
Cuba Libre! Army-Navy Cooperation in 1898



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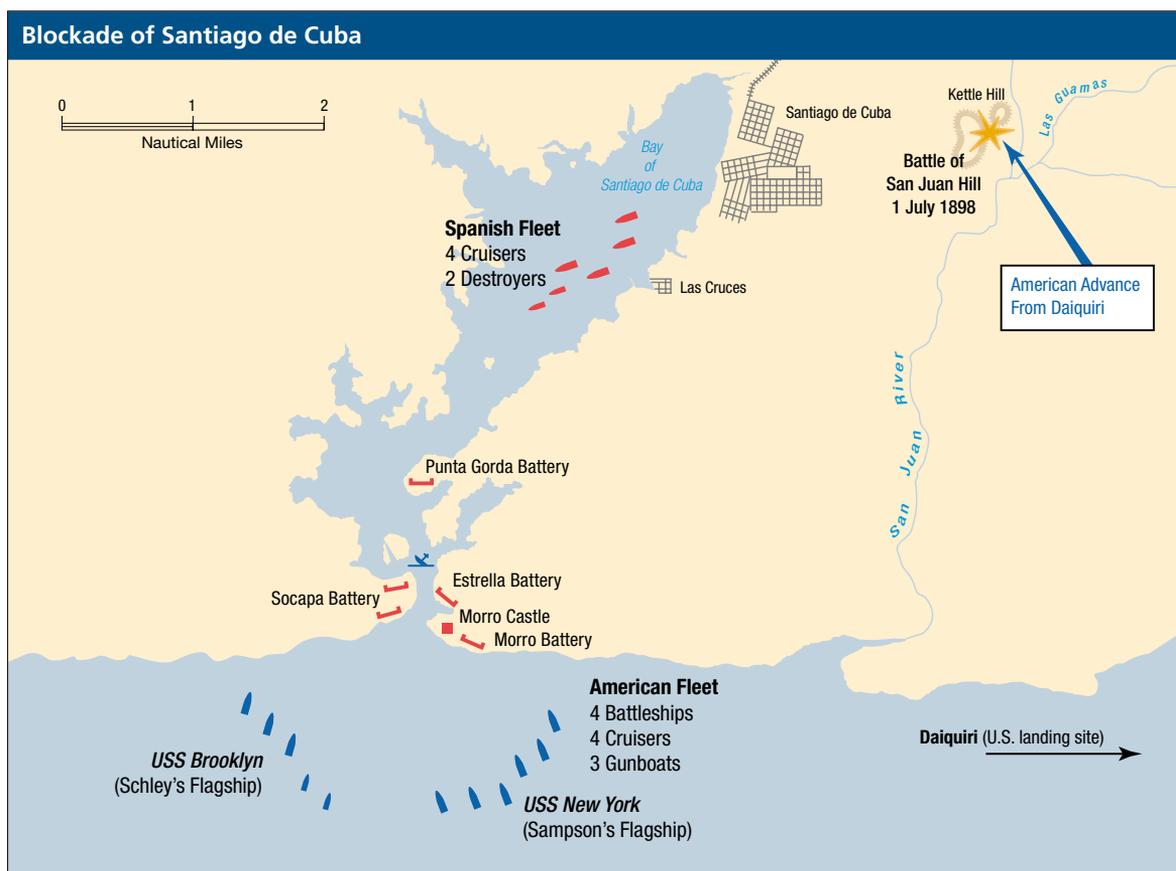
Bloody Ford,
July 1, 1898 by
Charles Johnson Post

By JONAS L. GOLDSTEIN

On April 11, 1898, President William McKinley asked Congress for authority to intervene in Cuba to end the conflict between the Spanish colonial government and local insurgents who had launched a revolt in 1895. A declaration of war was issued on April 25. Initial combat occurred half a world away when naval forces under Commodore

George Dewey defeated the Spanish at Manila Bay. Dewey, subsequently promoted to admiral, then assisted land forces under General Wesley Merritt in capturing Manila. This victory crippled efforts by Spain to bolster forces in the Caribbean or threaten America on a second front. Nevertheless, overestimating Spanish seapower, municipalities along the eastern seaboard of the United States called for defense against marauding Spanish ships, while Washington rushed to blockade Cuba. Against a backdrop of unprecedented global engagement, the services drafted joint plans for projecting U.S. power abroad.

