12-1-1982

**Tampa’s Splendid Little War: A Photo Essay**

Gary R. Mormino

*University of South Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory](https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory)

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: [https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol4/iss2/5](https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol4/iss2/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
TAMPA’S SPLENDID LITTLE WAR: A Photo Essay

by Gary R. Mormino

Secretary of State John Hay described the Gilbert and Sullivan drama as “a splendid little war;” Teddy Roosevelt exclaimed that it wasn’t much of a war, but it was the only war we had. It was the Spanish-Cuban-American War. The conflict with Spain may only have lasted a few months, but the episode in general catapulted America into a position of major world power and, in particular, put Tampa on the map.

Tampa and Cuba interlaced fortunes and destinies in the nineteenth century. The first recorded settlement in Tampa – at Spanishtown Creek – was inhabited by Cuban fishermen; entrepreneurs such as Howard T. Lykes and James McKay engaged in a profitable cattle trade with the island after the civil war; Cuban and Spanish patrones Vicente Martinez Ybor and Ignacio Haya brought cash and immigrants to the floundering port town of Tampa in 1886; and Cuban exiles filibustered arms and fomented revolution from Tampa’s “Little Havana” in the 1890s. Appropriately, Tampa would play a major role in the war for Cuban independence between 1895 and 1898.

During the 1890s, Tampa’s Ybor City pulsated with revolutionary fever, from the fiery speeches of José Marti, to cigarmakers’ pledges of a day’s work for Cuba Libre. When war commenced in 1895, most Tampans rejoiced. However, the city's influential Spanish population viewed the insurrection with increasing anxiety.

Such anxiety was ominously expressed by the Tampa Morning Tribune on February 9, 1898. “The battleship Maine will be relieved from her station in Havana in the course of a few days,” the paper reported, adding, “the ship’s crew must feel uncomfortable lying close aboard in the harbours of Havana.”1 One week later an explosion blew the U.S. Maine from the waters, killing 260 American sailors, and arousing an American public to jingoistic fury. Survivors were shipped to Tampa. In Washington, an embattled President William McKinley asked for war. Congress declared war on April 19, 1898.

Americans would soon avenge the Maine, but practical considerations demanded immediate attention. Where would American forces embark for Cuba? Recent upstart Miami lobbied for the mobilization plum as did Pensacola and Key West, but Tampa was selected.

In spring 1898, Tampa boasted a population of about 14,000 inhabitants, an underdeveloped one-track railroad, and a promising port.2 The frenzied demands by the War Department gave city fathers little time to comprehend the magnitude of the operation. To protect citizens from an invasion by Spanish pirates, fortifications at Mullet Key and Egmont were strengthened.

By late April 1898, a vanguard of journalists and soldiers had landed in Tampa. Literally hundreds of newspapers and magazines – even the Daily Iowa Capitol – sent correspondents to Florida, dateline Tampa.3 To the lament of city boosters, most of the fourth estate searched for
adjectives to lampoon Tampa as an ill-fated choice for embarkation. “Tampa,” complained *Outlook’s* George Kennan, “is a huddled collection of generally insignificant buildings standing in an arid desert of sand, and to me it suggests the city of Semipalatinsk – a wretched, verdureless town in southern Siberia.” Another reporter described Tampa as a “city chiefly composed of derelict wooden houses drifting on an ocean of sand.” Added Baltimore mayor Joseph Pangborn: “The streets are jammed with army teams . . . . Tampa has been completely transformed since my first arrival here, in the middle of March . . . . Now everything is booming.”

Journalists and army brass stayed in the palatial Tampa Bay Hotel. The celebrated Richard Harding Davis described the ambience.

> In the midst of this desolation is the hotel. It is larger than the palace where Ismail Pasha built overnight at Cairo . . . and so enormous that the walk from the rotunda to the dining room helps one to an appetite. Someone said it was like a Turkish harem with the occupants left out . . . . One of the cavalry generals said, ‘Only God knows why Plant built an hotel there, but thank God he did!’

For the 64,000 soldiers bearing down on Tampa, there would be no beds built for royalty, or press conferences or chilling spring breezes to invigorate the spirits. Regiments such as the Heavy Artillery, Second Georgia, First Florida, Thirty-second Michigan, and Fifty-seventh Indiana began arriving in May. By June, 25,000 troopers were here. Altogether, four regiments were posted at Port Tampa, seventeen in Tampa, and four in Lakeland. Troopers were garrisoned at various sites from Port Tampa to Ybor City to Tampa Heights. Most could relate to Poultney Bigelow’s complaint: “With the thermometer 980 in the shade . . . the U.S. troops sweat night and day in their cowboy boots, thick flannel shirts and winter trousers.”

