

PROLOGUE

Wednesday, January 10, 1906

The White House

President Theodore Roosevelt is all smiles as he moves about and briskly shakes hands with the several guests gathered in his private office and the adjoining cabinet room. The president's favorite and overused exclamations punctuate the conversation: "Bully!" "By George!" and the drawn-out "Deeelighted!"

Among those present today are Secretary of War William Howard Taft, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Adna R. Chaffee, and Surgeon General Presley Marion Rixey. Also in the small crowd are several army and navy officers—all in full dress uniform—members of the legislative council of the American Medical Association, and a collection of newspaper correspondents.

This is a very special day because the president has gathered these men to witness the presentation of a Medal of Honor. This is the first time a Medal of Honor ceremony has taken place in the White House, the first time since the nation's highest military honor was created during the Civil War that a president of the United States has personally presented. In all previous years, Medals of Honor simply came in the mail.

Roosevelt believed that medal recipients deserved more. As commander in chief, he issued an order on September 20, 1905, requiring

that medals be conferred in person by the president “with formal and impressive ceremonies.” Roosevelt’s wish, according to a newspaper report, was “to increase the value of the Medal of Honor as much as possible, and to make it as rare and as precious as the Victoria Cross.”

In an interesting but fitting coincidence, the man being honored this day, Captain James Robb Church, performed his acts of valor while serving as assistant surgeon under Roosevelt in the First United States Volunteer Cavalry, widely known as the Rough Riders. At the Battle of Las Guásimas, Cuba, on June 24, 1898, Church had risked his life time and again treating wounded troopers on the firing line. No less than five times, he had lifted a Rough Rider on his back and carried him to the rear, all the while being exposed to the enemy’s highly accurate Mauser rifles.

On three previous occasions, Captain Church had been formally recommended for this recognition, the first coming less than a year after his gallantry in Cuba, but for some reason, the recommendations languished at the War Department. Roosevelt was even under the impression that Church had received the medal seven years ago, until his close friend and former commander of the Rough Riders, Major General Leonard Wood, told him otherwise. The president wants today’s precedent-setting ceremony to make up for that long delay.

To begin, the portly Secretary Taft presents Captain Church to the president, and the room is completely silent as Taft reads from the recommendations that describe Church’s heroics. Roosevelt proudly looks on; in his hand is a morocco case that holds the medal. Once Taft finishes, Roosevelt turns to Church and speaks directly to him, but for all to hear:

There is no distinction which confers greater honor upon any American in military or civil life than this—the one honor coveted above all others, by every man in the military service of the United States. It was my good fortune as colonel of the regiment in which you

served to be an eyewitness to your gallantry and to bear testimony to it by letter to the proper authorities, stating the reasons why I deemed that you were entitled to the Medal of Honor. I wish to state, Mr. Secretary, that the letters I wrote were written before I was president. Since I was president, I have held no communication whatsoever with the military authorities on the subject.

Roosevelt, with another big smile, presents the morocco case to the captain.

“Captain Church,” he says warmly, “there could be no greater pleasure than that I now experience in handing to my old comrade and friend this Medal of Honor.”

The president firmly shakes Church’s hand and pulls him close, and in a softer voice but still loud enough for all to hear, says, “There is no greater comradeship than that which comes from having lived in the trenches together.”

Church, overtaken by emotion, is speechless. He bows respectfully to Roosevelt, and it is both eloquent and touching. The president wanted to make the Medal of Honor presentation impressive and memorable, and he has succeeded beyond all expectations.

Although there were many American heroes in Cuba during the summer of 1898—and many who did not survive that short war—Captain Church is the only Rough Rider to receive the medal. Yet another former Rough Rider is in this room, and he too should be wearing it. This man had been recommended for it by all his commanding officers, and several eyewitnesses testified to his actions above and beyond the call of duty. But because of pettiness, resentment, and, undoubtedly, some jealousy, the War Department had denied giving it to him.

This man is none other than the president. And having never received the medal he earned under a hot Cuban sun is among his greatest disappointments.

But Roosevelt is somewhat vindicated as he presents the coveted

decoration to Captain Church. Both men know it. They share the truth of an experience that only those who were there can truly know. As part of a ragtag regiment of southwestern cowpunchers, Oklahoma Indians, Ivy League football stars, and champion polo players, they had faced death boldly and defeated the enemy.

They had been Rough Riders.

Chapter One

Some Turn of Fortune

I think I smell war in the air.

FREDERIC REMINGTON

Frank Brito rode through the darkness, his cow pony's shod hooves making a slow, steady clapping on the hard dirt. Occasionally there would be a sudden scraping sound when its hooves struck a rocky outcropping, or a jolt to the rider when the pony stepped into a small ditch or arroyo.

Brito was riding through the rough country between Silver City, New Mexico Territory, and the mining town of Pinos Altos ("tall pines"), where his parents lived. It was now nearly midnight, and he was dog tired: he had been in the saddle for hours. But he was almost home, just a few more miles.

The twenty-one-year-old Brito had been born at Pinos Altos. His parents, natives of Mexico, were of Yaqui Indian heritage. His father, Santiago, had worked various gold claims at Pinos Altos since long before Frank's birth. As a young man, Frank had set type in the small office of the weekly *Pinos Altos Miner*, and he had grown up to

be a handsome fellow, standing five feet eight inches tall with a dark complexion like his parents, coal black hair, and striking blue eyes.

