



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Spanish-American War

As the Marine Corps evolved during the 1890s, the United States' relationship with Spain deteriorated. In line with the Monroe Doctrine, the United States' longstanding foreign policy disavowing European nations' right to reassert or expand colonial control in the Western Hemisphere, Washington officially condemned Spain's campaign against a renewed rebellion in its colony in Cuba. Two events in February 1898 led to war. First, a letter from Spain's ambassador to his government criticizing President William McKinley was leaked to the American press inflaming the American public. Then, on the night of 15 February, the battleship USS *Maine* (1895), sank in Havana Harbor following an explosion, killing 232 sailors and 28 Marines. Many U.S. officials and the American public blamed Spanish sabotage, although Spain believed the explosion was an accident. (The U.S. Navy concluded in 1976 that accidental ignition of coal dust adjacent to the ammunition stores caused the explosion.) By 11 April, President McKinley no longer believed a diplomatic resolution was possible, and he asked Congress for the power to employ armed forces in Cuba. On 19 April, Congress passed a joint resolution recognizing Cuba's independence and authorized the president to use force to expel Spanish troops from the island. Spain subsequently declared war on the United States on 24 April. The United States reciprocated the following day.

Although Cuba dominated Americans' attention, the war's first major actions occurred in the Philippines, another Spanish colony in the western Pacific. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt directed Navy Commodore George Dewey, commanding the Asiatic Squadron, to attack Spanish naval forces in the colonial capital of Manila. In a swift and daring move, Dewey slipped into Manila Bay on 1 May and annihilated a Spanish squadron there. On 3 May, Marines from the cruiser USS *Baltimore* (C 3), commanded by First Lieutenant Dion Williams, occupied the naval station at Cavite, in Manila Bay. The Marines were the first Americans to land and raise the American flag on Spanish-held territory. Other Marine ship detachments landed to assist with the surrender of Guam, a Spanish-held island in the Mariana Islands, and continued guarding Cavite while awaiting Army reinforcements. On 14 August, the

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Spanish defenders surrendered Manila.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

While Marines and sailors defeated Spanish forces in the Pacific, the Army mobilized to form an expeditionary force to land in Cuba, and the Navy prepared to blockade the island. Sailors and Marines of Navy Rear Admiral William T. Sampson's North Atlantic Squadron severed transoceanic telegraph cables between Cuba and Spain to isolate Cuba and hinder the movement of Spanish forces. In one such operation, a party of Marines and sailors set off in small boats on 11 May to cut cables offshore near Cienfuegos, a port on Cuba's southern coast. While locating and cutting the cables, the party came under Spanish fire from the shoreline. After more than two hours braving heavy fire and incurring eight casualties, including two killed, the party completed cutting cables and returned to the ships. Twelve Marines were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions.

In early June, Rear Admiral Sampson requested Marines seize Guantánamo Bay, located on Cuba's southern coast about 100 kilometers east of Santiago. Sampson already had trapped Spain's Caribbean squadron there, and he now hoped to seize the port to serve as a coaling and maintenance station for the blockade. Secretary of the Navy John Davis Long had anticipated this need and had ordered Commandant Heywood on 16 April to organize a Marine battalion for service in Cuba. The Marines were commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Huntington. Within weeks, Marines were encamped at Key West, Florida, in readiness for an offensive operation. On 10 June, Lieutenant Colonel Huntington landed his battalion unopposed at Guantánamo Bay, becoming the first American troops to establish a beachhead on Cuban soil.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines in Battle: Guantánamo Bay, 10 June – 9 August 1898*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

