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Arrival of a battalion at Tampa in 1898. (Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Photographic Collection.)

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The usual story of the Tampa-based preparations for the Spanish-American War is one of confusion, incompetence and near chaos on the waterfront. Testimony of many high-ranking and important officers and volunteers noted the general lack of organization in the loading of the transport fleet prior to the invasion of Cuba. Most of the regular officers also noted the lack of transports, the fact that only one rail line went to the Port of Tampa, and that the railroad cars were mostly unlabeled and had to be opened individually to discover their contents. Stories of rotten beef, spoiled hardtack, and railroad cars sitting for weeks on sidings with perishable foodstuffs inside: all these made spectacular headlines in many newspapers. The infamous “embalmed beef” scandal played well in the “Yellow Journalism” of the day. Public outcry demanded that all of these horrific events had to be investigated to provide an answer to the question: How can they be prevented from ever happening again? The real question is, did they ever happen at all? And, whether they happened or were invented, who was to blame?

In one of the more startling chapters in the history of the “Splendid Little War,” an entire army was fitted out in Tampa, Flori-
da and prepared to invade Cuba. Tampa in 1898 was a growing town of just over 14,000 souls with few modern facilities. Its municipal streets were unpaved and mostly covered with Florida's ubiquitous sand. Few buildings were up-to-date; most were rundown unpainted wooden structures. The only spectacular building in the area was Henry Bradley Plant's luxurious Tampa Bay Hotel, opened in 1891 on the banks of the Hillsborough River. The town did have two railroads entering it but only one track went to Port Tampa, nine miles south of the Tampa town center. There, one major quay awaited the military transports of the War; that quay normally accommodated nine ships with ease. In an emergency, Tampa could have handled an army of about 5000, but not one of nearly 30,000, which is approximately what finally showed up for the affair.1

Tampa was one of three major points chosen for the gathering of the army. New Orleans and Mobile also played minor roles in the impending war, but Tampa was designated by the joint Army-Navy Strategy Board as the point of debarkation in the original plan for the invasion of Cuba. This plan called for an army of about 6000 men to be shipped to the southern coast of Cuba and to deliver arms, ammunition and other supplies to General Maximo Gomez, the leader of the Cuban forces in the Eastern Provinces. The troops headed to Cuba under this plan were to be a reconnaissance-in-force and not an actual invasion group. On April 29, 1898, General of the Army Nelson Miles chose Brigadier General William Rufus Shafter to assemble this force at Tampa. Shafter was advised to avoid any direct action in Cuba and to "give aid and succor to the insurgents, to render the Spanish forces as much injury as possible, [while] avoiding serious injury to your own command." The men Shafter commanded were all to be regular army, with no volunteers contemplated. But war had been declared on the 25th of April and the pressure on President William McKinley and Congress was intense and argued for the use of a large volunteer force. Admiral George Dewey's surprising victory in Manila changed the battle plans, and what had started out as a diversionary attack now brought on the possibility of greater action and acquisition.2 The Philippine victory would have major consequences for Tampa.

On April 30, President McKinley and Secretary of War Russell Alger sent a note to General Shafter canceling his reconnaissance-in-force and advising him to continue troop preparations. In Washington, the Army and Navy were debating which strategy was to prevail. The Navy insisted on the blockade and bombardment of Havana and other major positions. By coordinating the Army, the Navy, and the Cuban insurgents, Admiral William T. Sampson and others felt that the Spanish Army in Cuba could be starved into submission. The potential hitch in this plan was the whereabouts and power of the Spanish Navy, led by Admiral Pascual de Cervera. As it turned out, the U.S. Navy strategists over-estimated the power, speed, and ability of the Spaniards. Many of the Spanish fleet's ships were not as well-armed as thought. Some were not even completed vessels and were still under construction when the fleet left the Cape Verde Islands for the theater of engagement. Overall, U.S. intelligence about the fleet was limited and the overseas network of agents very amateurish. The Office of Naval Intelligence was relatively new, understaffed, and saddled with more responsibilities than it could handle at that stage of its development.3 Added to the intelligence deficit was Admiral Sampson's lack of effective blocking vessels with enough fire-power to effect his plans. Thus the President, Secretary Alger, General Miles, and others sent new orders to Shafter.