That spring of 1898, Frank had been pulling in a dollar a day as a cowpuncher for southwestern New Mexico's Circle Bar outfit. But he had received a message from his father to come back to Pinos Altos immediately. His father knew Frank was a ten-hour horseback ride from home, so Frank knew he wouldn't have sent for him unless it was something important. Finally, as Frank's pony neared the old place, he could see that the house was all lit up, oil lamps glowing in every room. Frank's first thought was not a good one: surely someone must have died.

Santiago Brito had been waiting anxiously for his son. When he heard Frank's pony approach the house, he came out onto the porch. Before Frank could slide out of the saddle, Santiago told him that the United States had declared war against Spain. He had gotten the news from nearby Fort Bayard, so there was no doubt about it. More important, Santiago had learned that the government had authorized a volunteer regiment to be composed of cowboys and crack shots from the western territories. Santiago told his son that first thing in the morning, he and his older brother, Joe, were going to ride to Silver City and enlist.

"In those days," Frank would recall decades later, "you didn't talk back to your father, so we did it."

This war with Spain was no surprise to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt. For months, he had been doing everything in his power—not always with the direct knowledge or approval of the secretary—to make the navy ready for the great conflict he was certain was coming. And he also let it be known that he had no intention of observing the war from afar. Crazy as it sounded—and more than a few did think Roosevelt was crazy—this lightning-rod bureaucrat intended to go where the bullets were flying. He had been waiting for

a war, any war, his entire adult life, and now that it was here, *nothing* was going to keep him from the battlefield.

Many would blame Roosevelt's outsized martial spirit on the family's supposed stain of his father not taking up arms in the Civil War. Theodore Senior was a staunch Lincoln Republican married to a staunch southern patriot from Georgia, and rather than deepen the divide within his family by becoming a Yankee soldier, he had paid a substitute to serve in his place (an option many well-off men in the North took advantage of). Theodore Junior would later write, "I had always felt that if there were a serious war I wished to be in a position to explain to my children why I did take part in it, and not why I did not take part in it."

But Roosevelt's war fever was actually due to America's fever for war, or at least its long glorification of all things military. The Civil War had erupted just three years after Roosevelt's birth in a New York City brownstone, and that terrible conflict had exerted a strong influence on a most impressionable boy. Two of his uncles on his mother's side served in the Confederate navy, and little Theodore witnessed his mother, aunt, and grandmother pack small boxes of necessities destined for the wrong side of federal lines (surreptitiously, of course, while Theodore Senior was away).

Nearly everything about the Civil War seemed glorious to a boy far removed from the actual fighting. The best and most popular songs of the day were martial songs, from the rousing "The Battle Cry of Freedom" and the poignant "Just Before the Battle, Mother" to the tragic "The Vacant Chair." The oversized pages of *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* were chock-full of spectacularly detailed engravings of saber-wielding cavalrymen at full gallop, smoke-belching cannons, and corpse-strewn battlefields. And there were the dignified portraits of the war's many heroes, both North and South: Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Lee, Jackson, Stuart, and the like.

After the Civil War, veterans were showered with adulation for the rest of their lives. The erecting of commemorative monuments and

markers on numerous battlefields became a minor industry. And there were the Fourth of July parades, the reunions, and, for many, high political office. In the United States, the quickest way to fame and votes at election time had always been the winning of laurels on the battlefield.

No wonder young men born too late for the great Civil War hoped they would be given their own chance to prove themselves, in their own war, on their own fields of valor. Theodore Roosevelt clearly was one of these.

In 1882, as if his job as New York State's youngest assemblyman wasn't enough of a responsibility, he joined the New York National Guard, eventually rising to the rank of captain. But the Guard mostly set up camps and drilled, which was a lot like *playing* soldier. No enemy. No thrill of battle. No glory.

Then, in the summer of 1886, Roosevelt sniffed an opportunity to get into a real fight. At the time, he was cattle ranching in the Badlands of Dakota Territory. Roosevelt was one of a number of well-to-do young easterners who were drawn to the Wild West for its business opportunities—and adventure. As a passionate hunter, the Little Missouri River country was appealing to him with its last small herds of buffalo, as well as deer, elk, and even bighorn sheep. “It was a land of vast silent spaces,” he wrote, “of lonely rivers, and of plains where the wild game stared at the passing horseman.”

And it was an escape. Roosevelt had lost his first wife, Alice, and his mother on the same cold February day in 1884, his wife to Bright's disease after giving birth to their daughter, his mother to typhoid fever. Roosevelt had met and fallen in love with Alice while a student at Harvard; they had been married less than three years. The page in Roosevelt's diary for February 14, the date of those two tragic losses, contains only a black “X” and the words, “The light has gone out of my life.” For Roosevelt, the long days on a working cattle ranch and his numerous hunting excursions helped him push away the sadness and reinvigorate himself.

But during his brief career as a rancher, Roosevelt never completely

cut his ties to the East or its politics, and his blood rose when he read the newspaper reports of growing tension between the United States and Mexico over the false imprisonment of an American newspaper editor in El Paso del Norte, Mexico. The United States was demanding his release, and Mexico was refusing. Texans called for war, and rumors swirled of troops mobilizing on both sides of the border.

