

## ROUGH RIDERS

USS *Maine*, a second-class battleship built between 1888 and 1895, was sent to Havana in January 1898 to protect American interests during revolt of the Cubans against the Spanish government. In the evening of 15 February 1898, *Maine* sank when her forward gunpowder magazines exploded. Nearly three-quarters of the battleship's crew died from the explosion. American popular opinion blamed Spain and war followed within a few months.

The U.S. prepared for war with Spain in Cuba. The U.S. Army, under-manned and ill-prepared for war, began mobilization for the coming conflict a week before President McKinley's April 23 call for volunteers. Within days recruiting offices were swamped with patriotic young men, eager to serve in the anticipated conflict. Training began almost immediately, at several posts and stations around the United States.

One of the eager volunteers was the 40-year-old Under Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt who



wanted to enhance his own personal role on the fields of combat. The previous December, he had made his feelings about armed conflict clear in his comments to the Naval War College that, "No triumph of peace is quite as great as the supreme triumphs of war".

One of Roosevelt's friends in Washington, D.C. was an Army surgeon, Dr.

Leonard Wood, who had served in the Indian Campaigns under General Nelson Miles. On April 8, just weeks before the mobilization of the Army, Dr. Wood was issued the Medal of Honor for personal heroism during the Apache Campaign in Arizona Territory in the summer of 1886. Long before his award was issued, Roosevelt and Wood had talked often and passionately about events in Cuba and the prospect of war. "We both felt very strongly that such a war would be as righteous as it would be advantageous to the honor and the interests of the nation", Roosevelt later wrote. "After the blowing up of the *Maine*, we felt that it was inevitable. We then at once began to try and see that we had our share in it."

Although Dr. Wood had combat experience in the West, and in spite of his recently received Medal of Honor, with ten volunteers for an available slot, the 38-year old physician didn't make the final cut. Events were not favoring the two would-be leaders in America's first war on foreign shores. Then, unexpectedly, Congress authorized the raising of three cavalry regiments from among the cowboys, miners, and other woodsmen of the frontier west. Theodore Roosevelt was offered command of one of the regiments.

The most famous regiment of the Spanish-American War was the First United States Volunteer Cavalry, better known as "Roosevelt's Rough Riders." The idea for the regiment originated with Prescott's own Bucky O'Neill, who, as Territorial Adjutant General in 1890, had offered to raise a regiment of Arizona cowboys to fight the Plains Indians. Bucky O'Neill, the Mayor of Prescott, Arizona and a famous frontier sheriff, volunteered and was commissioned Captain of Troop A.

As war threatened in early 1898, O'Neill, James McClintock, and Alexander Brodie petitioned Governor McCord for permission to raise "one thousand Arizona cowboys" to fight in Cuba. On April 25 the regiment was approved, but only 170 of the men were to come from Arizona. The rest would be recruited in New Mexico, Oklahoma, and the Indian Territory.

Roosevelt wanted to command a combat regiment and experience the "supreme triumphs of war"; but he realized his lack of military experience might delay the training of his regiment and their deployment to Cuba. With the quick defeat of the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay, Roosevelt feared the war with Spain might end before he and his men could reach sufficient level of training to deploy, and quickly made an unusual decision. He suggested that Dr. Wood be commissioned Colonel in charge of the regiment, and that he would serve as a Lieutenant Colonel under his friend. The plan was promptly approved, and Colonel Leonard Wood was assigned commander of the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, mustering near San Antonio, Texas.

They were an unusual lot--lawmen, outlaws, preachers, craggy cowboys, hardened miners, former Indian fighters, scouts, and Native Americans. Most were as independent, strong willed, and determined to create their own destiny as was their Executive Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt.

To the initial chagrin of the regiment's members and commanders, as training began, the public assessed the nature of its members and coined a nickname for the First United States Volunteer Cavalry. "At first we fought against the use of the term," Roosevelt wrote, "When finally the Generals of Division and Brigade began to write in formal communications about our regiment....we adopted the term ourselves." Henceforth and for history, the First United States Volunteer Cavalry became known as: The Rough Riders Bucky O'Neill was killed in Cuba.