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Service Responses

At the outset of the war, the Navy was better prepared than the Army in both organization and weaponry. The fleet had four first-class battleships: *USS Indiana*, *USS Massachusetts*, *USS Oregon*, and *USS Iowa*, as well as a second-class battleship, *USS Texas*. Among other major surface combatants were armored cruisers, including *USS New York* and *USS Brooklyn*, which were fine vessels for their day. The Navy also had six double-turreted monitors and activated 13 outmoded monitors of Civil War vintage. Finally, there were 18 smaller vessels useful against ships of their own class or in blockades, helpful since a strategic goal was blocking Cuban ports under Spanish control.

In addition, when war broke out the government transferred 13 revenue cutters along with their officers and crews to the Navy. These were not only important for the blockade but in transporting troops to Cuba. Congress also appropriated \$50,000,000 for national defense. Because the War Department had not yet finalized its plans, the bulk of the money went to the Navy, which bought civilian vessels—including 123 merchant ships and yachts—and outfitted them for war.

The Navy response was not surprising. The department had been relatively well organized since the Civil War. The Secretary of the Navy administered the service with support from an able Assistant Secretary, Theodore Roosevelt. Although there was no chief of staff, civilian officials worked with bureau chiefs, who were rotated so that naval leadership remained responsive.

The Navy had also given thought to fighting future wars. Prior to the conflict, its strategic thinking was concentrated at the Naval War College, where alternatives were considered regarding a possible war with Spain. Creative thinking in the schoolhouse was matched by energetic training in the fleet. At sea and ashore, naval officers invested in readiness. As Roosevelt stated:

Except actually shooting at a foe, most of the men on board ship went through in time of peace practically all that they would have to go through in time of war. The heads of bureaus in the Navy Department were for the most part men who had seen sea service and expected to return to sea.¹

Secretary of the Navy John Long created the Naval War Board in March 1898. Its original members were Roosevelt; Captain Arant Crowninshield, Chief of the Bureau of Navigation; Rear Admiral

Montgomery Sicard, recently detached from Commander in Chief, North Atlantic Squadron; and Captain Albert Barker. Some of the members assumed other duties once war was declared. Its permanent members included Sicard (as chairman), Crowninshield, and Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. The board proved valuable during the conflict both to the Secretary and the President. As Long said:

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It was eminently fitted to coordinate the work of the department and the fleet, and to keep a general surveillance over the larger strategic and technical questions which could not be dealt with by the commanders in chief of the several squadrons. . . . To my mind the board possessed high intelligence and excellent judgment, and its service was invaluable in connection with the successful conduct of the war.²

Although the Navy was fairly well prepared, the Army was not. As Roosevelt stated:

The War Department was in far worse shape than the Navy Department. . . . [After the Civil War] the only way in which the Secretary of War could gain credit for himself or the administration was by economy . . . through [reduction in the size of the Army].

The bureau chiefs were for the most part elderly incompetents.³

At the outset of the war, the Army numbered roughly 28,000, with twenty-five infantry, ten cavalry, and five artillery regiments. These units were not prepared for a war with Spain since the Army assumed it would play a subordinate role to the Navy and that the fundamental mission of land forces was defending the Nation's borders. This view explains much of the indifference in the War Department until mid-April 1898.