Roosevelt dashed off a letter to Secretary of War William Endicott on August 10, 1886, “offering to raise some companies of horse riflemen out here in the event of trouble with Mexico.” He confided to friend Henry Cabot Lodge, “I haven’t the least idea there will be any trouble; but as my chance of doing anything in the future worth doing seems to grow considerably smaller, I intend to grasp at every opportunity that turns up.” Alas, diplomacy prevailed, and Mexico released its prisoner after a three-day trial. “If a war had come off,” Roosevelt fantasized to Lodge, “I would surely have had behind me as utterly reckless a set of desperadoes, as ever sat in the saddle.”

Roosevelt had always had this something “worth doing” close in his mind. But nine more years would pass before he saw another opportunity to do anything about it. That moment came in 1895 as Spain was fighting a new insurrection in Cuba. On March 8, a Spanish gunboat spotted the American mail ship *Alliança* as it steamed past Cuba’s east coast and fired upon it repeatedly. Spain knew the Cuban rebels were receiving supplies from vessels sailing from Florida, but the *Alliança* was six miles out to sea, and it was traveling north, away from Cuba. Fortunately, the *Alliança* was the faster ship and quickly outran the gunboat. The United States demanded an apology; Spain wasn’t forthcoming with one.

By this time, the thirty-six-year-old Roosevelt was back in the government in Washington and serving in Grover Cleveland’s administration as a U.S. Civil Service commissioner. He turned not to the secretary of war, however, but to New York governor Levi P. Morton. In a March 19 letter to the governor, Roosevelt jotted this postscript, which he marked “Private”:

In the very improbable event of a war with Spain I am going to beg you with all my power to do me the greatest favor possible; get me a position in New York's quota of the force sent out. Remember, I make application now. I was three years captain in the 8th Regiment N. Y. State militia, and I must have a commission in the force that goes to Cuba! But of course there won't be any war.

Roosevelt was right. There wouldn't be any war, not now, but Americans had become sympathetic with Cuba's struggle for independence, fueled in part by the yellow press's graphic accounts of "cruel wrongs" and "barbarities" committed against the Cubans by the Spanish government. Spain was the last Old World country with colonies in the New World and, as such, was a "weak and decadent" relic, according to Roosevelt.

"I am a quietly rampant 'Cuba Libre' man," he wrote his sister Anna Roosevelt Cowles on January 2, 1897:

I doubt whether the Cubans would do very well in the line of self-government; but anything would be better than continuance of Spanish rule. I believe that [President] Cleveland ought now to recognize Cuba's independence and interfere; sending our fleet promptly to Havana. There would not in my opinion be very serious fighting; and what loss we encountered would be thrice over repaid by the ultimate results of our action.

Three months after sharing his not-so-quiet views with his sister, Roosevelt accepted the appointment of assistant secretary of the navy in the new administration of President William McKinley. It was an ideal position for the author of *The Naval War of 1812*, which was published in 1882 and was the first of his many books. But more important, the secretaryship made him an insider, privy to the administration's every move—or lack thereof, much to his vexation—in its increasingly strained relations with Spain.

Roosevelt's new status in the nation's capital added to his already impressive circle of prominent friends and acquaintances: navy and army men, journalists, more politicians, entrepreneurs, scientists, and so on. Some he found stimulating, others not; some of like mind, others not. One he found both remarkably stimulating and of like mind was thirty-six-year-old army surgeon Captain Leonard Wood, who served as personal physician for McKinley (and his seizure-suffering wife) and for the secretary of war and his family.

Roosevelt and Wood first met at a Washington dinner party in June 1897 and quickly became fast friends. It didn't hurt that Wood was a fellow Harvard man and an excellent football player, but Roosevelt was most impressed by Wood's experiences chasing the Chiricahua Apache leader Geronimo eleven years earlier.

Wood had asked for and received the command of an infantry detachment that was lacking an officer and led it for several weeks in pursuit of Geronimo and his followers. One night, he volunteered to ride alone through seventy miles of Apache land to deliver important dispatches. By the end of the campaign, Wood had covered thousands of miles of mountain and desert country in northern Mexico and southern Arizona, much of it on foot and in temperatures at times exceeding one hundred degrees. His courage and gallantry during the campaign would earn him the Medal of Honor.

Not surprisingly, the blue-eyed medico was an outstanding specimen of manhood, standing five feet ten inches tall (an inch taller than Roosevelt) with a "superb chest." His long, serious face matched his disposition. Roosevelt chum Owen Wister observed that the captain "was inclined to be silent, inclined to be grave." In this way, he was the opposite of Roosevelt. Nevertheless, Wood and the assistant secretary were each highly competitive, and they shared a near-sadistic passion for testing the limits of the human body.

Roosevelt had been a puny, sickly child plagued by terrifying

asthma attacks. One day, when he was about eleven, Roosevelt's father said, "Theodore, you have the mind but you have not the body, and without the help of the body the mind cannot go as far as it should. You must *make* your body. It is hard drudgery to make one's body, but I know you will do it."

Demonstrating the indomitable spirit that would be his trademark as an adult, the young Roosevelt spent hours upon hours pulling himself up between horizontal bars in the home's open-air gym, fully equipped and paid for by his father. Roosevelt's sister Corinne would never forget seeing her brother hanging from the bars, "widening his chest by regular, monotonous motion." After two years of this "drudgery," the young man took up boxing. The subsequent transformation in Roosevelt's body and health was nothing short of phenomenal.

