"In the matter of healthfulness it is ideal"

Roosevelt's Rough Riders at Camp Wikoff

By Patrick McSherry

General:

This article addresses the experience of the First United States Volunteer Cavalry, also known as Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" at Camp Wikoff, Montauk, Long Island, on the unit's return to the United States.

The Article:

The summer heat was rising as the crowd of officers and enlisted men gathered at the Long Island Railroad's Montauk station. At 8:45 AM a special train arrived. As the Third U.S. Cavalry band blared “Hail to the Chief,” President McKinley alighted from the train, shaking the hand of the camp's commander, General "Fightin' Joe" Wheeler. As the music continued, the rest of the presidential party appeared, including Secretary of War Alger. They had come to investigate the reportedly deplorable conditions at Montauk's Camp Wikoff to which the U.S. Army's disease-decimated Fifth Corps was returning after its decisive victory in Cuba.

As the music dissipated into the Montauk breezes, another sound met the ears of those present – the rapid reverberation of furious hoofbeats. Emerging from a dust cloud was one of the few officers not already present. Colonel Theodore Roosevelt had arrived. In a unique historical moment, the president left his carriage and made his way for this latecomer, an honor not accorded to the many ranking officers present. At the same time, the horseman quickly dismounted with the smooth but inelegant slide of a man used to life on horseback, tugging at his gauntlet with his teeth in an effort to present his hand to the president.

Roosevelt, who called Oyster Bay home, was a man of destiny. It didn’t lead him. Destiny could barely keep up with this human whirlwind. Not yet aged forty, he had already served in the New York legislature, as a Dakota ranchman, civil service commissioner, New York City police commissioner, and assistant secretary of the Navy, and all before commanding one of the most famous military regiments in U.S. history – the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, better known as the "Rough Riders." At Montauk the regiment was already in the waning phase of its mere one hundred thirty-three day existence, but it was about boomerang Roosevelt to the New York governorship, vice-president and then president of the nation.

Roosevelt’s famous regiment was one of the few volunteer regiments to see action in Cuba. The Rough Riders fought at Las Guasimas and again at the San Juan Heights. Of all the regiments that served in Cuba, the regiment suffered the highest casualty rate. However, it wasn’t the regiment’s losses that gained the group its fame. The losses only proved it worthy of the attention it had already garnered.

What made the Rough Riders unique was the combination of men involved. The regiment consisted of men from thirteen foreign countries, four territories and forty-two of the country’s forty-five states. Even more unique was that the men were of such diverse backgrounds – cowboys, Indians and Indian fighters from the West, and well-to-do athletes from the East. Tennis player Bob Wrenn would serve with the likes of Benjamin Daniel, the Dodge City marshal. John Jacob Astor’s cousin, yachtsman Woodbury Cane, would serve with William H. H. Lewellyn, a westerner with four bullets already in his body from fights with outlaws. Orators, Cuban insurgents, professional golfers, locomotive firemen, baseball players and stage drivers would all serve together. The personality of the regiment’s second in command – Roosevelt - drew newspapermen in search of a good story who, in turn, were surrounded by other stories aplenty, spreading the regiment’s story throughout the nation. Every class was represented and everyone read with interest about how their peers would get to rub elbows with such exciting people.

By the time the fighting had ended in mid-July of 1898, the Rough Riders, now commanded by Roosevelt, along with the remainder of the Army’s Fifth Corps, found themselves confronting a deadlier enemy than Spanish bullets - disease. By late July the raging tropical diseases reached crisis proportions with eighty percent of the Corps’ men suffering the effects. Routine tasks, such as posting sentries and holding inspections were suspended in most regiments because there were not enough men fit for duty.

Through inadequate communication, Washington was not fully aware of the dire situation. Then, on August 4, 1898, newspapers carried the story of the troops’ condition in Cuba in the form of a letter from Roosevelt to Fifth Corps commander Major General William Shafter and a “round-robin” letter signed by many of the Corps’ ranking officers. Roosevelt’s name being prominently attached to the letter was not by chance. The colonel had looked at the issue pragmatically. He was not a career military man, and had less to lose in what would be the ensuing political debacle than would the regular army officers
In the weeks before the nation was shocked into awareness of the state of their fathers, brothers and sons in Cuba, the War Department had started work on a camp at Montauk, Long Island. The camp, one hundred and twenty-five miles from New York City, was connected to the metropolis by the single-track of the Long Island Railroad. Many considered the site well-suited as a camp. One writer indicted that “along the ocean front are high cliffs which rise up about fifty feet and overlook a sweep of the ocean of graphic picturesqueness. Below is the beach where the finest surf bathing facilities are afforded...” The temperatures were noted to be about ten degrees cooler than anywhere else on the island and “in the matter of healthfulness it is ideal.” In short, there was “no more desirable spot in the country than this southeastern neck of Long Island.” Equally important, it was isolated from major population centers should disease appear.

