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THE ROUGH RIDERS IN TAMPA*
by James W. Covington

Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders made a lasting impression upon Tampa during their brief visit at the onset of the Spanish-American War. Tourists visiting the Tampa Bay Hotel, now the University of Tampa, want to know in which room Roosevelt stayed. Old timers relate the story of the “yellow rice brigade charge,” and Ybor citizens recall vividly Teddy Roosevelt and the names of his horse and dog. This account is the story of Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders in Tampa – a visit that lasted only four days.

When the newspapers began playing up a possible war with Spain, military planners in Washington projected the conflict as mostly a naval action. It was planned that the United States Army would protect the American coast and help the Navy seize and hold strategic bases in Cuba. Since the American coastal defenses were hopelessly inadequate, $29 million were allotted to the Navy and $15 million to the Corps of Engineers and Ordinance Department for coastal defense from a total appropriation of $50 million. Consequently little attention was paid to the organizing and equipping of an army for the invasion of Cuba. Still, some supplies were purchased and a joint Army-Navy Planning Board began studying railroads and harbors in the South during March and April, 1898, with the object of selecting an embarkation port for an army.

More substantial plans by the War Department began to develop during the spring of 1898. Since the American Navy would probably gain a victory over the Spanish Navy, a strike force of nearly 100,000 men composed of regulars would be needed to seize Cuban points. Some supporters of the National Guard defeated a plan to use only regular troops for the action in Cuba, leaving the National Guard for coastal defense. Finally, a board appointed by Secretary of War Russell A. Alger presented a plan calling for the mobilization of the regular troops. Volunteer regiments to complement the manpower of the regulars would be fused into larger units with the regulars.

On April 15th Secretary of War Alger selected Chickamauga, Georgia, as the assembly area for six of the cavalry and most of the artillery regiments and mobilization of twenty-two infantry regiments was planned at New Orleans, Mobile and Tampa. In addition to the cavalry, artillery and infantry regiments, Alger and his board saw the need for the use of some specialized troops. Accordingly, provisions for the raising of three regiments of United States Volunteer Cavalry were made. Other specialist regiments to be raised included the engineers, immune infantry and signal corps. The commander of each of these units was to be appointed by the President and assigned a recruiting district. Acting under regular army supervision, the commander was given authority to appoint his officers who enlisted the lower ranks. ¹

Tampa was selected as a port of embarkation for the expeditionary army to Cuba because of its apparent natural features. Forts were planned but not completed until 1902 at the entrance to Tampa Bay at Egmont and Mullet Keys. The long channel stretching more than ten miles into Tampa and Hillsborough Bays made the area reasonably safe from attack by the Spanish Navy.

Map from the *Tampa Daily Times* (June 21, 1898), showing the location of camps in and around Tampa (upper right) and Port Tampa (lower left) that were connected by the single rail line of the Plant System.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Tampa was connected with the north by two railroads and it possessed a fine hotel which would serve as headquarters during the assembly of the strike force from all parts of the country. The deep water of Tampa Bay extended to Port Tampa where a depth of twenty-one feet was available. Henry Plant had constructed a single ten-mile line of railroad track from Tampa to Port Tampa where he erected the Port Tampa Inn and shipping facilities. Wharves at Port Tampa were able to accommodate as many as thirteen vessels. Still Port Tampa had been designed to handle at the most a thousand or more persons – not thirty thousand at one time.2

The First United States Volunteer Cavalry, which became known consecutively as the Rocky Mountain Rustlers, Teddy’s Terrors and finally as the Rough Riders, included men mostly from New Mexico, Arizona, Oklahoma and Indian Territory but also a sprinkling from the Northeast. Although Secretary Alger offered Theodore Roosevelt command of the regiment, Roosevelt demurred in favor of Leonard Wood – thus Wood became Colonel and Roosevelt Lieutenant Colonel of the regiment. Leonard Wood, a graduate of Harvard Medical School, was the family doctor of Secretary of War Alger and a good friend of Roosevelt. The two leaders of the Rough Riders knew the right people and could get favored treatment. Before going to assembly headquarters at San Antonio, Roosevelt held a meeting in Washington where he recruited fifty persons from Virginia, Maryland and the northeastern states.3