Roosevelt's "real tastes were for the rougher and hardier forms of exercise," remembered Wood. He "always loved to gather a party of men who felt equal to a bit of hard work and give them a thorough try-out, which generally resulted in using them up pretty badly. . . . His excellent endurance, his aptness in rough, hard climbing, and especially his ability to take his followers and generally outlast them on hard walks and runs ending in a dash up a fissure in a ledge where one had to be able to chin the edge and swing up or confess defeat by going around, all these demonstrated that he had built up a condition of unusual physical fitness."

Most afternoons Roosevelt and Wood could be found boxing, wrestling, fencing, or playing football (tackle, of course). But Wood was becoming tired of Washington, and like Roosevelt, he desperately wanted a field command if war came. He even told Roosevelt he was considering returning to the West and maybe starting a ranch. Roosevelt urged his friend to wait just a little longer. War with Spain, he told him emphatically as only Roosevelt could, was not far off.

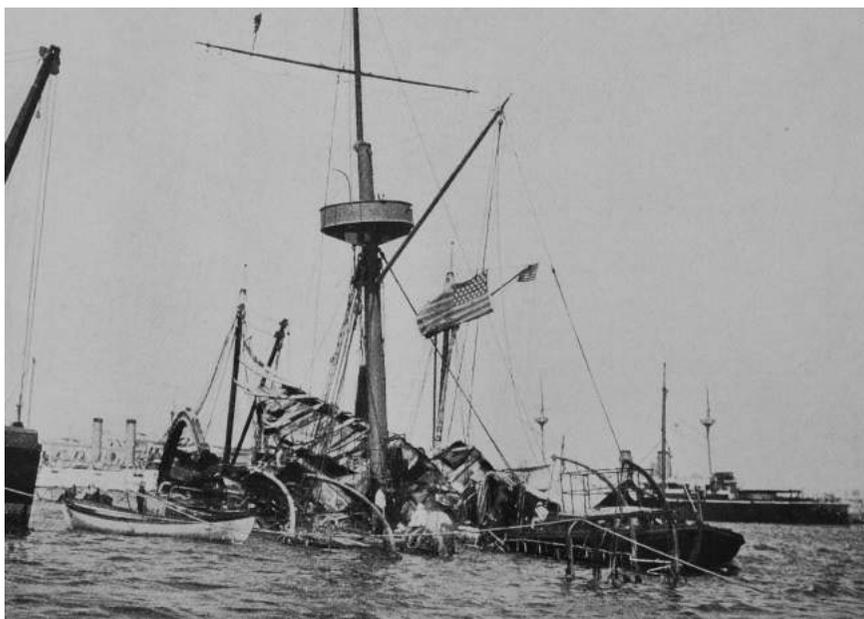
Then, in the early morning darkness of February 16, 1898, lights went on in home after home in Washington and soon the White House, where President McKinley was awakened to the horrid news that the battleship USS *Maine* had exploded in Havana Harbor. "Many

wounded, and doubtless more killed and drowned,” the initial report read.

The explosion, the result of the ship’s powder magazine igniting, rocked Havana, breaking windows in several houses and leaving the *Maine* a twisted carcass of steel. The final death toll was a staggering 266 officers and men.

The *Maine* had been sent to Cuba just three weeks earlier, after anti-American demonstrations in pro-Spain Havana threatened U.S. citizens and property there. Although the battleship’s visit to the Cuban capital was meant to be friendly, it was still provocative under the circumstances.

Many in the United States instantly suspected that Spain had orchestrated the tragedy. Headlines like the one in Washington’s *Evening Times*, published well before any solid details could reach the States, were typical: “Blown Up by Spain, Every Evidence That the *Maine* Was Torpedoed.” The newspaper added beneath it, “Two Hundred and Fifty American Sailors the Food of Sharks.”



Wreckage of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor. Photo by John C. Hemment. (Author's Collection.)

And Roosevelt was just as quick to lay blame, writing confidentially to a young Harvard friend the same day, “The *Maine* was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards.”

The navy ordered an investigation to determine what caused the explosion, but this would take a few weeks to complete. In the meantime, when Roosevelt wasn’t providing Secretary of the Navy John D. Long with endless recommendations about preparing the navy for war, he and Wood feverishly tried to position themselves to be a part of any invading force once war came. Roosevelt wrote to New York State’s adjutant general three times about his desire to serve.

“I don’t want to be in an office during war,” he wrote on March 9, “I want to be at the front. . . . If I were in New York City, I think I could raise a regiment of volunteers in short order. . . . I have a man who rendered most gallant service with the regular Army against the Apaches, whom I should very much like to bring in with me if I could raise a regiment. . . . Have you any idea how quickly I could get uniforms, arms, etc.?”

One week later, Roosevelt, Wood, and McKinley’s secretary, John Addison Porter, dined with Senator Redfield Proctor at Washington’s Metropolitan Club. Proctor had recently returned from Cuba and could not stop talking about the shocking conditions he had seen. In those areas in revolt, which was most of the island, Spain’s military governor had forcefully moved all Cubans from their rural homes and relocated them to larger towns. To keep these Cubans (known as *reconcentrados*) in, and the insurgents out, the governor had surrounded the towns with trenches, barbed wire, and blockhouses, making them virtual prison yards. In the last few months, Proctor said, two hundred thousand *reconcentrados* had died from starvation and disease.