In analyzing the force needed to take Cuba, the Army debated the force's size and the site of invasion over and over. Following a report from Shafter that his advance command was ready to move, Alger and Miles instructed him to be ready to move out on May 9, 1898. Shafter's command was to be augmented by the regular forces then at Chickamauga and the Gulf ports. The additional 12,000 to 15,000 men, the strategists reasoned, would be enough to take Mariel and possibly Havana if they acted quickly and decisively. During this same time McKinley issued his famous call for volunteers, which would bring the invasion force to about 70,000. Most of the volunteers were National Guardsmen, with a strong lobby in each state capital. The political pressure to swear in and activate these troops was tremendous, but so were the problems. Many of these troops were already partially trained in Army fashion, but
most had obsolete weapons. Few had uniforms and most did not seriously train every month. Consequently, the mobilization was slow. With the Spanish Navy still at large in the Atlantic, potentially posing a threat to the North American coastline, the orders to sail were delayed.

A direct assault on a fortress as well-defended as Havana was reckoned to be costly. The timing of the battle plan would also place any possible attack at the beginning of the rainy season, complicating the operation even more. General Nelson Miles strongly urged against such an assault, based upon his experiences in the Civil War and his vast knowledge of military strategy and tactics. Instead, the General advised an attack on the southern coast of Cuba, preferably on the weakly defended eastern end. An offensive launched from this location would be less costly in lives and present the best opportunity to use the Cuban forces to help destroy Spain’s hold on the island. The discovery of Admiral Cervera’s fleet in the area of Martinique on May 13 allowed the administration a “publicly acceptable excuse for postponing a campaign that the Army was not yet ready to launch.”

Between May 9 and 14, Shafter was reinforced by about 6000 troops, bringing his command to approximately 12,000 men. A plan was launched to send the majority of this force to Key West, until it was discovered that the drinking water in that island city was running short with just the demands made upon it by the Navy and the civilian population. Water would have to be shipped into that port before any assault could be launched from there. The Key West plan was scratched and the new volunteer troops and other regulars from along the eastern seaboard were sent to Tampa, which by May 25 had over 17,000 men under arms awaiting the word to invade Cuba. The number of troops in Tampa then outnumbered the city’s civilian population. The camp at Tampa Heights and the one at the Port of Tampa were already overcrowded. The City of West Tampa opened its arms to the incoming forces until it also had more than it could handle. Troops were transferred to new camps in Lakeland and Jacksonville.

The constantly changing plans, strategy and orders put a heavy strain on Shafter and his command. Additionally, the command also had to assist in preparing and staffing three separate expeditions to Cuba.
to deliver guns, ammunition and medical supplies to the Cuban insurgents. Two of these excursions were led by Captain J.H. Dorst of the Fourth Cavalry. The first of his attempts to land supplies and troops met with stiff opposition by the Spanish command at Point Abolitas, about forty miles east of Havana. The commander of the Spanish forces, Colonel Balboesis, was killed in the action, but his men succeeded in driving the United States troops off before they could accomplish their goal. The second expedition was very successful in delivering 7500 rifles, 1,300,000 rounds of ammunition and 20,000 rations to the Cuban forces at Port Banes on the northern coast of Cuba. The last of the three expeditions, under the command of Lieutenant C.P. Johnson, consisted of men of the Tenth Cavalry, the famed Buffalo Soldiers, and 375 armed Cubans. This hugely successful expedition included the troop- and supply-carrying ships Florida and Fanita, the latter owned by Captain James McKay of Tampa. Landing near Palo Alto, the party met resistance from a Spanish force. The Army took casualties (one dead and nine wounded) in the short but spirited engagement that followed. These shipments and deliveries of arms, ammunitions and supplies were an added burden to Shafter and his staff, but they helped to keep up morale and interest in the impending Cuban invasion.

The United States Army was organized during this war into eight different Corps. Each Corps was approximately 30,000 men divided into three divisions. The divisions were further divided into three brigades and these divided into three regiments. The Corps were composed only of infantry. Cavalry and artillery units were assigned to assist each Corps, but were relatively independent in operation. The Fifth and Seventh Corps called Tampa home at the beginning of the conflict. The Fifth Corps was composed mostly of regular troops augmented by some volunteer units as they arrived in camp. It was the Fifth Corps that received the honor of spearheading the invasion of Cuba.

