appointed city marshal by Mayor Dickinson. McDonald had joined the militia in 1876, and he was appointed captain in 1889.7 While at Camp Dewey, Captain McDonald found time to write his friend, Mayor Dickinson. In a letter dated May 5, 1898, he wrote: "the uncertainty that fills the air is demoralizing, but whatever comes we are in for it alright."8 He and the men were worried; he expressed his fear when he wrote: "What the results of this wrangle will be no one can tell."9 The initial enthusiasm faded rapidly.

On the 11th of May, the regiment was ordered to depart for Tampa, Florida. There had been hope that the units would pass through Springfield on their way south, but instead the regiment left for Newport, Rhode Island. Mayor Dickinson and a few Springfield residents made the trip to South Framingham to see the men off to war. The regiment sailed from Newport to New York City, arriving there on May 13. From there, the regiment transferred to Jersey City and boarded a train for the journey south. The trip was slow, and the train was uncomfortable. The destination was now changed to Lakeland, Florida. The Springfield men arrived there on the 16th of May.10

Conditions in Lakeland were far from ideal. Sergeant Kelley reported that the daily routine stretched from 4:45 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Each day was filled with boring military training and drills. The food was adequate, though facilities to prepare it were limited. Private Wilson Allen wrote his parents that the men from Massachusetts were far better soldiers than those of New York. He also noted that the officers of the Second Regiment had prohibited the men from eating ice cream and fruits, two substances which had caused much sickness in the New York ranks. While Kelley reported Lakeland's friendliness, Allen was critical of local merchants who raised their prices to make an extra profit off of the "Yankee soldiers." Adding to their misery were mid-afternoon temperatures of over one hundred degrees.11

Although burdened with his military duties, Captain McDonald found the time to write to Mayor Dickinson. He noted that "the heat is almost unbearable," and indicated that the men "all displayed a certain restlessness..." In the same letter, McDonald expressed his concern over events at home. As
head of the Springfield Police Department, he worried over its operation while he was away, and he advised the mayor on police matters.\textsuperscript{12}

On May 30, the regiment was ordered to Ybor City, Florida, just outside of Tampa. While encamped here, the regiment was assigned to the First Brigade, Second Division of the Fifth Army Corps. The Second Division was to be commanded by Major-General Henry S. Lawton of the Regular Army.\textsuperscript{13} Conditions in Ybor City differed little from those in Lakeland. Captain McDonald wrote a thank-you note to Mayor Dickinson for “the elegant and luxurious hammocks which you so generously purchased.” He noted that he and other Springfield officers were “now the envy of the whole regiment.”\textsuperscript{14} One might gather that this envy also carried into the ranks of the enlisted men. In the same letter, McDonald informed the mayor of events around the camp. “Tampa and its surroundings is today the busiest place in America. There are forty thousand troops here....” He clarified an erroneous newspaper report by stating that although “the newspapers say the Cuban invasion has commenced,” it was untrue. Finally, McDonald stated that the “regiment has attained such a reputation for excellence, that the general impression seems to be that we will be included among the first that leaves here.” He was confident that the Springfield men would make a good showing in the war.\textsuperscript{15}

On June 8, the regiment boarded the transport ship, \textit{Orizaba} for passage to Cuba. The regiment had boarded the ship after the Regular Army, and quarters were cramped. Sergeant Kelley wrote of the reactions of the Springfield men to the Regular Army troops. “It is interesting to see the care the regulars bestow on their Krag-Jorgensens. They take pleasure in showing the gun to the volunteers,” he wrote, “but in matters of dress we can give them pointers, as was shown at the inspection yesterday afternoon.”\textsuperscript{16}

Due to the cramped conditions aboard the \textit{Orizaba}, on June 14, the regiment was transferred to the \textit{Knickerbocker}. Although not given to superstition, Sergeant Kelley reported that “the boys think we are fated, but the Captain [of the ship] says it is luck; our ship is No. 13, has 13 letters in her name and sailed on the 13th.” Though many laughed at the coincidence, they were visibly shaken when a steam jacket blew out on board ship. The explosion sounded much like a cannon, and rumors of Spanish torpedoes circulated around the ship.\textsuperscript{17} Living conditions aboard the \textit{Knickerbocker} were abysmal. The men were ordered to sleep below deck in the sweltering hold. This was due to the military surgeon’s concern that the damp night air might be harmful. For many, however, it was not the quarters which caused the most concern. Kelley reported that “yesterday afternoon the sea became choppy and many of the boys paid heavy tribute to old Neptune and didn’t care whether Cuba was freed or not.”\textsuperscript{18}