The atrocities Proctor described were a preview of a speech he would give before the Senate the next day. That speech, quoted at length on the front pages of numerous newspapers, “aroused a spirit of hot indignation throughout the nation,” remembered Wood, “and a determination to terminate these conditions.”

“[W]e might have ignored cruelty and oppression, had they been further off,” explained Owen Wister years later, “as it was, we began to feel it our duty in the name of liberty and humanity to help the weak little neighbor, and also to abate the nuisance.”

Just eleven days after Proctor’s chilling report, the country was again filled with indignation—and a seething desire for vengeance. The navy’s board of inquiry on the *Maine* disaster concluded that the battleship “was destroyed by the explosion of a submarine mine.” Although the board could not identify who was responsible for the mine, nearly all Americans, and particularly the yellow press, further convicted Spain.

President McKinley was now facing intense pressure to intervene in Cuba, and among those pushing him were Roosevelt and Wood. McKinley half fondly referred to them as the “war party.” During Wood’s daily visits to attend to Mrs. McKinley, the president jokingly greeted the surgeon with, “Well, have you and Theodore declared war yet?”

Wood usually replied, “No, Mr. President, we have not, but we think you should take steps in that direction, sir.”

Those steps, uneasy ones to be sure, officially began on April 11. In a message to Congress, McKinley asked for authorization to end the hostilities between the Cuban insurgents and the Spanish government and to establish a new, stable government for the island, using the force of American arms if necessary. Few believed that Spain would acquiesce without the use of force, though McKinley, a Civil War veteran who dreaded the suffering and death that war would bring, still had hope of avoiding armed conflict.

“The President still feebly is painfully trying for peace,” an exasperated Roosevelt jotted in his pocket diary on April 16. “His weakness and vacillation are even more ludicrous than painful.”

Congress vacillated a little as well, but on April 19, it passed a joint resolution demanding that Spain get out of Cuba once and for all. It also empowered the president to use “the entire land and naval

force of the United States” to make it so. Spain responded by declaring war on April 23, and Congress followed with its own formal war declaration two days later. Now came the critical work of forming not only a war strategy but quickly mobilizing an invasion force.

“I have the Navy in good shape,” Roosevelt scrawled in his diary. “But the army is awful. The War Dept. is in utter confusion.”

“I want to introduce you to my personal friend, Dr. Leonard Wood,” began Roosevelt’s short letter to Massachusetts governor Roger Wolcott. “He is an intimate friend of mine, and one of the best fellows, as well as one of the best officers that I know. He wants to go as a field officer in one of the Massachusetts regiments.”

Written on April 16, more than a week before the declaration of war, it was one of several glowing letters Wood had asked others to send to the governor of his home state, including one from the secretary of war, Russell Alger. But even with these high-powered recommendations, plus his status as a Medal of Honor recipient, Wood was essentially told to get in line. As Roosevelt later recalled, at least ten men clamored for each potential officer’s commission.

The extremely well-connected Roosevelt was having no easier time when he asked for a spot for himself and Wood in the Seventy-First Regiment, New York National Guard. Roosevelt also pressed General Fitzhugh Lee (formerly the consul-general at Havana) to appoint him as an officer on the general’s staff, when it became known that Lee would be given some type of command. Roosevelt’s maneuverings became so commonly known that a false story went over the wires on April 17, claiming that Roosevelt had just resigned his secretaryship to join Lee. The general promptly denied making any promises.

The situation was getting more desperate by the day. Then, on April 22, Congress passed a bill to temporarily increase the military, including a provision for three thousand volunteers (“possessing special qualifications”) from the country at large. This provision was added by a Wyoming senator who believed the army would benefit

from some regiments composed of cowboys and “mountaineers” from out west.

The American cowboy was thought to be a natural-born, crack-shot fighting man by a public fed on shoot-'em-up dime novels and thrilling performances from Buffalo Bill's Congress of Rough Riders of the World. (Newspapers reported that Cody was raising his own regiment of cowboys and Indians to fight in Cuba.) Some within the military shared that view, romantic as it was.

“I believe that the ‘cow boys,’ so called, are the very best material for cavalry service in Cuba, or anywhere else, for that matter,” opined Major William M. Wallace of the Second U.S. Cavalry. “They are necessarily young men and thorough horsemen: the spirit that put them into the saddle to start with is apparent all the time. . . . No man who is not a daring fellow can be a good cow boy.”

Roosevelt knew quite a bit about cowboys, too, and Secretary of War Russell Alger was as aware of this as he was of Roosevelt's desire to take part in the coming campaign—Roosevelt had made that annoyingly clear. So, on Saturday, April 23, Alger called Roosevelt into his office. The three thousand “at large” volunteers, he told him, would be divided into three regiments of mounted riflemen to be recruited in the western territories. Would Roosevelt accept command of one of these regiments?

Alger's offer came as a surprise to Roosevelt, but it was now his turn to surprise Alger. He couldn't accept, at least not the colonelcy. After six weeks in the field, Roosevelt explained, he would have no qualms about leading a regiment. But the war might be over by then. And as rapidly as things were moving right now, the organizing and outfitting of a new regiment, as well as Roosevelt's own military education, would best be served with an experienced officer at the reins. That man, Roosevelt told him, was Leonard Wood. If Alger would appoint Captain Wood the regiment's colonel, Roosevelt would happily accept the lieutenant colonelcy, the second in command.