Since the assigned recruiting area was the Southwest, the bulk of the men in the First United States Volunteer Cavalry included Indians, Cowboys, former American and foreign army personnel, professional gamblers, Texas Rangers, miners and even some clergymen. According to Roosevelt, these men were “accustomed to the use of firearms, accustomed to taking care of themselves in the open, they were intelligent and self-reliant; they possessed hardihood and endurance and physical prowess.”4 Wood selected San Antonio as the assembly point for it was in the center of horse breeding country and was near an old army post and arsenal from which material could be secured. The Menger Hotel which is still standing and in use served as the headquarters.5

After basic training and horse breaking at San Antonio, the regiment was ordered to proceed to Tampa. Leaving San Antonio on May 29, 1898, the caravan moved through the heart of the Southland to the cheers of an admiring populace. The four-day trip by train in seven sections was an eventful one with frequent stops for hay and water for the nearly twelve hundred mules and

Colonel Theodore Roosevelt.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
horses aboard. The men traveled in railroad coaches with adequate sleeping accommodations – not boxcars. In several places during a rest stop cheers turned to concern when some Rough Riders dashed to the nearest saloon, got drunk and became belligerent.\textsuperscript{6}

Since the Rough Riders had been given only rations for two days when they entrained at San Antonio, they were forced to steal pigs, chickens and everything edible while en route when the trip was extended two more days. In fact, when news of their exploits spread ahead to Tampa, the citizens drew up a petition requesting that the Rough Riders be kept in camp and presented it to Colonel Wood after his regiment had arrived.\textsuperscript{7} Route of the train led through New Orleans, Mobile and Tallahassee, where state officials and capital city inhabitants entertained the troops during their overnight stay. Vegetables and coffee were given to a few hungry Rough Riders at Chaires.\textsuperscript{8}

Since the military situation in Tampa represented “an appalling spectacle of congestion and confusion,” no one except Teddy and his men were surprised that there was no one to meet them or tell them where to camp when they arrived on June 3. The terminal point of the Florida Central and Peninsular was the Hillsborough River wharves and Jackson Street in the heart of present-day downtown Tampa. Since no food was available for the arriving and hungry men, the officers, from their own funds, purchased food for the Rough Riders. Somehow Roosevelt and his men were able to locate and seize control of some wagons to carry the baggage to the designated camping grounds. So far as can be determined, the camp of the Rough Riders was one...
mile and a quarter due west of the Tampa Bay Hotel or near present day Armenia Avenue and Kennedy Boulevard. Camped nearby were the Second Cavalry Recruits, the Fifth Cavalry and the Third Cavalry.

Tampa in 1898 had approximately 14,000 people housed in a setting of ill-sorted residences, ranging from squalid to luxurious. Some of the buildings in the downtown area were frame structures, many unpainted and dilapidated but some brick buildings showed evidence of a rising prosperity engendered by a prosperous port and good railroad connections. Streets had recently been paved and concrete sidewalks and rain sewers constructed in the downtown area. In other areas, including Ybor City and West Tampa, industrial plants were to be found that were constructed of brick made in local brickyards. According to George Kennan, a most astute war correspondent, Tampa seemed to be a huddle of generally insignificant buildings standing in an arid desert of sand. Cuban and American flags were displayed in front of every restaurant, hotel and cigar shop and from many homes.9

Once in the campgrounds, the Rough Riders moved to establish order within a sea of pines, sand and palmettoes. By noon on the day of arrival, tents were erected stretching down long straight avenues with the officers’ quarters at one end and kitchens at the opposite end. Foot
drills were begun, and after the horses had been rested for thirty-six hours, mounted drills were commenced.  

