The “Rough Riders” is the name bestowed on the 1st United States Volunteer Cavalry one of three such regiments raised in 1898 for the Spanish-American War and the only one of the three to see action. The United States army was weakened and left with little manpower after the Civil War roughly 30 years prior. As a result, President William McKinley called upon 1,250 volunteers to assist in the war efforts.[1] It was also called “Wood's Weary Walkers” after its first commander, Colonel Leonard Wood, as an acknowledgment of the fact that despite being a cavalry unit they ended up fighting on foot as infantry. Wood's second in command was former assistant secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt, a man who had pushed for US involvement in Cuban independence. When Colonel Wood became commander of the 1st Cavalry Brigade (1st U.S. Cavalry, 106th U.S. Cavalry, and 1st U.S.V. Cavalry) the Rough Riders then became "Roosevelt's Rough Riders". That term was familiar in 1898, from Buffalo Bill who called his famous western show "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World".

The volunteers were gathered in four areas: Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and Indian Territory. They were gathered mainly from the southwest because it was a hot climate region that the men were used to similar to that of Cuba where they would be fighting. "The difficulty in organizing was not in selecting, but in rejecting men."[2] The allowed limit set for the volunteer cavalry men was promptly met. They gathered a diverse bunch of men consisting of cowboys, gold or mining prospectors, hunters, gamblers, Buffalo soldiers, Native Americans and college boys; all of whom were able-bodied and capable on horseback and in shooting. Among these men were also police officers and military veterans who wished to see action again. Men who had served in the normal army during campaigns against Indians or served in the Civil War had been gathered to serve as higher ranking officers in the cavalry.[3] In this regard they possessed the military knowledge and expertise to lead the men strongly and train them to perform their duty as any other military unit would. As a whole, the unit would not be entirely inexperienced. Leonard Wood, a doctor who served as the medical advisor for both the President and secretary of war, was appointed the position of Colonel of The Rough Riders with Roosevelt serving as Lieutenant-Colonel.[4] Volunteers were also gathered in San Antonio, TX at the Menger Hotel Bar.

Equipment

Before training began, Lieutenant-Colonel Roosevelt used his political influence gained as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to ensure that 'his' volunteer cavalry regiment would be properly
The “Rough Riders” is the name bestowed on the 1st United States Volunteer Cavalry equipped to serve as any regular unit of the U.S. Army. For private soldiers and noncommissioned officers, this meant the M1892/98 Springfield (Krag) bolt action rifle in .30 Army (.30-40) caliber "They succeeded in getting their cartridges, revolvers, clothing, shelter-tents, and horse gear ... and in getting the regiment armed with the Krag-Jorgensen carbine used by the regular cavalry."[5] Officers of the regiment each received a new lever-action M1895 Winchester rifle, also in .30 Army. A last minute gift from a wealthy donor were a pair of modern gas-operated M1895 Colt-Browning machine guns in 7mm Mauser caliber.

In contrast, the uniforms of the regiment were designed to set the unit apart. "The Rough Rider uniform was a slouch hat, blue flannel shirt, brown trousers, leggings, and boots, with handkerchiefs knotted loosely around their necks. They looked exactly as a body of cowboy cavalry should look."[6] It was the 'rough and tumble' appearance and charisma that contributed to earning them the title of The Rough Riders.

Training

Training was very standard, even for a cavalry unit. They worked on basic military drills, protocol, and habits involving conduct, obedience and etiquette. The men proved to be eager to learn what was necessary and the training went smoothly. It was decided that the men would not be trained to use the saber as other cavalries often used, because they had zero prior experience with that combat skill. Instead, they chose to have the men stick to the use of their carbines and revolvers as primary and secondary weapons. Although the men, for the most part, were already experienced horsemen, the officers refined their techniques in riding, shooting from horseback, and practicing in formations and in skirmishes. Along with this the high-ranking men heavily studied books filled with tactics and drills to better themselves in leading the others. During times which physical drills could not be run, either because of confinement on board the train, ship, or during times where space was inadequate, there were some books that were read further as to leave no time wasted in preparation for war. The competent training that the volunteer men received prepared them best as possible for their duty. They were not simply handed weapons and given vague directions to engage in a disorderly brawl.