Roosevelt's refusal of the colonelcy came across to Alger as pure stupidity. Take the command, Alger insisted, and he would appoint

Wood lieutenant colonel. As for organizing the regiment and getting it into fighting trim, it was simple: just order Wood to do the work. But Roosevelt strongly objected.

“I did not wish to rise on any man’s shoulders,” Roosevelt wrote later—he refused “to hold any position where any one else did the work.”

Alger was flabbergasted. Roosevelt’s ego was substantial, but here the secretary was handing him a colonelcy, his own regiment, a chance to grab all the glory, and Roosevelt wouldn’t take it. Not only that, Roosevelt was urging another man in his stead. The secretary ended the meeting cordially, saying he would seriously consider Roosevelt’s request.

The next day, Roosevelt fired off a letter to his ranch foreman in Billings County, North Dakota: “It may be that I am going to Cuba.” If so, he continued, he might come there to raise a company of volunteers. “I shall telegraph you at once when anything is decided. As yet it is all in the dark, and I may not be able to go [to Cuba]. I have been anxious to strike for the last six months.”

But in just twenty-four hours, the darkness evaporated. On Monday morning, April 25, Alger informed Roosevelt that he would appoint Wood colonel of the regiment. Roosevelt then agreed to accept the appointment as lieutenant colonel. Until the regiment was recruited, however, he would continue to fulfill his duties as assistant secretary of the navy, at which time he would resign.

It’s doubtful that any other man in Washington that morning was as giddy as thirty-nine-year-old Theodore Roosevelt, but some of the wives in the administration were appalled at what they saw as his outright selfishness, and they confronted him about it.

“Mr. Roosevelt, you have six children, the youngest a few months old and the eldest not yet in the teens,” one said. “While the country is full of young men who have no such responsibilities and are eager to enlist, you have no right to leave the burden upon your wife of the care, support and bringing up of that family.”

In truth, it was much more of a burden upon Mrs. Roosevelt than

these women knew. Theodore Roosevelt had married Edith Carow, a childhood playmate, nearly three years after the death of his first wife. Edith gave him five children, four boys and a girl. On March 7, she'd undergone a dangerous surgery to drain an internal abscess, from which she was still recuperating. On top of this, their eldest boy, ten-year-old Ted, was fighting a mysterious illness. Their conditions were so serious that Roosevelt wondered if either would fully recover.

Still, that did not sway Roosevelt's resolve. "I have done as much as any one to bring on this war," he told the ladies, "because I believed it must come, and the sooner the better, and now that the war is declared, I have no right to ask others to do the fighting and stay at home myself."

Years later, he would confide to an aide, "I know now that I would have turned from my wife's deathbed to have answered that call." It was his "one chance to cut my little notch on the stick that stands as a measuring rod in every family."

The administration wives were far from the only ones dismayed at Roosevelt's actions. Privately, his boss, Secretary Long, strongly disapproved. Writing in his diary the same day Roosevelt accepted Alger's offer, Long commented that his subordinate was a "man of unbounded energy and force. He thinks he is following his highest ideal, whereas, in fact, as without exception every one of his friends advises him, he is acting like a fool."

Yet Long had to admit there might be something to this foolishness. "[H]ow absurd all this will sound," he wrote, "if, by some turn of fortune, he should accomplish some great thing and strike a very high mark."

Getting a command was one thing. Getting that command recruited, fully outfitted, and then setting soldiers on Cuba's beaches with the army's first wave was going to be a near-Herculean task. To begin with, the Ordnance and Quartermaster Departments were sure to see a mad rush for weapons, uniforms, and accoutrements, some of

which were in short supply. And moving the recruits from rendezvous points in the far western territories to a single location where they could be organized and trained would take time, as would purchasing hundreds of cavalry mounts.

And of course, once they got to Cuba, Wood and Roosevelt's regiment would be jockeying for a place along with Regular Army units, state National Guard units, and the other two cowboy regiments. If, as Roosevelt expected, the war was short, many of the volunteer units would never see action. Any trifling delay or snafu could knock theirs out of the hunt.

But the two friends started with a decided advantage. First, they were, for the moment, both in Washington, close to the army personnel they would need to call upon for their various wants. Second, they were Roosevelt and Wood. Their close relationships in the administration, from the president on down, had already gotten them their own command. And with the War Department now in a frenzied state, Secretary Russell Alger was more than happy to give them a free hand.

"Go right ahead and don't let me hear a word from you until your regiment is raised," he told Wood. "When your requisition and other papers are ready, bring them to me to sign, and I'll sign them." No other regimental officers had anything close to that kind of free hand.

Wood promptly planted himself in the secretary of war's office, where he sent and answered a flurry of telegrams concerning the raising of the 780 men authorized for his regiment. Under the secretary's name, he asked the governor of New Mexico Territory for four troops, and two from the Arizona Territory. Oklahoma Territory, one troop. And when officials from the Indian Territory (present-day eastern Oklahoma) complained that they were not included in the call for volunteers, they were asked to contribute two troops.

The regiment's military designation was the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, but within days, the press was calling it "Roosevelt's Rough Riders."

"The newspapers keep talking about Roosevelt's Regiment," a

friend wrote Wood. "Give the reporters a bit of discipline & have things called by the right name."

But Wood didn't mind that his lieutenant colonel was getting all the attention. And there was nothing he could have done about it, anyway. "This only goes to show," observed one newspaper in a biting tone, "that wherever Roosevelt rides is the head of the parade."