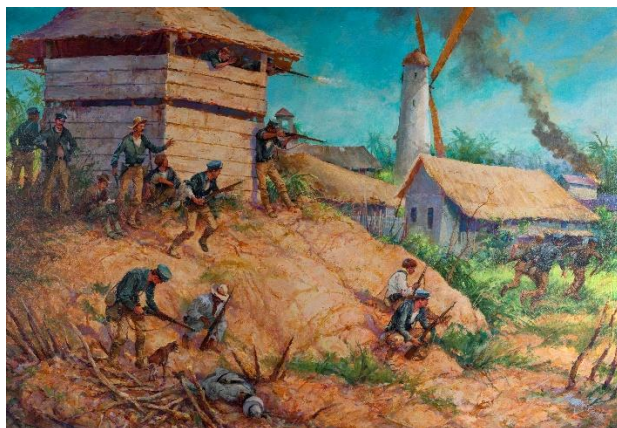


The first night passed uneventfully, but the enemy struck an outpost on the afternoon of 11 June, killing two Marines. After three days of intermittent fighting, Huntington decided to compel the enemy to withdraw by destroying their water supply, a well in the village of Cuzco, about 10 kilometers to the southeast. On 14 June, about 50 Cubans and 2 companies of Marines, led by



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Captains George F. Elliott (later the 10th Commandant of the Marine Corps) and William F. Spicer Jr., started toward Cuzco. Captain Elliott, commanding the attacking force's main body, ordered Second Lieutenant Louis J. Magill and his men to bypass the objective and cut off any enemy retreat. As Magill led his men to the crest of a hill overlooking the well, the dispatch boat USS *Dolphin* (PG 24) opened fire from the bay with the Marines in the line of fire. In plain sight of the enemy and under fire, Sergeant John H. Quick stood up and calmly waved an improvised flag to signal the ship to cease firing. During the confusion, the enemy retreated and abandoned their water supply point. Elliott's forces destroyed the well and returned to Guantánamo Bay that night. Quick emerged unscathed and was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions.



*Cuzco Wells, Guantánamo Bay, by Col Charles H. Waterhouse
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection*

After the Marines secured Guantánamo Bay, the Army's V Corps landed unopposed at Daiquirí, more than 20 kilometers east of Santiago, on 22 June. Casualties mounted due to combat and disease brought on by the harsh climate and poor sanitation. When the Spanish squadron attempted to escape, U.S. ships gave chase and sank all enemy vessels. During the battle, Marines serving with the squadron



helped sailors shovel coal to maintain speed and manned the ships' secondary batteries. U.S. forces next laid siege to Santiago, prompting the Spanish to surrender the city on 17 July. Although Havana remained under Spanish control, the surrender of Santiago effectively ended major combat operations in Cuba.

In the meantime, the United States pursued the capture of Puerto Rico, another Spanish-held Caribbean island east of the Dominican Republic. On 25 July, an Army brigade landed near Ponce, a port on the island's south coast. On the night of 26 July and into the morning hours of 27 July, the Marine detachment from auxiliary cruiser USS *Dixie* (1898), commanded by First Lieutenant Henry C. Haines, landed at Ponce and received the town's surrender. Several weeks later, a Marine detachment from the cruiser USS *Cincinnati* (C 7), commanded by future Commandant of the Marine Corps First Lieutenant John A. Lejeune, landed on Cape San Juan.

On 12 August, the United States and Spain agreed to the peace protocol, formally ending hostilities while a treaty was negotiated. As most U.S. forces withdrew from Cuba and Puerto Rico, Huntington's battalion returned to the United States to great fanfare, marching in multiple parades. The United States and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris on 10 December 1898. Spain agreed to guarantee the independence of Cuba and cede Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States. It also agreed to sell the Philippines to the Americans for \$20 million.

The Spanish-American War was a defining experience for the Marine Corps. The United States' accumulation of overseas territory (including the 1898 annexation of the Hawaiian Islands) justified an enlargement of the naval establishment, including the Marine Corps. The Service's swift deployment of an expeditionary force validated reformers who had professionalized and modernized the Service earlier. The product of those reforms was a performance in the Spanish-American War that did not escape the notice of the nation. The bravery and discipline of Marines during the war created a new image of the Corps, one built on bravery, discipline, and a reputation of being the first to fight.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)