As Secretary of War Russell Alger wrote:

The War Department had, on April 23, accomplished some little extra work on the coast defenses; it had ready for use enough 30-caliber rifles to arm the 33,000 men added to the regular Army, and enough 45-caliber Springfields for the volunteers; but that was all.⁴

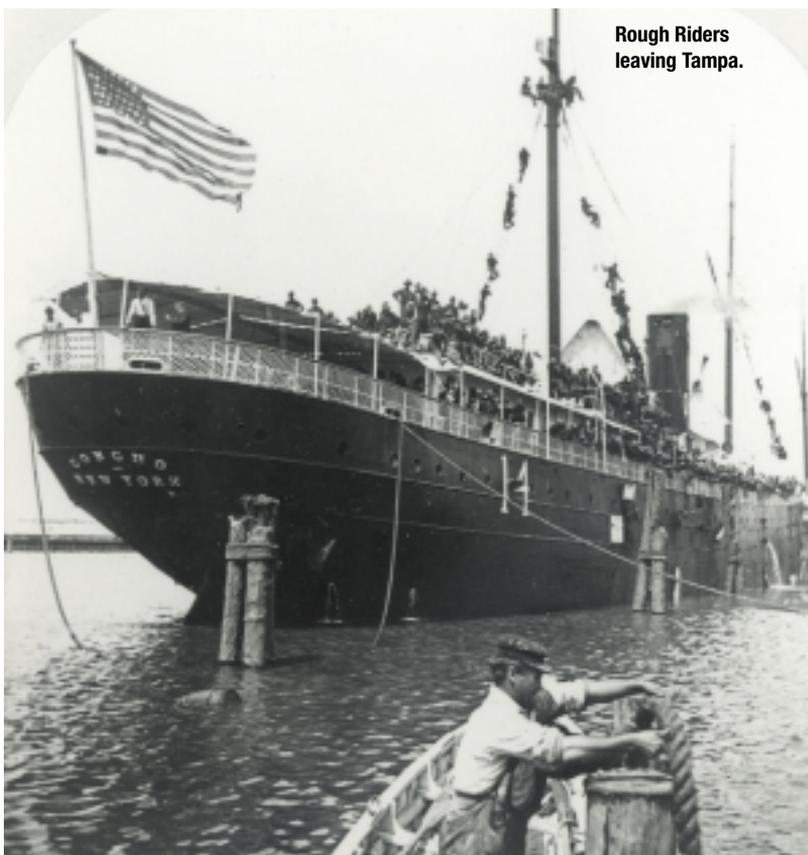
After much discussion with Congress, the administration decided to create a volunteer army to serve beside the regulars. An initial call for volunteers was confined to members of the National Guard, with quotas for each state according to population. It was also decided to form national organizations of volunteers—a concept that produced the famous Rough Riders. Congress passed a bill to that effect on April 22. The next day, the President issued the call for 125,000 volunteers. On April 26 Congress authorized a regular army of 64,719. Thus the stage was set for launching a major land campaign against the Spanish.

Strategic planning by the Army before the war was minimal, although some thinking went into an invasion of Cuba. Once war came vigorous action was stifled by the indifference shown by the President toward the War Department and weak Army leadership. Moreover, the assumed primacy of naval operations—by gaining control of waters around Cuba before an invasion—made land operations of secondary concern.

War by Consensus

An early example of joint planning and execution was manifest in Washington by a council of war convened at the White House on May 2. Because the President lacked faith in his Secretary of War and his senior military assistant, General Nelson Miles, he increasingly played a major roll in formulating joint strategy. In this instance, he joined Secretary of War Alger along with Miles, Long, and Sicard. Landing sites and a naval convoy of the invasion force were dominant issues, with little discussion of the ground war to follow.

After war was declared, the Navy instituted a blockade of Cuba. The next step was determined to be the destruction of the Spanish fleet anchored in the Bay of Santiago de Cuba, but it was soon realized that success would depend on an



Rough Riders leaving Tampa.

Naval Historical Center

Marines skirmishing,
Guantanamo.