Next to the rough seas, the biggest problem aboard ship was the boredom. Colonel Clark had opened a case containing government papers to give the men something to read. The majority of the papers were reports and Congressional records, however, and “somehow the boys didn’t appreciate them.”
Kelley reported that protests from the men led the military surgeon to allow the men to sleep on the deck. The rations given to the men for the duration of the trip were quite inadequate even to the most discriminating palate. To supplement these rations, the men resorted to devious means. Kelley reported that:

Yesterday noon the ship's cook had just taken a roast of beef from the oven and turned around for a moment, when a boat hook slipped down through a skylight and the meat was deftly drawn heavenward.

Kelley further recorded that the cook had a lively time attempting to explain to the officers where their lunch had gone.

On the 23rd of June, the regiment was in position off the southeastern coast of Cuba. General Lawton had decided that his division would land at Daiquiri, some eighteen miles east of Santiago de Cuba. Kelley reported that although the landing was uneventful, the sea was as uncooperative as usual. While sailing to shore in small boats, Kelley noted that "it was easier to find a seat than to keep it." Kelley reported:

As we approached shore Old Glory swung out from the top of a nearby hill of perhaps 1000 feet elevation... this is said to be the first American flag flung to the breeze on this end of the island.

If conditions were bad in Florida and aboard ship, they were worse in Cuba. There was dense vegetation and undergrowth, but little signs of human habitation. The regiment's prime concern was the abundance of mosquitoes and land crabs. Sergeant Kelley noted that the crabs "helped themselves to whatever they could find, and one man awoke to find his tin cup departing rapidly." The men soon learned they would take part in the assault on the village of El Caney, after which they would assist in the attack on Santiago de Cuba.

Although the regiment had been active as a unit of the Regular Army for about two months, war was still not a reality. Many in the regiment could not take the situation seriously. This attitude was soon to change. On Friday, June 24, Kelley and the men heard:

Sharp firing on a hill ahead of us. The rough riders, 10th Colored Cavalry and the 1st Infantry were having a skirmish with the Spaniards.

The realities of war were soon upon the regiment. As Kelley wrote: "while at headquarters one of the rough riders, badly wounded, walked into the hospital. It was play-soldier no longer."

On the evening of June 30, the Second Regiment Massachusetts Infantry, United States Volunteers, began its march into battle. At ten in the evening, the regiment encamped on a hillside near the village of El Caney. During the
night, many of the men were apprehensive about the forthcoming battle, including Private Frank Moody of Company K who was certain that he would never see home again. At four-thirty on the morning of July 1, the regiment broke camp and began to advance towards El Caney.\textsuperscript{25}

The Spanish troops in the village of El Caney were under the command of General Vera Del Rey. Numbering only six hundred and twenty men, the Spanish would make good use of the village’s entrenched fortifications. General Lawton felt it would only take about one hour to dislodge the Spanish defenders from El Caney; then the Americans would march to Santiago de Cuba.\textsuperscript{26}

As the sun rose, the regiment increased its pace towards the village. Sergeant Kelley recorded the opening moments of the battle:

Crossing an open field we took possession of a road and then the spiteful singing of the bullets began. What it is like no one can know who has not once heard it. Haversacks and rolls were left in a pile and every man went into the fight as unencumbered as possible.\textsuperscript{27}

The earlier apprehensions about the battle soon began to come true. The war had suddenly become a reality, as Sergeant Walter W. Ward of Company G expressed when he wrote:

It was our first experience under fire and it is no wonder that nearly all of us wished ourselves, just for a few moments, somewhere else and remembered certain pressing engagements we had at Springfield.\textsuperscript{28}

Following the initial engagement with the enemy, the regiment took up positions to the left of the American line. They were placed so as to prevent Spanish troops from retreating to Santiago de Cuba. Companies B and K were moved up into the line of battle to assist the 22nd Regiment which had come under heavy Spanish rifle fire. As the Springfield men reached the line, Spanish bullets found ready targets. One of the first Springfield men to be killed was Private Frank Moody, whose premonition about never seeing home again had come true.\textsuperscript{29}