Clever journalists coined other nicknames for the cowboy regiment—"Teddy's Terrors," "Teddy's Toughs," "Roosey's Red Hot Roarers," and the ghastly "Rooseveltians"—but Rough Riders stuck.

Officially, the recruits were supposed to be "frontiersmen possessing special qualifications as horsemen and marksmen." But Roosevelt was quick to tell the press that the recruits did not have to be cow-punchers, even though these "at large" volunteer units were being referred to as "cowboy regiments." Above all else, he said, they must be good men: "Desperate characters and reckless mountaineers and plainsmen will not be enlisted."

And it went without saying that no black men would be enlisted, even if they were sure enough cowboys. At this time, and for decades to come, the U.S. Army was segregated.

Roosevelt emphasized that he didn't want men who were looking for some kind of outdoor soiree. "If anyone is going into the regiment with the idea that it is to be a hippodrome, he is making an error," he said pointedly. "If there is any fighting, this regiment is going to be in it. That is what it is for."

Western governors were eager to send men Roosevelt's way, and some of them took an active role in soliciting specific recruits. New Mexico governor Miguel Otero designated Santa Fe as the rendezvous point for the territory's four troops, "because I want to personally inspect every man that leaves." He assured the secretary of war that "only A-1 men would be accepted."

One of the A-1 men Otero had in mind was famed lawman Pat Garrett, the slayer of Billy the Kid. But the forty-seven-year-old Garrett, sheriff of Doña Ana County, was in the midst of a manhunt for the murderers of a prominent local prosecutor; it was not a good

time to go to Cuba. And the lawman already had enough notoriety to last a lifetime and beyond.

Even with Garrett unavailable, Otero would have no problem finding other eminent citizens to serve. A larger concern for the governor were rumors that some of New Mexico's "Hispanos," who made up more than two-thirds of the territory's population, sympathized with Spain. These rumors, according to Otero, had been "started for some selfish motive by some individuals." He wished to assure the secretary of war that New Mexico's Hispanos "are all extremely anxious to go to the front. All their sympathies are entirely with the United States and Cuba, and against Spain." Moreover, Otero pointed out that the territory's bilingual men would be particularly valuable during an invasion of a Spanish-speaking country.

In reality, when New Mexico gathered its quota of recruits in Santa Fe, only about five percent of them were of Spanish descent. Oddly, Otero would later claim that he purposely limited the number of native New Mexicans accepted. In a May 3 letter, he admitted that "I did not like to include a great number of native citizens, because I have lived here long enough to know that the 'cow-boy' generally does not get along any too well with the New Mexican, as during the Civil War New Mexico furnished 9,500 federal troops who did the principal fighting against the Texas troops, and the border cow-boys look on us still with just a little disfavor."

Actually, animosity between New Mexicans and Texicans dated back to before the U.S.-Mexican War, but whether it was because of this or some other reason, the New Mexico contingent would count only a handful of men of Spanish descent. Just one Rough Rider officer was a Hispano: Captain Maximiliano Luna. The twenty-seven-year-old Luna, a former county sheriff, was a rising star in the territory's Republican Party and a member of New Mexico's legislative assembly.

Another criticism the governor and others had to manage was that the recruits weren't the real deal; that is, they weren't true "rough riders." A newspaper article labeled Luna's troop a bunch of

“tenderfoot cowboys” and doubted that many of them would be accepted into the regiment. However, this slander came from the *Albuquerque Democrat*, which was naturally hostile to Otero’s Republican administration—hardly an unbiased observation.

Then there was the unnamed New Mexico man who told the *New York World*, “Roosevelt’s cowboy regiment is liable to be a fake.” He claimed the men were not being recruited in cowboy country but in railroad towns. “Probably not 10 percent of the men recruited ever were cowboys in their lives,” he said, “and I doubt if one-fourth of them ever rode a horse.”

This same criticism cropped up in Arizona as well. “The members of this so-called ‘cowboy’ regiment seem to have been recruited from the sort of cowboys that ranges up and down Washington Street, Phoenix,” complained one Arizona newspaper. “Many of them are not horsemen in the mildest construction, and as crack marksmen have yet to distinguish themselves.”

Indeed, Captain James McClintock, himself a newspaper journalist, admitted that in his Arizona troop, “the working cowboy is not materializing very rapidly.” Nevertheless, a good many of the men had “graduated as cowboys,” he argued, and they were expert horsemen. And, echoing Roosevelt’s criteria for the recruits, McClintock added: “The character of the men enlisting is of the very highest kind morally and intellectually. They come from among the very best people of Phoenix and will be a great credit to the territory.”

The men rushing to sign up did represent all manner of society. They were miners, lawyers, stenographers, actors, printers, carpenters, saddlemakers, electricians, barbers, jewelers, bakers, railroad workers, schoolteachers, painters, and, to be sure, cowboys. Twenty-four-year-old George Hamner was a night telegrapher with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway at Wagon Mound, New Mexico, when he caught the fever to enlist, although he almost caught it too late. On May 5, he sent a telegram to New Mexico’s adjutant general, Henry B. Hersey, who had been appointed major of the New Mexico Rough Riders:

Wagon Mound N.M. May 5

*H. B. Hersey,
Adjt Genl*

Any chance to get in cavalry now? Answer collect.