The Fifth Corps commanded by Major General William R. Shafter had been assembled at Tampa for the original purpose of attacking Havana. According to General Orders issued on May 7th and May 16th, the Fifth Corps, composed mostly of regulars, was created and designated as the Cuban Strike Force. On April 29th Shafter had been ordered to assemble some 6,000 regulars at Tampa and to move by sea to Cape Tunas near Cienfuegos in Cuba where weapons would be given to the rebel general Maximo Gomez and return to the United States. When the Spanish fleet left for the West, plans for the Cuban expedition were postponed until the whereabouts of the Spanish fleet were ascertained.  

During the interval, Shafter continued to assemble troops and transports at Tampa. Most of the regular regiments plus the First Volunteer Cavalry and eight infantry regiments of volunteers were included with the Fifth Corps command. These various regiments were situated in various areas from Port Tampa to Ybor City with principal encampment being in the two hundred and fifty acres of pine forest specially designated military grounds at Tampa Heights. Other units at or near Tampa included the Eighteenth Infantry, Heavy Artillery, Second Georgia, First Florida, Thirty-Second Michigan, First Infantry, Ninth Infantry, Light Artillery, Fifty-Seventh Indiana, First Illinois and Sixth New York. General Joseph Wheeler noting that his men had been camped at Port Tampa where no shade trees were available was able to move the camp to West Tampa. Also encamped at West Tampa were
several hundred Cuban troops who would sail with the invasion fleet. Altogether four regiments were at Port Tampa, seventeen at Tampa and four at Lakeland. Horses and mules were kept in the Army corral located in the town of Fort Brooke near present day DeSoto Park. Some rustlers were able to steal part of the herd but the deputy United States Marshal located most of the livestock in Pasco County. When $175,000 was paid out to the soldiers on their first payday, various Tampa firms prospered from the increase in business. The military was forced to provide two hundred armed guards in the downtown area to stop fights and disputes that arose. Tampa was wide open at this time with gambling widespread and the worst dives located in the Fort Brooke section. Some robbers seemed to follow the troops, and residents began to report that their houses had been ransacked. Near the end of the troops’ stay, discipline had declined so much that a docked British ship was invaded by soldiers who stole bananas and coconuts laughing at the police as they loot ed. When the office of the Florida Brewery was robbed, an insignia of the 69th New York Regiment was found on the floor.

Although to many people living in Tampa, persons speaking Spanish seemed to be Cuban and friendly, the Latins knew very well the differences between the two groups. The Cubans knew the difference between one devoted to revolution and one who wanted Spanish rule and kept a close watch upon the Latin population of Tampa, reporting to American and Cuban Revolutionary authorities any suspicious activities. A plaque placed by Mirror Lake in St. Petersburg marks the spot where an alleged spy was detained while attempting to poison the water supply of the troops. Miss Mabel Bean of Port Tampa was employed by General Shafter to open the mail of suspected spies. Many Spaniards left Tampa when war was declared reducing the membership of the Centro Español by two-thirds. When the troops first arrived in Tampa, they searched the Central Español occupying it for some time. Finally after protests by Mayor Myron Guillette the soldiers were removed but the place remained closed for the duration of the war.

Uniforms of the Rough Riders, dusty brown canvas topped by a dark grey broad brimmed soft hat, mingled with the dark blue of the regulars in Tampa’s streets. Still, little time was spent in places other than the campground for the Rough Riders were in Tamp, for a total of four days. Roosevelt and his men must have visited Ybor City for some time later he remarked how he liked Tampa-style Cuban bread. When the thousands of soldiers poured into Tampa, the inhabitants found interesting shows available in the camps scattered throughout the lower bay area. The Tampa citizens liked to talk with the soldiers from other areas, watch their poker games and listen to the band music. However, the show put on by foot soldiers was drab compared to the activities of the colorful Rough Riders and their horses. Soon the camp was surrounded by throngs of black and white youngsters with a few of them wearing makeshift cardboard spurs in imitation of the cavalrymen. It was the glamour of the Rough Riders with their cowboys, gunfighters, Indians and eastern blue bloods that attracted the crowds. Roosevelt’s mountain lion, dog and two horses – “Rain in the Face” and “Texas” – were indeed most unusual. Many young men from Florida tried to enlist in the unit but all of the places had been filled.