Companies B and K were approximately nine hundred yards from the nearest Spanish position. The men quickly began to return the Spanish fire. As they fired, smoke from their old Springfield .45-70 rifles hung in the air, exposing each man’s position. The Spanish aimed at these small clouds of smoke. Within a minute or so, eleven Springfield men lay dead or wounded. Sergeant Ward later recounted that “it must have been just like target practice for the enemy.”\textsuperscript{30}

Major Van Horn, commander of the 22nd Regiment, was visibly agitated over the smoke caused by the rifles of the Second Regiment. He ran over to their positions and shouted, “For God’s sake, Second Massachusetts, stop fir-
ing! You're making us a regular target for the enemy." The Springfield men ceased firing, but were soon ordered by their officers to resume firing. More protests from Major Van Horn fell on deaf ears as the American troops began to advance towards the Spanish positions.\textsuperscript{31} The problem with the Second Regiment's rifles was one of obsolescence. The old Springfield .45-70 rifle used a cartridge with gunpowder that created a lot of smoke. Many of the other American military units in Cuba were using the Krag-Jorgensen rifle which utilized cartridges employing the relatively new smokeless powder.\textsuperscript{32}

The American forces slowly made their way towards the Spanish positions. After heavy fighting, the Americans were able to utilize the trenches previously occupied by Spanish troops. By five in the afternoon, General Vera Del Rey had been killed by artillery fire, and the village had surrendered. Within a twelve hour period, the Second Regiment had suffered five men killed and another forty wounded. Three of those wounded would not survive. As Sergeant Ward remarked: "the Second Regiment received its baptism of blood."\textsuperscript{33}

Private Ralph Fisk of Company K, who had received a minor wound in the battle, wrote home that "the Spaniards do not make any distinction; they shoot at those wearing the red cross just as quickly as they do at us." Sergeant Kelley also expressed his hatred for their enemy when he wrote that they "have used explosive bullets and have fired on the Red Cross, both contrary to recognized customs." Kelley did not limit his disgust just to the enemy. He reported that when he saw "Cubans we have come to fight for, it seems a gigantic farce."\textsuperscript{34} Following the surrender of El Caney, the regiment returned to the road where they had left much of their equipment. The men quickly found that their Cuban "allies" had ransacked their haversacks and taken the men's rations. Tired and hungry, the men marched off towards Santiago de Cuba, taking up positions to the right of the American line.\textsuperscript{35}

The regiment camped on a hillside just outside of the city. At ten in the evening of July 1, the regiment was ordered to reinforce other units which had come under Spanish fire. While moving up the hillside, the regiment encountered its old nemesis, Major Van Horn. He rebuked the Springfield men for moving too slowly up the hill. He also directed them to fire as soon as they reached the crest of the hill. Fortunately his command was not obeyed. Had the men fired, they would have fired into their own men moving down the other side of the hill.\textsuperscript{36}

On July 3, the regiment learned that the Spanish fleet had been destroyed while at anchor in Santiago Bay. The Spanish troops within the city called for a temporary truce, which was agreed to by the American forces. During this lull in the fight, the Second Regiment settled in to dig trenches. At this time, the Springfield men lost no time in exchanging their old Springfield .45-70 rifles for Krag-Jorgensens. Hometown loyalty disappeared, as one hundred and fifty of the new Krag-Jorgensens were obtained, while an equal number of Springfields were discarded.\textsuperscript{37}
The hillside which the regiment occupied was called "Misery Hill" by the men. Trenches were dug without the aid of proper tools. Supplies for the regiment were few and far between. Rationing became a way of life. During this truce, the regiment regrouped and took note of its losses. Sergeant Kelley reported that each of the Springfield Companies were without their original commanding officer. Captain William Warriner of Company K had been wounded at El Caney, and was in the hospital. Captain Henry McDonald of Company B had injured his back while climbing a hill. He too was confined to the hospital. Captain John Leonard of Company G had been appointed by Colonel Clark to fill a vacancy on the regimental staff. The senior lieutenant of each company had taken command.

On the morning of July 14, the regiment was ordered to take up positions within the trenches. The temporary truce was to end at noon, but when the appointed hour had come and gone without a resumption of the fight, many men climbed out of the trenches to await further word. At four in the afternoon, a staff officer from headquarters rode by with the latest news. "Men," he said, "do not cheer, let us respect the enemy — the Spanish general has surrendered the cities' 12,000 troops, and 8,000 troops to the east of us." Sergeant Kelley wrote, that upon hearing the news, "we threw our hats in the air, shook hands and immediately fell to discussing the prospects of our getting back to the States." The battle for Cuba had ended.