Naval Historical Center

expedition ashore. This introduced substantial problems. To carry out the invasion, the Army had to procure sufficient transports, made difficult by the Navy commandeering vessels for the blockade. The Army finally obtained ships by securing transports with civilian crews in charge.

The Army planned the invasion throughout May. There was a consensus that control of the sea around Cuba was vital to an invasion. However, there were differences regarding the roles of the two services. The Navy believed the landings would support the destruction of the enemy fleet while the Army envisioned the objective as a victorious land campaign. At first

the Army planned for debarkation near Havana, followed by an all-out drive on the capital. However, General Miles determined that Spanish strength in the area was too great and that the strike should concentrate on the naval base at Santiago de Cuba.

On May 31 General William Shafter—who had an expeditionary force of some 17,000 men in Tampa—was ordered by the War Department

to proceed under naval escort to Santiago. When he received the order, he could not obey. His base was chaotic with guns in one place, mounts in another, and ammunition somewhere else. Moreover, there was confusion between civilian crew members on Army transports and base support staff. Problems abounded, including an inability to unload railroad cars at the right piers. After a delay of over a week the force was ready to proceed on June 7 but was further frustrated when the Navy believed that Spanish ships had been spotted, stalling sailing until June 14.

No Misunderstanding

The main invasion force was V Corps: two divisions and an independent infantry brigade, a dismounted cavalry division, four field artillery batteries, and a handful of auxiliary troops. This force sailed into the Bahama Channel aboard 32 densely packed coastal steamers. A convoy of naval vessels joined the flotilla off Key West and began the slow voyage toward Cuba. Largely because of the inexperience of civilian crews on troop ships, the Navy had to round up and herd the makeshift flotilla. As Richard Harding Davis,

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a journalist who accompanied the convoy, recalled, "We traveled at the rate of seven miles an hour, with long pauses for thought and consultation. Sometimes we moved at the rate of four miles an hour, and frequently we did not move at all . . . We could not keep in line and we lost ourselves and each other, and the gunboats and torpedo boats were kept busy."⁵ Fortunately, as Long added, "Not the slightest attempt was made by the Spanish gunboats lurking in the harbors of Cuba to prevent the American transports with the Army on board from safely reaching their destination."⁶

Deploying and convoying the invasion force was the most notable example of Army-Navy cooperation during the war. The teamwork was outlined in a dispatch to Shafter:

With the approval of the Secretary of War, you are directed to take command on transports, proceed under convoy of the Navy to the vicinity of Santiago de Cuba, land your force . . . under the protection of the Navy . . . and cover the Navy as it sends its men in small boats to remove torpedoes, or, with the aid of the Navy, capture or destroy the Spanish fleet now reported to be in Santiago harbor.⁷

As troops sailed to Cuba—indeed throughout the war—the President was deeply involved. Leadership on this level assured completion of joint strategic planning. As Commander in Chief, McKinley alone had the authority to ensure united action by the Armed Forces. Although the Navy Department did not require close scrutiny in executing its approved strategy, the War Department lacked efficient leadership, making intervention by the President most helpful. His personal secretary noted that the "President seemed to grow more masterful day by day and exhibited infinite tact and gentleness and graciousness in dealing with men."⁸

McKinley fostered the teamwork between the services in Washington, with a war room in the White House connected by telegraph. He also brought military leaders together and assured their efforts were harmonious. With Presidential support, field and fleet commanders ensured interservice cooperation. On June 29, a dispatch from the War Department to Shafter stated, "The President directs that there must be no misunderstanding between the commanding officers of the naval and land forces in and around Santiago and the signal officers of the Army."⁹

Command Conference

On June 20 the American force arrived off Santiago. Admiral William Sampson's chief of staff guided his flagship among the blockading naval vessels. Sailors lined the rails and cheered the troops. Sampson wanted the Army to storm lofty

Morro Castle on the east side of the channel entrance, but Shafter felt the price would be too high.