The Tampa Bay Hotel with its silver minarets, wide porches and beautiful park served as command headquarters and residence for the correspondents, Cuban refugees and military
attachés. Plans had been made by Resident Manager D. P. Hathaway to close the hotel at the end of the season on April 1, 1898, and keep the doors shut until December. It remained closed for only several weeks for the hotel was selected as Army Headquarters and served in addition as residence for guests and others who were in some way connected with the war. During this “rocking chair” phase of the war, it seemed that the Tampa Bay Hotel was the place to meet old friends, listen to good music and learn the latest gossip concerning the place in Cuba where the force would land.

Not many of the Rough Riders found it convenient to visit the command headquarters. Teddy, however, was given special permission by his good friend Colonel Leonard Wood to spend every evening from dinner hour until breakfast the next day with Mrs. Roosevelt who was a guest at the hotel. Few of the military attaches or correspondents left the hotel to visit the nearby camps to learn how unhealthy they were or how poorly the war machine had been organized. To those keen observers who were able to make the trip to the camps, the uniforms were too heavy, the food was bad, and no one knew how to organize the various regiments to work together. A few people must have gone to Eleventh Street and Fifth Avenue in Ybor City where Tampa Gas Company was testing a military balloon to carry men to Cuba. It failed when the artificial gas proved to be too heavy to supply proper lifting power.
President William McKinley, working from a war room on the second floor of the White House which was complete with large scale maps and fifteen telephones, decided to shift the invasion point from Havana to eastern Cuba where the rebels held partial control of the coast line. It was time to move material and men aboard the waiting fleet in Tampa Bay and be ready to depart at a moment’s notice. On May 26th, guns, wagons, animals and supplies began moving from Tampa to the ships docked at Port Tampa. Since there was only one track leading from Tampa to Port Tampa, it took nearly two weeks to complete the loading. Wood and Roosevelt were notified that the regiment’s horses were to be left behind and only eight troops of seventy men each were to be taken to Cuba on the first sailing.

When Secretary of the Navy John D. Long became fearful that a Spanish fleet under Admiral Pasqual Cervera would sail from Santiago before the Americans landed in Cuba, President McKinley and Secretary of War Alger heeded his warnings and ordered an instant sailing of the entire expedition. What had taken two weeks to load the baggage now became a frantic twenty-four hour embarkation for the men. One the night of June 7 the Rough Riders were told that their expedition would depart at daybreak and any persons or units not aboard at that time would be left in Tampa. It was a case of move quickly or else be left behind. No one could rely upon support from Shafter for his Quartermaster Colonel Humphrey had bungled the entire operation.

Following orders, the Rough Riders moved to a railroad track to await a train at midnight which would carry them to Port Tampa. By three o’clock in the morning different orders were received transferring them to another track but no train appeared. Finally, acting in desperation at six o’clock, the men seized some coal cars and persuaded the conductor to take them to Port Tampa.

It was a long train that the Rough Riders had boarded. Somehow several flatcars had been attached – one holding a dynamite gun with two barrels and another the Colt machine gun purchased by Lieutenant Tiffany with his own funds. How and why the Rough Riders were carrying a two barrel artillery piece that could propel a dynamite bomb a distance up to a mile was not known. Teddy stood in the open door of a boxcar watching the progress of the train. As usual his khaki uniform looked like he had slept in it. Like all Rough Riders he wore a polka dot blue bandanna handkerchief around his neck. The trip through the Interbay Peninsula was uneventful for there were only three homes between Tampa and Port Tampa. Since the water depth at Ballast Point was fifteen feet, it was used for cattle shipments to Cuba and a few shacks and a dock were erected there.