At least Tampa businessmen were happy. “Business here is on the rush,” an ecstatic businessman told the *Morning Tribune*. “Every man and boy that can muster sufficient capital to purchase a dozen lemons and a pound of sugar, establishes a refreshment stand.”

Not lemonade, not even the local Tropicana Beer could improve morale as the temperature rose. A litany of discipline problems were reported: soldiers looted a British vessel of coconuts and bananas while troops laughed at police; members of New York’s Sixty-ninth Regiment left their insignia behind after robbing the Florida Brewery in Ybor City. Feisty soldiers occasionally brought the battle to Ybor City. “Some of the regular soldiers are giving the people of Ybor City considerable trouble,” complained the normally pollyannish *Tribune*. “They demolish saloons, theatres, and restaurants and other places of amusement with avidity and as regular as the click of a Waterbury watch. They shoot out the electric lights, climb on top of street cars, and are in all kinds of diabolical mischief that hoodlums can possibly conceive.”

The presence of young soldiers – a volatile brew in normal times – confronting the nineteenth century racial code, spelled trouble. Black soldiers of the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry were stationed in Tampa Heights, but black cavalymen had been diverted to Lakeland for fear of provocation. Racial tension resulted when black soldiers tested the tolerance of Tampa, which was very much a southern town in 1898. A number of disturbances resulted, the
most serious when black troopers objected to white soldiers from Ohio target shooting at a black youngster. A riot ensued, injuring twenty-seven persons. The Tribune snarled: “It is indeed very humiliating to the American citizens and especially to the people of Tampa . . . to be compelled to submit to the insults and mendacity perpetrated by the colored troops . . . .”

Tampa’s Spanish population fared little better than Afro-Americans. Many Americans already felt endangered by a Spanish fifth column, a mood reinforced when an alleged spy was arrested in St. Petersburg attempting to poison the water supply. General William Shafter ordered agents to open mail of suspected Spanish sympathizers and American soldiers searched and closed the mutual aid society, Centro Espanol.

If blacks were perceived as unsettling and Spaniards as seditious, at least one group pleased nearly everyone. The Rough Riders captured the public imagination in 1898, becoming the darling of the press and the envy of every young Tampan. Commanded by Colonel Leonard Wood and assisted by the adventuresome Theodore Roosevelt, the Rough Riders arrived in Tampa on June 3 after training in San Antonio, Texas and Chickamauga, Georgia. Called successively the Rocky Mountain Rustlers, Teddy’s Terrors, and finally The Rough Riders, the company consisted of Ivy League football captains, Indians, cowboys, and it was rumored, a few Democrats. Their brief stay in Tampa, celebrated in the apocryphal “Charge of the Yellow Rice Brigade” at Columbia Restaurant, was legendary. One such incident was recorded by the Tribune: “Alice May, keeper of a whorehouse, was shot in the leg and had several bones broken as Rough Riders rioted.”

Despite the many legends, the Rough Riders’ stay in Tampa lasted less than a week because of rumors that a Spanish flotilla had sailed for Tampa. On June 7, the operation which was totally bungled began. Tampa’s inadequate port and rail facilities, combined with bureaucratic incompetence, created a tragicomic scenario. Some Rough Riders, frustrated by the lack of transportation to Port Tampa, simply seized some coal cars and commandeered them to the port. Other soldiers had good reason not to hurry. After the boring ride through the desolate Interbay peninsula, soldiers were greeted by “The Last Chance Village,” a sinful arcade of bordellos and shops erected by enterprising merchants.

By June 8, the operation was ready for sail. Much to the fury of Roosevelt’s troops, the Rough Riders’ horses were left behind, another victim of the bureaucracy. To add insult to boredom, once the ships were loaded, the fleet bobbed aimlessly in Tampa Bay for a week, fearful of the phantom Spanish armada. Roosevelt penned his frustrations to his friend Congressman Henry Cabot Lodge of Boston:

No words could describe to you the confusion and lack of system and the general management of affairs here. When we unloaded our regiment at Tampa we had to go twenty-four hours without food and not a human being to show us to camp . . . . When we were ordered to embark here it took us twelve hours to make the nine miles of railroad and on the wharf not one shadow of preparation has been made to receive any regiment.
Finally the fleet left Tampa Bay, and to the tunes of “The Girl I Left Behind,” and “It’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonite,” the war began. The Rough Riders charged up San Juan Hill – sans horses – Roosevelt won his reputation, America became an imperial power by holding Cuba and Puerto Rico as protectorates, Spain was ousted from the New World, and Tampa was placed on the map.
The Spanish-American War was dramatized by artists whose works appeared in the leading and most powerful magazines of the day.