The biggest obstacle to the invasion of Cuba was the lack of nearly everything. Transports were the first priority for the Army, but it had never before had to build, rent or contract for such a large number of vessels. The U.S. Army had only invaded one other country (Mexico) in its history and that was in the 1840s. It had no experience with water-borne invasions. The only sea-going transports available to the Army were run-down old coastal vessels, the Navy having taken most of the faster, lighter vessels for use as cruisers. Congress was not helpful. That august body was chronically resistant to any enlargement of the Army during peace-time. Since the Civil War, the Army had been consistently cut in size and was under-funded in almost every department. It had only enough weapons on hand to field a force of 25,000 men, yet in 1898 it was fighting essentially a two-front war in Cuba and the Philippines. The Quartermaster Corps was relatively small at the outbreak of the war and had not ordered enough materials to handle an army of more than 25,000, the approximate size of the effective troops available for service. At the beginning of the War, it should be remembered, the plans did not call for a full-scale invasion, and the Quartermaster's and Commissary's staffs were gearing up for only a small reconnaissance-in-force type of operation. No U.S. military leader had ever led a force larger than a regiment. Most of the activity between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War had been against the western tribes of Native Americans, and these campaigns rarely required more than a regiment. Most of the companies in the regular regiments had not worked together at all. Regimental-scale war games or maneuvers were unheard of until later. All told, the Army was simply not prepared to undergo an operation like the invasion of Cuba. Everything had to be learned from experience and that was going to be a hard teacher.

The general lack of military readiness was exemplified by America's coastal defense. Military historian Walter Millis, in his classic Arms and Men: A Study of American Military History, made the following observation: "In 1897 the truest symbol of American military policy was still the heavy, immovable and purely defensive seacoast gun." When the war seemed unavoidable, McKinley asked Congress for additional funding and received in return the "Fifty Million Dollar Bill" to fund the war. The Army, reflecting outmoded thinking and responding to the fears of Congressmen from the coastal states, spent the majority of its allotment on coastal defense. Very little funding went to the Quartermaster's Corps,
the Medical Corps or the Signal Corps. When the Endicott Board met in 1885, it had recommended 2362 gun emplacements and batteries be installed to defend the American coastline. At the outbreak of the Cuba war only 151 had been installed. Congressional under-funding haunted even this well-thought out plan. The coastal defense system may have been the “truest symbol” of United States policy, but it did little to solve the problem of assembling the largest invasion force seen to date by the American public.

At Shafter’s headquarters in Tampa, the biggest problem was getting the transports and loading them efficiently so they could be unloaded in the briefest time possible. An amphibious landing of the size contemplated for Cuba had never before been attempted by the Army, and Shafter had no experienced help on his staff to solve the loading problems. At that juncture, the Quartermaster, Colonel Charles F. Humphrey, discovered the talent needed was close at hand in the person of Captain James M. McKay, Jr. McKay had already been involved in the Cuban revolution and had run both guns and volunteer fighters to the island on the Fanita, his fast new ship. The Captain had long familiarity with the Cuban maritime trade. He earned his title of “Captain” by sailing with his father in their beef business in Havana, and as the owner of the family shipping line at his father’s death. In 1886, he threw in his lot with the Plant Steamship Company and captained the Plant System steam packets Mascotte and, later, Olivette. Both those ships and his own Fanita were to play important roles in the invasion and subsequent events. (McKay’s long and distinguished career would later include two terms as a Florida Senator, United States Marshal for the southern district of Florida, two years as Mayor of Tampa, and Postmaster of Tampa in 1914.) McKay’s knowledge of the waters around Tampa Bay and along the Cuban coasts made him a valuable person to the invasion, however it was his intimate knowledge of the loading and unloading of ships that made him indispensable.