Finally reaching Port Tampa, the coal train with its begrimed passengers moved past “Last Chance Village,” complete with bars and brothels, to the dock where more chaos awaited. “Last Chance Village” had been erected by some entrepreneurs in the area near the docks at Port Tampa. Along the one street of the village were scores of black women frying chicken on Cuban claystoves under large umbrellas stuck in the sand – last chance for fried chicken. Tents had been erected to serve as a saloon, and the bartenders stood behind a counter made of two planks laid across two empty beer or whiskey barrels. Here was the last chance to get a drink of whiskey or a cold beer. Some bought a one-two punch-whiskey first then a beer. Then there were the inevitable girls available in the bars and in one large frame building with the sign of restaurant about it.
The Rough Riders moved quickly past “Last Chance Village” for the trip to Cuba was foremost in their thoughts. No one knew which of the thirty-one transports had been assigned to the regiment. Finally Colonel Humphrey in charge of the loading operation was located and he assigned the *Yucatan* to the Rough Riders. While Wood was using a launch to board the ship anchored off the dock, Roosevelt discovered that the ship actually had been assigned to another volunteer regiment and a regular regiment. Moving quickly he marched his men aboard the ship which had been moved to the dock to load the men. Soon those troops who had been assigned to the ship arrived demanding their places. Roosevelt was able to bluff the lieutenant-colonel in charge of a regular regiment that he was acting under orders and to hold his position. Four companies of the Second Regular Infantry did manage to squeeze aboard but the regiment of volunteers had to find accommodations elsewhere. Although the *Yucatan* was filled to capacity, Roosevelt, catching sight of two movie cameramen who did not have places, made room for them aboard his ship so that the Rough Riders would be assured of good coverage.19

By midday June 8, most of the ships had been loaded with the seventeen thousand men destined for Cuba. Places had even been found for Roosevelt’s horses “Rain in the Face” and “Texas.” Perhaps the mountain lion and dog were left in Tampa. Since word had been received that Cervera and his fleet may have escaped from Santiago Bay, the armada remained for a week anchored in Tampa Bay. It was a rough week for the weather was hot, the food was bad and everything was terribly overcrowded.
The Rough Riders spent their time drilling themselves from a book of tactics. Separate classes were held both for officers and non-commissioned officers. When the classes were concluded, some men were able to enjoy themselves by swimming in Tampa Bay. Some regiments aboard other ships practiced landing drills on sandy islands in the bay. Perhaps the best show of all was the accidental burning of the tents and frame shacks in “Last Chance Village.”

Finally on June 14, 1898, the fleet set steam for Cuban and a place in history. The news came that Cervera’s fleet had been located in Santiago Bay and it was time to move to Cuba. A few horses and mules were loaded on the ships. A crowd gathered, the band played “Till We Meet Again” and the fleet headed out into Tampa Bay. In the convoy were thirty-five transports filled with 803 officers and 14,935 enlisted men. All of the regiments aboard were regular forces with the exception of the Rough Riders, Seventy-First New York and Second Massachusetts. It was a narrow and long passageway that the convoy moved through Tampa Bay marked by buoys and wooden frames. Finally Mullet Key and Egmont Key, occupied by units of the Tampa Naval Reserve, were reached and the fleet sailed into the Gulf of Mexico. In Cuba, the Rough Riders suffered losses of a third of the officers and one fifth of the men being killed or wounded. Tampa had played a most suitable place in history as the port of embarkation for these gallant men. Now, most of the country and the world knew where Tampa was located.

4 Ibid., 227.
5 Ibid., 219.
7 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 15, 1898.
11 Cosmas, *Army for Empire*, 111.
12 *Tampa Daily Times*, June 21, 1940.
13 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 15, 1898.
The machine gun and dynamite gun were landed in Cuba but were of little use due to lack of transport by horses or mules.