On July 17, 1898, the city of Santiago de Cuba was formally surrendered to the Americans. The men of the Second Regiment stood in front of their trenches and watched as the American flag was raised on the roof of the Spanish governor's palace. Many felt that all their troubles were over. However, it was only the beginning. With the end of hostilities, boredom quickly set in. Poor rations, bad weather, and lack of proper medical care replaced the Spanish as the enemy. Despite sufficient quantities of quinine to combat malaria, almost half of the regiment contracted malaria and dysentery. Many men in the regiment began to feel that the government was neglecting them. Medical supplies earmarked for the regiment were still aboard ship in Santiago Bay. Repeated requests for these supplies went unheeded.

Lack of adequate shelter served only to aggravate the sickness in the ranks. Daily inspections and drills were cancelled because not enough men could be found to conduct them. The morale of the regiment was improved with the receipt of mail from home. Unfortunately, this was temporary — as the regiment seemed to be recovering from the malaria and dysentery, the spectre of yellow fever hit the Army in Cuba. Sickness within the ranks would leave no man untouched. In his last report, Sergeant Kelley, a victim of malaria and confined to the hospital, wrote that the regiment was awaiting transportation back to the United States.

The senior officers of the Army in Cuba became alarmed at the conditions to which their men had been subjected. Colonel Theodore Roosevelt submitted a letter to the commander of the Army in Cuba, General William
Shafter. In that letter, he pleaded for relief of his men. Taking this cue, other officers initiated a "round robin" letter to the Secretary of War, Russell Alger. This letter was to have been submitted through General Shafter, but its contents were leaked to the press corps attached to the Army. As a result, officials in Washington read the text of the letter before Shafter even knew of its existence.  

This "round robin" letter stated that conditions were abysmal and that the Army was "in a condition to be practically entirely destroyed by an epidemic of yellow fever, which is sure to come in the near future." The letter went on to state that the Army could not be moved into the interior of Cuba, due to lack of adequate facilities. Finally, it was the opinion of the signing officers that "the Army must be moved at once," or "the persons responsible for preventing such a move will be responsible for the unnecessary loss of thousands of lives." The "round robin" letter was signed by Major-Generals J. Ford Kent, J.C. Bates, Adnah R. Chaffee; Brigadier-Generals Samuel S. Sumner, Will Ludlow, Adelbert Ames, and Leonard Wood. Finally, it was signed by Colonel Theodore Roosevelt.  

After the war, Private James F. Ferrier, veteran of Company B, felt that the story of the "round robin" letter had not been adequately told by Colonel Roosevelt in his book, The Rough Riders. In an "added appendix" to a copy of this book, Ferrier stated that General Henry Lawton was at first not asked to sign this letter. This was due, according to Ferrier, because of General Lawton having severely reprimanded Roosevelt and other cavalry commanders for their bad judgment at the battle of Las Guasimas. That battle had resulted in numerous American casualties. When Lawton was finally asked to sign this letter, the general stipulated that he would only sign it if it were immediately sent to General Shafter. Ferrier also noted that Lawton did not totally agree with the tone of the letter. As a result of his conditions, General Lawton's signature did not appear on the letter.  

Ferrier stated that when the letter was published in the newspapers in Washington, government officials were quite upset. Treaty negotiations were about to begin with Spain, and public complaints from military leaders in Cuba proved very embarrassing. As a result, General Shafter was reprimanded for his role in the matter, although he apparently had no prior knowledge of its existence until it was made public in the press. Ferrier implied that Roosevelt was the instigator of this "round robin" letter. However, Roosevelt denied any knowledge of the author, or who leaked it to the press.  