Colonel Humphrey was very pleased to have someone of McKay’s experience on hand to assist in the complicated operation. In testimony before the Committee Investigating the Conduct of the War (often called the “Dodge Committee” after its chairman, General Grenville M. Dodge), Humphrey stated: “He [McKay] was my principal assistant. He came to me by order of the Secretary of War and was a most valuable man. He had been a steamship captain, and a United States marshal more recently.” The Colonel went on to describe his “principal assistant,” in the following terms: “He was an exceedingly level-headed man. At Port Tampa, and subsequently in Cuba, his range of duties with ocean transportation were exceedingly great. He did everything...
Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, left, speaks to Captain Lee of the British Army near one of the campsites in and around Tampa during the build-up to the Spanish-American War. (Courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center Collection.)

an exceptionally good man could do in that very responsible position.” Colonel Humphrey also noted it was McKay’s natural disposition to try and accommodate people, and he tried to procure for any officer whatever they requested. Most of the time, Humphrey noted, McKay was miles away from the war command and did much of the supervising of the unloading by himself.16 This was a tremendous responsibility for a civilian working under a military commander in time of war.

Captain McKay’s biggest problem was the loading of the materials at Port Tampa. To load the materials of war onto thirty-eight transport ships not designed for wartime use meant that each one be fitted out for its new role. Cargo ships had to be made comfortable for the transport of troops and horses. Accommodations had to be fitted for the officers and medical staff. Supplies had to be placed in such an order so as to be convenient for debarkation in Cuba. All of this was made more difficult by

the fact that many of the railroad cars filled with provisions, ammunition, weapons, forage, etc., were unlabeled and the bills-of-lading had not arrived in Tampa to allow them to be sorted out before loading onto the ships. Colonel Humphrey described the resulting problems: “The loading of the transports was at best difficult, owing to the limited wharf facilities and not having on hand full cargoes; it being necessary to bring transports into the canal to be loaded, and often before loading could be completed sent them into the harbor, to be brought back in a future time to complete cargo.”17 Somehow, space had to be found for 16,154 men and 834 officers, along with the large amount of military stores needed to conduct the campaign.18 It was miraculous that the entire operation was completed between 2:30 a.m. on June 7, 1898 and 9:00 p.m. on the following day. Given the severe problems with unmarked railroad cars, impatient officers and men, a severe lack of lighters to haul materials to ships at anchor and a lack of trained stevedores on the docks, this was truly a miracle.19 That this was done with a relatively minimal number of breakdowns in the process is a tribute to Humphrey and McKay.

During the operation, Captain McKay was involved in a number of high-level decisions that profoundly affected the expedition. The original estimate for the number of troops that could be transferred to Cuba in the available ships was given as over 30,000 men and material. McKay, with his expert knowledge of transports, advised Shafter that this number was too high and revised it to accommodate 24,000 men more comfortably. When the loading was in its final stages, McKay, along with General Henry W. Lawton, was assigned the task of adjusting the arrangements by moving troops from one ship to another, in order to give them as much room and freedom of movement as possible. McKay also oversaw the loading of the materials so that the ammunition and rations would be off-loaded first, followed by the forage and medical supplies.20 For a civilian to undertake such responsibilities demonstrated McKay’s abilities and acumen, as well as the faith others had in him. When General Shafter appeared in front of the Dodge Commission, he specifically noted the service of Captain McKay and declared: “I regard him as a most efficient man; I am not a seafaring
man, but when a man goes about everything and makes no back steps, you don't have to have an expert opinion on him.” Every essential person involved in the loading operation knew that Captain McKay was in charge. He was obeyed as if he were a ranking officer in the regular service.21

This positive picture of the process of loading the troops and materials differs substantially from that offered by two of the more famous critics of the affair, Colonel Leonard Wood and Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt. The “standard” version of the story comes almost directly from Roosevelt’s classic, The Rough Riders. In this highly colorful — and colored — account, the loading is filled with drama and foreboding, but ends with the happy seizure of the Yucatan by the Rough Riders and the fending off of the troops from the Seventy-First New York Volunteers. Of course, the Second United States Regular Infantry are graciously allowed to board their vessel in time for departure. The story also suggests that the procedure was total chaos with no one in charge. Colonel Humphrey, in the account, “might just as well have been asleep, as nobody knew where he was and nobody could find him, and the quay was crammed with some ten thousand men, most of whom were working at cross purposes.” Only after a frantic search did Wood and Roosevelt find, by separate routes, Colonel Humphrey, and get the assurance that the Yucatan was their assigned transport.22 It was after this initial drama that the Rough Riders got to their ship and prepared for their final destiny and future fame.