Built on 4,200 acres of land the camp, named for Colonel Charles Wikoff, an officer killed in Cuba, consisted of two parts – the “detention camp,” where the new arrivals were held for five days before being released to the other portion of the camp, simply called the “general camp.” The detention camp was located on Observatory Hill, opposite Montauk Station. The combined camps were originally planned to hold five thousand men and have two hospitals capable of treating seven hundred and fifty. However, with the entire corps coming home en masse, the camp had to be expanded to accommodate nearly six times the planned number! Contracts for well digging, lumber, and other supplies were released on August 2. By August 6, work began in earnest, with tent floors being constructed, wells bored and ten thousand tents being erected before the first troops arrived.

During its brief two month existence, the camp would grow to have tens of thousands of tents, multiple wells, a twelve mile underground water system, a laundry facility, disinfecting facility, water distillery, bakery, and numerous kitchens operated by some of the most renowned chefs etc. Surrounding the camp unofficial facilities appeared, including a new post office, express package building, general store, electrical powerhouse, and two restaurants, including one known as “Hungry Joes.” Telephone service was extended to Montauk, connecting the camp to Brooklyn.

On August 13 the first transport ship, GATE CITY, arrived. However, the MIAMI, arriving the next day, caused the most excitement because she bore the “Rough Riders.” From amidst the tumult of the throngs, someone yelled to Theodore Roosevelt “How are you?” He responded “I’m in disgracefully healthy condition...I feel as big and strong as a bull moose!” The New York Sun reported “...Colonel Roosevelt’s men have come here in good condition, far better than could be expected...Never the less they are worn and tired out...” At Camp Wikoff, the regiment was reunited with Troops C, H, I and M, left behind in Florida during the invasion of Cuba.

In spite of the Army’s best efforts at the camp, it started from a bad position and was never able to recover. Those in charge, had a continuous job of catch-up while under the watchful, probing and sometimes disingenuous eye of the nation’s second most populous city and its famous “yellow press.”

Before long, shocking news from the camp began to appear in the newspapers. Men were released from the camps to go home and recuperate, only to board the train at Montauk and be dead before the train reached New York City. Emaciated men continued to pour into the camp at a rate faster than they could be accommodated or supplied. Outsiders seeing the camp – and there were many as the ships of the Montauk Company ran close in shore to give its excursionists the best view, and the Long Island Railroad ran ads tempting tourists to visit the Rough Riders, and all the martial sights at the “City of Tents” – spoke of the horrible conditions, the half-alive men, the boxes serving as latrines in the streets, etc. Death stalked many in the camp. On August 16, J. Knox Green became the first Rough Riders to die on Montauk’s plains.

The public and government responded to the camp’s crisis as best they could. Private supplies, supplementing the government’s, began rolling into the camp. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle newspaper set up a tent at the camp where it received supplies of all sorts. People came to the camp “laden with packages of knick knacks and delicacies for the sick.” Unfortunately, with the erratic distribution of the supplies from any source, goods were not getting to the people who needed them most. In this respect, the Rough Riders fared better than most regiments. So much arrived at the Eagle’s tent designated specifically for the regiment that it designated an officer to distribute the goods to the men.

The camp’s underlying problem was that the men in the hospital got care, and the healthy men got what they needed. The many men caught in the netherworld of being not quite ill enough to be accepted into the hospital, but were not well enough to look after themselves were most horribly affected. Food was available in camp, if the soldier was capable of walking to where it was being given out and strong enough to hold his own when the food appeared. The men who could not struggled to avoid slipping over death’s brink.

For most of the Rough Riders, floating on fame’s wave, conditions were fairly good. Roosevelt commented that the regiment’s time at Camp Wikoff was “On the whole...very pleasant.” There was some excitement, such as when its escaped mascot, Josephine the mountain lion, crawled into the bunk with a sleeping Third Cavalry trooper. There was also the pastime of challenging men of other regiments to bronco riding, in which the Rough Riders had obvious superiority. Roosevelt led the men in a daily charge to the beach. Many of the Rough Riders revealed in the last days of this major pinnacle in their lives. McKinley’s guided tour through the cleaned camp came and went. Some claimed that he did not get a true view of the
conditions. Regardless, the visit did not uncover anything as horrible as the newspapers indicated. By this time, the population of the camp had already began to wane as the men went home and the crisis diffused itself amidst bad press, and the War Department’s castigation.

On September 15, 1898, the Rough Riders passed into history, as the regiment was mustered out. Camp Wikoff’s last regiment, the Seventh U.S. Infantry, was ordered away on October 9th, and by March 14, 1899, the work to remove all government property from the site began. The camp and the 126 men who perished there would exist only in memory.

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A healthful eating pattern, regular physical activity, and often pharmacotherapy are key components of diabetes management. For many individuals with diabetes, the most challenging part of the treatment plan is determining what to eat. It is the position of the American Diabetes Association (ADA) that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" eating pattern for individuals with diabetes. The ADA also recognizes the integral role of nutrition therapy in overall diabetes management and has historically recommended that each person with diabetes be actively engaged in self-management, education, and tre