It should be noted that Ferrier's opinion of Roosevelt was extremely low. His accusations against Roosevelt may have been the rantings of a private who was disgruntled with his superior officers. However, there is truth to much of what Ferrier stated. Roosevelt was known to be strong-willed, and ambitious, used to getting his own way. Although it is difficult to confirm the validity of Ferrier's allegations against Roosevelt, they make an interesting sidelight into the operations of the Army in Cuba. In any event, the effects of the letter were
immediate. The government quickly made plans for the removal of the troops from Cuba. Public opinion would not allow the government to procrastinate on this point.49

On August 10, Colonel Clark was ordered to prepare the Second Regiment to move out at a moment's notice. On August 12, the regiment marched to Santiago Bay to board ships for the trip home. Seventeen men from the regiment were too ill to make this trip and were left behind in Cuba.50

The regiment boarded the ship *Mobile*, which had just come from ferrying mules to the Army in Puerto Rico, and had not been cleaned out. The Springfield men were determined to arrive home safely, no matter how bad conditions aboard the ship might get. On August 13, 1898, the ship sailed for the United States. It had been just two months since the regiment had left for the war.51

The destination of the *Mobile* was Montauk Point, Long Island. The ship itself was crewed by English merchant sailors, who delighted in making a large profit off of the men of the regiment by selling leftover foodstuffs. Complaints from the men soon put an end to this practice, but not before several of the sailors had become quite wealthy. The sick men of the regiment were made as comfortable as possible aboard the *Mobile*. Medical attention and supplies were nonexistent, but the men themselves took to caring for the needs of their ill comrades. The first death aboard ship occurred on August 14, followed by another on the 15th, and four on the 17th, a black day in the history of the regiment. Among the dead was Lieutenant Harry Vesper, the commanding officer of Company B. He died without knowing the fate of his sick brother left in Cuba, Private Paul Vesper, also of Company B. Private Vesper had died just several days prior to the *Mobile*'s departure from Cuba. The Springfield men soon began to call the ship, "*Death Ship Mobile*."52

When the regiment reached Montauk Point on August 20, several Springfield residents, including newspapermen and doctors, were awaiting its arrival. When the ship docked, these people were not permitted aboard since the vessel had been placed in quarantine. When the regiment was finally allowed to disembark, the men were taken to Camp Wikoff for internment. In all, ten Springfield residents had died on board the *Mobile*.53

The majority of the men in the regiment were sent directly to the camp hospital. Food, medical care, and proper living conditions soon had most of the regiment fit again. As each man recovered from his illness, he received a ten day furlough. These furloughs were soon increased to thirty days, as the number of men departing Camp Wikoff increased. By the time the regiment was to officially leave for Springfield, most of the men had already departed for home.54

On August 25, the remaining men of the Second Regiment were ordered to leave for Springfield. Because of a lack of transportation, the regiment had to
delay its departure until the 27th. The men boarded a ship to take them to New London, Connecticut, where they would board a train for the trip north to Springfield. On hand to greet the men in Springfield was the governor as well as a large portion of the city's residents.55

For the majority of the men, it was homeward bound. Some were taken to either Mercy or Springfield hospital for more care. For the most part, these men recovered quickly. On October 3, 1898, the Second Regiment Massachusetts Infantry, United States Volunteers was mustered out of active service. It reverted back to the Second Regiment of the Massachusetts Militia. The ceremony had little impact on the participants, as the final pay for the regiment did not arrive until November 17. Springfield's citizen-soldiers had returned home.56

Of the two hundred and forty Springfield men who comprised Companies B, G, and K of the Second Regiment, twenty never returned home. They had died from wounds in battle, or sickness after the end of the war. Of the remaining two hundred and twenty, four died at home from illnesses contracted while in Cuba. The remaining two hundred and sixteen men had returned without harm. They had left as boys, and returned as men.57

Reminders of Springfield's participation in the Spanish-American war are few. For the survivors, there were a few medals, reunions, and memories of their time in Cuba. For the dead, there is only a solitary statue, on a patch of green grass in Springfield's Memorial Square.
Spanish-American War Monument, Springfield
NOTES


21. Ibid., July 23, 1898, Pg. 4, col. 2.

22. Ibid.


26. Ibid., p. 86.


29. Ibid., pp. 87-88.

30. Ibid., p. 88.

31. Ibid., p. 89.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., pp. 92-93.

34. Springfield Homestead, July 23, 1898, P. 10, col. 2.


36. Ibid., pp. 98-99.

37. Ibid., pp. 101-102.

38. Ibid., p. 106.


40. Ibid.


42. Ibid., pp. 123-126.

43. Springfield Homestead, August 13, 1898, P. 10, col. 2.


46. James F. Ferrier, "Appendix D" to The Rough Riders (Springfield, updated), p. "295." (Copy of appendix located in Westfield State College Historical Archives; original in possession of researcher.)

47. Ibid.


55. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.