Few have ever questioned this account by the future President, and nearly every biographer of “T.R.” has repeated the story intact, but why not question Roosevelt’s version of the event? Historians have long known that the future President was an “unreliable witness” when it came to many aspects of the war in Cuba. From his assertions that he suffered with his troops in the sandy camp at Port Tampa while officers enjoyed the luxury of the Tampa Bay Hotel (where, in fact, Roosevelt stayed for three days with his wife Edith), to his claim that his unit attained the summit of Kettle Hill first (it was as likely that soldiers of the Ninth Cavalry did), Roosevelt’s credibility is far from airtight.

One of the key features in Roosevelt’s portrait of confusion and chaos at the embarkation point in Tampa was the fact that there were, in the space of forty-eight
hours, nearly 17,000 men and provisions loaded onto the transport fleet and only one rail line feeding the quay. The image was of a mass of disorganized men and horses trying to get onto their various ships. Stacking the vessels three wide in the canal also presented a picture of relative disorganization. However, given the enormity of the task and the efficiency with which it was performed, it is hardly likely that chaos reigned. Roosevelt, it must be remembered, was a Lieutenant Colonel of a regiment; orders may not have reached down that far in the chain of command. Both Humphrey and McKay testified that Shafter had approved a list of units to be placed upon each ship and that almost all reached their assigned destination in fairly good order. Most telling, as far as the accuracy of Roosevelt's account is concerned, is the fact that although reports indicate that everyone knew that McKay was in charge of the loading, "T.R." seemed unaware of that fact. He wrote the Dodge Commission that: "I never saw Captain McKay, and, indeed, never heard of him until I heard of his testimony [to the Commission]."

As famous, energetic and politically astute, as he was, Roosevelt could not have had knowledge of everything, especially since he was relatively far down on the chain of command. James McKay's own testimony before the Dodge Commission sheds a great deal of light on the activities of this "level-headed" man and, as well, on the activities so criticized by Roosevelt. During the greatest part of the brief war McKay was on active duty as Colonel Humphrey's assistant. He served from May 4 until August 30, 1898 with only ten days away from active duty. The ship captain testified that he was in charge of loading the stores of the commissary, quartermaster and artillery along with mules and wagons. McKay noted that each ship carried no fewer than 100,000 rations aboard and that many had more. This was enough to feed the troops while in transport and for the first few days after landing. The captain also stated that he only found five ships overcrowded in the initial loading and that these were soon relieved, with the surplus troops being sent to less crowded vessels. The Plant System steamer Olivette served as a hospital ship for the first part of the invasion. McKay oversaw the loading of 124 wagons for the immediate forces and an additional 60 to 80 for those of General J. C. Bates. There were enough horses and mules loaded onto the transports to power these wagons. The biggest producer of later criticism was the lack of ambulances, which Shafter had personally ordered left behind, rationalizing that the rough roads of Cuba would not cause anyone wounded to notice the difference between an ambulance and a wagon. The greatest problem for loading all the stores was the lack of space on the railroad line leading to the port. The congestion and confusion of not having properly labeled cars also greatly hampered the loading of the stores.

Captain McKay's testimony about the Rough Riders and the seizing of the Yucatan is most interesting. When questioned by General Dodge about the orders allegedly received by these troops, the captain did not hesitate to declare that it was part of their orders to report to that ship. When asked about Colonel Wood's knowledge of the orders he stated: "He must have known it. He marched right aboard." When asked point blank about the Rough Riders seizing the Yucatan, McKay replied: "They didn't do anything of the kind." All of the boarding went pretty much as scheduled with little confusion, according to the captain. McKay presented a paper with notations of the troops to board the Yucatan. General James A. Beaver of the Pennsylvania Volunteers read this paper aloud: "Yucatan designated No. 8, headquarters band and companies C, D, G, and B, Second United States Infantry, First Regiment U. S. Volunteer Cavalry." General Beaver asked McKay if all that was designated before anyone went on board. "Yes sir; that was designated," replied McKay. It was this testimony of Captain McKay, countering Roosevelt's story of the event, that prompted "T.R." to write the Commission.

