

A Soldier Reflects on the Spanish-American War

Jacob Judson



OVERVIEW

In 1956, years after the Spanish-American War in Cuba, Jacob Judson, a soldier looked back on the war. There was little actual hand-to-hand combat, and disease resulting from lack of supplies and preparedness was responsible for most of the 5,000 American deaths in the war. The soldier's view was shared by Theodore Roosevelt, who at the end of the war, was highly critical of army bungling in the Cuban campaign.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Who does this soldier blame for the state of the troops in Cuba?
 - Why does this soldier compare the Spanish-American War to World War I?
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We of the Spanish War who are still living can look back on our war experience, and can thank our Heavenly Father for being alive today. It's remarkable what our bodies can stand, when I think back on our Picnic Island days in Tampa, Florida—raw men in a heavy rain, a fierce storm blowing our pup tents out into the sea, no protection, our clothing soaked to the skin. Then came the issue of canned corned beef at sea that stunk so that we had to throw it into the sea—our landing at Sebono in Cuba, camping at the foot of a hill, large land crabs crawling over us at night, our long march toward San Juan Hill through jungles and swamps, joining up with the Rough Riders on Kettle Hill, heavy rains pouring down, no tents for cover, every man for himself, standing in trenches in a foot of water and mud, day and night. When off duty we kneaded our feet to get them back in shape. When the sun came out our boys would help each other by wringing out our wet clothes and blankets, quickly cutting down limbs of trees, and constructing an overhead protection by laying on palm leaves. Abel Davis and I found a spot under a tree about 30 feet from Teddy Roosevelt's tent.

For lack of proper nourishment men were becoming weak, ration issue consisting of a slice of sow belly, hardtack, and some grains of coffee that we had to crack between stones or rocks. Then came the issue of fleece-lined underwear in a 132 climate, and orders to burn the underwear we brought from home—result, you would see the boys in the river streams, backs covered with boils. Fleece-lined underwear and sow belly do not go in a 132 climate. Then came on malaria. It was my duty on mornings to take our sick boys to the Division hospital. There were no doctors in attendance, just a hospital corps sergeant who issued pills out of one bottle for all ailments. Sick men

laying on cots, their mouths, ears and noses full of flies. I would go over to these poor boys and with my finger clear their mouths of flies—not so much as a piece of paper to cover their faces. Then our boys laying day and night on the edge of the sinks; because of their malaria they had no control of their bowels, weakened by malaria, kidneys diseased, guts rotted by foul food and water. Morning sick detail would come along and take away any that died, their bodies buried on a hillside, heavy rains washing away the soil, making necessary a second burial.

I was one of the fortunate boys. It had been my privilege to train Abel Davis when he joined up with the First. We were very close pals. Abel Davis had a brother who was a doctor in Chicago; this doctor gave Abel a box containing medicines for malaria and other tropical ailments, so when I came down with malaria Abel took care of me. Doctors were scarce; most of them were down with malaria themselves. Abel pulled me through; he then came down with the malaria himself, and I used his medicines until he got on his feet. If it was not for that box of medicines I think both Abel's bones and mine would lay in Cuban hills today.

Colonel Teddy Roosevelt said to his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Teddy Roosevelt, Jr.: "The Spanish War was but a drop in the bucket as compared with the war following." This statement was no doubt true; the war following had troops spread all over Europe, but the soldier had full modern equipment, was properly clothed, had healthy, nourishing food and the very best medical care, none of which was given the Spanish War soldier.

So when the war ended and we landed at Montauk, Long Island, our boys were thin, underweight, yellow as lemons, and it took us years to recover. So I say: Let us thank God for taking care of us all these years.

Source: Letter of Jacob Judson, Captain, Company E. First Regiment, Illinois National Guard, April 15, 1956. Manuscript Collection, Chicago Historical Society. Printed by permission of the author.