Weighing well over two hundred pounds, Major General William R. Shafter led the American forces in the Cuban campaign. While in Tampa, Shafter slept on the floor of the Tampa Bay Hotel – to instill a moral vigor said his spokesman – but others insist no bed at the hotel could contain his massive torso.
Frederick Remington captured this glimpse of mules and cavalry moving across Tampa. Remington had orginally been sent to Cuba by his rapacious boss, William Randolph Hearst, to dramatize the civil war. Remington, bored in Havana, wired Hearst, “All is quiet. There is no war. I wish to return.” The enraged owner of the Journal fired back his message: “You furnish the pictures. I'll furnish the war.” Hearst.

Soldiers of the Ninth Cavalry (colored) ride across the sands of Tampa Bay. Cubans called them “Smoked Yankees.”

Photograph from Leslie's Weekly June 30, 1898.
The Girl I Left Behind “An Evening At The Tampa Bay Hotel”

Photograph from Collier’s Weekly, June 18, 1898.

Scene in camp on the eve of departure, June 1898.

Photograph from Leslie’s Weekly, July 7, 1898.
Charles Sheldon drew this portrait of orderly precision as troops embarked for Cuba. Others recall pandemonium.

Photograph from Leslie’s Weekly, June 30, 1898.

Off to Santiago – on the docks of Port Tampa.

Photograph from Harper’s Weekly, June 25, 1898.
Two soldiers enjoy a meal under Tampa palms.

Photograph courtesy of Florida Historical Society.

Tortured by Florida heat, eaten by disease-carrying mosquitoes, and poisoned by embalmed beef, these American soldiers somehow managed to survive Tampa and defeat the Spanish.

Photograph courtesy of Florida Historical Society.
Campsite at Port Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of Jack Restall.

They gathered by the River Hillsborough to join in prayer.

Photograph from Truth, June 1, 1898.
Theodore Roosevelt, poised at a historical watershed, and astride his favorite horse Texas. The Rough Rider resigned his post at the War Department to pursue the strenuous life.

Photograph courtesy of Hampton Dunn.
Rough Riders pose with the Tampa Bay Hotel gracing the background.

Photograph courtesy of Hampton Dunn.

Outsiders might guess this photo depicts American soldiers defending the Summer Palace of the Dowager in Boxer-held China. In reality, the horsemen are protecting the Tampa Bay Hotel from Spanish saboteurs.

Photograph courtesy of Hampton Dunn.
Nurse Clara Barton, an active participant in the war effort in Tampa, inspired other women to serve in an auxiliary role. These women appear to be hosting a picnic for offduty soldiers.

Photograph courtesy of Jack Restall.
Embarkation for Cuba from Port Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

Troops crowd Port Tampa docks before embarkation. Note the observation deck of the rail car. Such decks were used during political rallies of the day.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.
In an age before guided missiles, this American frigate rode the waves.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

Between the heat and the patriotic fever, soldiers were glad to leave Tampa. One New Yorker exclaimed, “We’re gonna whip them Spaniards, and make them take Florida back!”

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.
The tools of war, products of an earlier arms race, stacked at Port Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

Squad of pack mules to be used in the interior of Cuba.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.
1 Tampa Morning Tribune, February 9, 1898, p. 3.


6 Tampa Morning Tribune, May 24, 1898.

7 Davis, “The Rocking-Chair Period of the War,” p. 146.

8 Harper’s Weekly, May 28, 1898.

9 Tampa Morning Tribune, May 29, 1898, p. 1.

10 Ibid., June 8, 1898, p. 3.


12 Tampa Morning Tribune, May 12, 1898; see also June 8, 1898; May 18, 1898.

13 “Ybor City, Historical Data,” Federal Writers’ Projects, Works Progress Administration for the State of Florida, Florida Historical Society, University of South Florida Library, p. 401; The Tampa Morning Tribune, April 18, 1898 reported 150 Spaniards leaving Tampa. See also Tribune May 3, 1898.


15 Tampa Morning Tribune, June 23, 1898.