General William R. Shafter had a good laugh over Roosevelt's seizure story. Upon hearing of the Roosevelt riposte to McKay's statements the gruff old veteran wrote to the Dodge Commission himself. In his letter of December 21, 1898, the General quoted a letter he had received from Major Leon S. Roudiez of the Quartermaster's Corps. Major Roudiez wrote: "I have a distinct recollection of meeting the wild and woolly 'Rough Rider' [Roosevelt] at the foot of the gang plank as he was about to embark on a transport. His men had halted and were in a double column behind him. I did not know
him at the time and, not noticing his rank, I asked for the officer in command ... He stated that he was in command of the regiment temporarily during Colonel Wood’s absence.” Roudiez’s letter continued: “I then informed him that he was assigned to the transport before us and that he could march on board at any time. As we were talking Colonel Wood appeared upon the upper deck of the ship and hailed us. I repeated to Colonel Wood what I had said to Colonel Roosevelt, and went on. The ‘Rough Rider’ then galloped on board.” Roudiez’s final comment speaks directly to the discrepancy between Roosevelt’s and McKay’s version of the boarding. “There are a great many funny things testified to by various parties,” he wrote, “who appear before the commission, and I really don’t know whether it is worth while to worry about their statements or even pay the slightest attention to them.”26 Given Shafter’s views on headline grabbing, the General undoubtedly enjoyed forwarding Roudiez’s letter to the Commission.

Some stories, scandals, and conflicted accounts of the War are not as well researched as others. The widely publicized embalmed beef scandal, for example, was tackled by two different government commissions and found to be untrue. That the meat was the victim of being left on a sidetrack for days on end in the heat of a Florida June is not disputed. The heat did break down some of the chemical components of the beef packing and made some changes to the taste, but the product was not the cause of the illnesses reported. Indeed, more wartime diseases were attributed to the heat, mosquitoes, and dehydration of the troops than to any foodstuffs sent for their meals. General Nelson Miles’ charges of bad beef and inedible bread made his testimony sensational, but it did not make it true, as the two investigating commissions discovered.27 Unsanitary conditions in many camps also added greatly to the suffering of the troops. As in the case of the overcrowding on the ships and the confusion on the docks, much of the controversy was stirred up by those reporting – accurately or inaccurately – on the War, or by those wishing to politically damage the McKinley administration.

The service rendered by Captain James McKay, Jr. in the course of the Spanish-American War was difficult and dangerous. He oversaw the loading and unloading of the supplies of the Fifth Corps in Tampa and at Daiquiri, and even accompanied some of these supplies to the front. The Captain assisted the Quartermaster for the Fifth Corps and earned that gentleman’s unwavering trust. McKay also earned the respect of the commanding general and most of the members of his staff. To load nearly 17,000 officers and men onto 38 transports from a quay serviced by only one railroad line and do it in less than forty-eight hours is a remarkable feat. General Shafter had promised President McKinley that this would be done and Humphrey and McKay made it happen. At the other end of the line, McKay had to oversee the unloading of the stores at Daiquiri while Humphrey was doing similar duty at Siboney. Left alone with such responsibility, Captain McKay made sure of the safety of his vessels first and waited until the pier was refurbished by the Army Corps of Engineers and it was safe to unload. Most of the stores he then unloaded were medical supplies in heavy demand at the front. Testimony by General John Weston shows that McKay did his job well, promptly, and with utmost safety.28 That nearly everyone in command positions believed Captain James McKay, Jr. did his job efficiently is ample indication of the value of his services. More specific and public commemoration of this gallant service is long overdue. Captain McKay deserves to be recognized for his service in the war that opened the “American Century.”

ENDNOTES


7. Cosmas. 130-133.

10. Cosmas. 35-110. Also see Ganoe. 355-370.
11. Millett and Maslowski. 271.
14. Grismer. 211.
16. United States Senate Document No. 221. 56th Congress, 1st Session. 1900, Volume 7. Report of the Commission Appointed by the President to Investigate the Conduct of the War Department in the War with Spain. 3655. [Hereafter "Dodge Commission" and page number.]
17. Ibid. 3667.
21. Ibid. 3209.
25. Ibid. 2659.
27. Millet and Maslowski. 286.

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