Geo Hamner

Hersey's reply came back forty-six minutes later:

Santa Fe 5/5

Geo. Hamner

Wagon Mound NM

If you are first class horseman and shot and ready to face anything and can take today's train for Santa Fe Come Otherwise do not come.

Hersey Major

Hamner jumped on the next train for Santa Fe and became a member of Maximiliano Luna's troop. In a letter to his girlfriend in Virginia, Hamner explained his reason for enlisting, and it had nothing to do with liberating the Cubans: "I am fighting, or going to fight, to avenge the *Maine*. And 'Remember the *Maine*' is our war cry!" Most of the recruits had the same motivation. A special train carrying prospective Rough Riders from northeastern New Mexico sported large banners the length of each Pullman car. One banner proclaimed in huge letters, "WE REMEMBER THE MAINE."

Some men, though, had other pressing reasons for wanting to go to Cuba. According to one Rough Rider, certain of his comrades had joined because they had either skipped bail, were wanted for horse stealing, or, worse, had killed someone. That was indeed true of Oklahoma outlaw Jim Cook, a member of the notorious "Cook Gang," led by his brother Bill. Jim had escaped from the Cherokee National Penitentiary in Tahlequah, Indian Territory, during the previous winter, where he had served half of an eight-year manslaughter sentence. The



A crowd sends off Rough Rider recruits from the depot at Las Vegas, New Mexico Territory. (Courtesy of the City of Las Vegas Museum and Rough Rider Memorial Collection.)

twenty-three-year-old fugitive became a member of Troop L, which was raised at Muskogee. He even used his real name.

Another wanted man who joined up was later startled and crest-fallen to bump into the Arizona lawman who'd been on his trail. The two men's names are unknown, but the story of their encounter was told again and again:

"Well," the wanted man said, "you've got me at last."

"How do you mean I've got you?" the lawman said.

"Why you have. You came for me, didn't you?"

"I didn't come for you," said the lawman. "I'm here to fight under Roosevelt same as you are. I don't know you except as a soldier."

"You mean you're not my enemy anymore?"

"No sir, I haven't any enemies now but Spaniards."

"And you ain't goin' to give me up?"

"Not in a hundred years! There's my hand on it, comrade."

On Wednesday, May 4, Leonard Wood called at the White House to see the president one last time. The two took a long walk on the White House grounds, and Wood briefed McKinley on his dizzying efforts of the last few days to raise and equip the Rough Riders. The surgeon was pleased that he had been able to secure Model 1896 Krag-Jorgensen carbines for his men. They were standard issue for the Regular cavalry, and having the same firearms increased the odds that his regiment would be brigaded with the Regulars. This was critical because the Regulars would likely see most of the action in a brief conflict.

Moreover, the Krag-Jorgensen fired a .30-40 round using smokeless powder. This meant that his men would not have to wave away a cloud of white smoke after pulling the gun's trigger, unlike the National Guard units, which were equipped with older guns using black-powder cartridges. It also meant that their positions would not be revealed to the enemy by the telltale puffs of gunsmoke.

For sidearms, Wood had ordered the time-tested and nearly indestructible Model 1873 Colt Single Action Army revolver. It had a five-and-a-half-inch barrel, making it easy to get the gun in and out of its holster, and it fired a .45-caliber cartridge, which could punch a good-sized hole in just about anything close up. Another advantage was that most westerners either owned a Colt of their own or were at the very least thoroughly familiar with it. As Roosevelt put it, the men were "armed with what might be called their natural weapon, the revolver."

Of course, cavalymen were famous for carrying sabers, but it would take precious time to train the men to use them efficiently, and the cavalry saber probably wasn't very practical considering the mostly unbroken horses that would be purchased for the troops. For the first week or so, a rodeo could break out any minute with these semiwild mounts; the recruits didn't need long, pointy blades thrown into the mix.

Instead of sabers, Wood wanted machetes, the same kind that were used in the Cuban sugar fields—and were being carried by the Cuban insurgents. One eyewitness to the machete's use in combat reported “that almost every one struck at all is struck on the side and back of the neck. The blow almost severs the head from the body.” It turned out these “Cuban” machetes were made by the Collins Co. of Hartford, Connecticut, and Wood directed that they be purchased there for the Rough Riders.

As for uniforms, Wood was told flatly by the quartermaster general that none were to be had. But the quartermaster general was referring to the army's standard blue wool uniform. Wood didn't want those; the stifling Cuban jungle was going to be torture enough. He wanted the Model 1884 fatigue uniform made of brown canvas. Those were available, he was told, although the shirts would have to be the regulation dark blue wool flannel pullover. There were plenty of those, too, and, as one Rough Rider remembered, they were “hotter than hell.”

Wood told the president he had selected San Antonio, Texas, as the rendezvous for his troops. The home of the Alamo was the location of Fort Sam Houston and the San Antonio Arsenal, where they could draw what supplies were available, even if they were likely to be rather antiquated. Additionally, San Antonio was surrounded by horse country, and it was not far from Gulf of Mexico ports where the regiment could board a transport for Cuba.

Wood was due to depart for San Antonio that same day. He told McKinley that Roosevelt would remain in Washington for a few days longer, to stay on top of the requisitions and to tidy up any loose ends in the Navy Department.

When the two men ended up back at the White House, they said good-bye. And with a salute to his commander in chief, Wood was off to Texas and, he hoped, the chance for his and Roosevelt's cowboys to strike a blow for the *Maine*.