Departure from The United States

On May 29, 1898, 1060 Rough Riders and 1258 of their horses and mules made their way to
the Southern Pacific railroad to travel to Tampa, Florida where they would set off for Cuba. The lot awaited orders for departure from Major General William Rufus Shafter. Under extreme prompting from Washington D.C., General Shafter gave the order to dispatch the troops early before sufficient traveling storage was available. Due to this problem, only eight of the twelve companies of The Rough Riders were permitted to leave Tampa to engage in the war. The many horses and mules were almost entirely left behind on United States soil. Aside from Lieutenant-Colonel Roosevelt’s first hand mention of deep, heartfelt sorrow from the men left behind; this situation resulted in a premature weakening of the men. Approximately one fourth of them who received training had already been lost, most dying of malaria and yellow fever. This sent the remaining troops into Cuba with a significant loss in men and morale.[8]

Upon arrival on Cuban shores, the men promptly unloaded themselves and the small amount of equipment they carried with them. Camp was set up nearby and the men were to remain there until further orders had been given to advance. Further supplies were unloaded from the ships over the next day including the very few horses that were allowed on the journey. "The great shortcoming throughout the campaign was the utterly inadequate transportation. If they had been allowed to take our mule-train, they could have kept the whole cavalry division supplied."[9] Each man was only able to carry a few days worth of food which had to last them longer and fuel their bodies for rigorous tasks. Even after only seventy-five percent of the total number of cavalry men was allowed to embark into Cuba they were still without most all of the horses that they had so heavily been trained and accustomed to using. They were not trained as infantry and were not conditioned to doing heavy marching, especially long distance in hot, humid, and dense jungle conditions. This ultimately served as a severe disadvantage to the men who had yet to see combat.

Assault on Las Guasimas

Main article: Battle of Las Guasimas. Within another day of camp being established, men were sent forward into the jungle for reconnaissance purposes, and before too long they returned with news of a Spanish outpost. By afternoon, The Rough Riders were given the command to begin marching towards Las Guasimas, the point of interest, to eliminate opposition and secure the area which stood in the path of further military advancement. Upon arrival at their relative destination, the men slept through the night in a crude encampment nearby the Spanish outpost they would attack early the next morning.[10]

The enemy held an advantage over the Americans by knowing their way through the complicated trails that littered the area of combat. They knew where the Americans would be traveling on foot and at exactly what positions to fire on. They also were able to utilize the land
and cover in such a way that they were difficult to spot. Along with this, their guns used smokeless powder which did not give away their immediate position upon firing as other gun powders would have. This increased the difficulty of finding the opposition for the U.S. soldiers. Oftentimes the jungle was too thick to see very far forward in places.

General Young, who was in command of the regulars and cavalry, began the attack in the early morning. Using long-range, large-caliber Hotchkiss guns he fired at the opposition that were reportedly concealed along trenches, roads, ridges, and jungle cover. Colonel Wood’s men, accompanied by Lieutenant-Colonel Roosevelt, were not yet in the same vicinity as the other men at the start of the battle. They had a more difficult path to travel around the time the battle began, and at first they had to make their way up a very steep hill. "Many of the men, footsore and weary from their march of the preceding day, found the pace up this hill too hard, and either dropped their bundles or fell out of line, with the result that we went into action with less than five hundred men." Lieutenant-Colonel Roosevelt became aware that there were countless opportunities for any man to fall out of formation and resign from battle without notice as the jungle was often too thick in places to see around you. This was yet another event that left the group with fewer men than they had at the start. Regardless, The Rough Riders pushed forward towards the outpost along with the regulars. Using careful observation, the officers were able to locate where the opposition was hidden in the brush and entrenchments and they were able to target their men properly to overcome them. Towards the end of the battle, Edward Marshall, a newspaper writer, was inspired by the men around him in the heat of battle to pick up a rifle and begin fighting alongside them. When he suffered a gunshot wound in the spine from one of the Spaniards another soldier mistook him as Colonel Wood from afar and ran back from the front line to report his death. Due to this misconception, Roosevelt temporarily took command as Colonel and gathered the troops together with his supreme leadership charisma. The battle lasted a brief hour and a half from beginning to end with The Rough Riders suffering only 8 dead and 31 wounded, including Captain Allyn K. Capron, Jr. Roosevelt came across Colonel Wood in full health after the battle finished and stepped down from his position to Lieutenant-Colonel.