Sampson and Shafter decided to seek advice from leaders of the Cuban insurrection. The two American officers were pulled ashore with their staffs by a Navy gig and met General Calixto Garcia beyond the coastal cliffs. After Shafter stated his concern, Garcia recommended debarment at Daiquiri, 18 miles east of Santiago, which was acceptable to all parties. As a deception, the Navy bombarded not only that location but other sites simultaneously to distract the Spanish.

On June 1 the joint force still faced the daunting task of getting troops ashore. Long called Captain H.C. Taylor, who commanded the convoy: "The Army will probably ask you to assist the landing with the boats of your convoy, and to cover the attempt with some of your small vessels, which may be done, exercising due caution."¹⁰ In the spirit of this message, Sampson agreed to lend the invasion force all the steam launches and pulling boats with crews that could be spared. Furthermore, command of the operation was put under a naval officer, assisted by a beach-master ashore. Cooperation between the services at Daiquiri proved excellent, though arrangements were complicated when some civilian shipmasters commanding Army transports refused to expose their vessels to danger by moving close to the enemy-held shoreline.

After the successful landing, cooperation between the two services deteriorated as the Army proceeded toward Santiago by an indirect route. The Navy urged a more direct attack, although it was reluctant to risk its ships in a head-on engagement by advancing straight into the harbor defenses. Even when the Spanish naval force was destroyed, the Navy refrained from attacking the channel and forts because of fears of mines and artillery. As Long commented, "The international situation . . . did not permit us to take the risk of throwing our armored vessels away on the mines in Santiago Harbor when there were no Spanish vessels to attack and destroy. We could not afford to lose one battleship."¹¹ Yet, despite debate over the next step in the campaign, and which force should assume greater risk, these disagreements did not end interservice teamwork. Long directed the Navy commander to confer with his Army counterpart to do everything possible to secure the surrender of the enemy, then left the matter to his discretion. From that point Sampson and Shafter ensured the cooperation of their forces through consultation and mutual agreement.

Shafter's troops began a general attack on July 1 and fought several bloody engagements.



Hoisting flag over
Camp McCalla,
June 1898.

Two days later some of the Spanish force attempted to escape by sea but were driven back or sunk in sharp exchanges with the U.S. fleet. On July 17 the enemy garrison at Santiago surrendered. Following the success of the Cuban operation, U.S. forces landed on Puerto Rico on July 25 and took control of the island after dealing with token resistance. By the end of the month Spanish opposition in the Caribbean theater had ended.

The American victory was due as much to the weakness of Spain as to strategy and ability. Still it facilitated U.S. dominance in the Caribbean and the annexation of Hawaii, Guam, and Puerto Rico as well as control of the Philippine islands. The United States had emerged as a world power to be duly considered by the nations of Europe.

Operations during the Spanish-American War reflected a profound military transformation. At the same time, flaws in service cooperation demonstrated that the services would have to reshape its capabilities for a new century. Actions during the war offer lessons on the magnitude of that challenge. Army-Navy cooperation was no substitute for joint doctrine, integrated command, and functional capabilities. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 222.

² John D. Long, *The New American Navy* (New York: Outlook Company, 1903), pp. 162–63.

³ Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, p. 223.

⁴ Russell A. Alger, *The Spanish-American War* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901), pp. 14–15.

⁵ Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Literary Guild of America, 1931), p. 256.

⁶ Long, *The New American Navy*, p. 20.

⁷ H.C. Corbin, dispatch to Major General William R. Shafter, May 31, 1898.

⁸ Margaret Leech, *In the Days of McKinley* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 233.

⁹ *Correspondence Relating to the War with Spain*, Vol. 1 (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1993), p. 67.

¹⁰ Alger, *The Spanish-American War*, p. 81.

¹¹ Long, *The New American Navy*, p. 24.