The United States had full control of this Spanish outpost on the road to Santiago by the end of the battle. General Shafter had the men hold position for six days while additional supplies were brought ashore. During this time The Rough Riders ate, slept, cared for the wounded, and buried the dead from both sides. During the six day encampment, men were dropping in numbers from fever. Among those stricken by illness was General Joseph Wheeler. Brigadier General Samuel Sumner assumed command of the cavalry and Wood took the second brigade as Brigadier General. This left Roosevelt as Colonel of The Rough Riders.

Main article: Battle of San Juan Hill
The "Rough Riders" is the name bestowed on the 1st United States Volunteer Cavalry. The order was given for the men to march the eight miles along the road to Santiago from the outpost they had been holding. Originally, Colonel Roosevelt had no specific orders for himself and his men. They were simply to march to San Juan Heights where over one-thousand Spanish soldiers held the area and hold position. It was decided that Brigadier General Henry Lawton's division would be the main fighters in the battle while taking El Caney, a Spanish stronghold, a few miles away. The cavalry was to simply serve as a distraction while artillery and battery struck the Spanish from afar. Lawton's infantry would begin the battle and The Rough Riders were to march and meet with them mid-battle. In this way, The Rough Riders were not seen as a critical tool to the United States Army in this battle.

San Juan Hill and another hill were separated by a small valley and pond; the river ran near the foot of both. Together, this geography formed San Juan Heights. Colonel Roosevelt and The Rough Riders made their way to the foot of what was dubbed Kettle Hill because of the old sugar refinement cauldrons that lay along it. The battle of San Juan Heights began with the firing of the artillery and battery at the enemy location. Soon after battery-fire was returned and The Rough Riders, standing at the position of the friendly artillery, had to promptly move to avoid shells. The men moved down from their position and began making their way through and along the San Juan River towards the base of Kettle Hill. There they took cover along the riverbank and in the tall grass to avoid sniper and artillery fire that was being directed towards their position, however they were left vulnerable and pinned down. The Spanish regular guns were able to discharge eight rounds in the twenty seconds it took for the United States regular guns to fire one round. In this way they had a strong advantage over the Americans. The rounds they fired were 7mm Mauser bullets which moved at a high velocity and inflicted small, clean wounds. Some of the men were hit, but few were mortally wounded or killed.

Colonel Roosevelt, deeply dissatisfied with General Shafter's inaction with sending men out for reconnaissance and failure to issue more direct orders, became uneasy with the idea of leaving himself and his men sitting in the line of fire. He sent messengers to seek out one of the generals to try and coax orders from them to advance forward from their position. Finally, The Rough Riders received orders to assist the regulars in their assault on the hill's front. Roosevelt, riding on horseback, got his men onto their feet and into position to begin making their way up the hill. He claimed that he wished to fight on foot as he did at Las Guasimas; however he would have found it difficult to move up and down the hill to supervise his men in a quick and efficient manner on foot. He also recognized that he could see his men better from the elevated horseback, and they could see him better as well. Roosevelt chided his own men to not leave him alone in a charge up the hill, and drawing his sidearm promised nearby black soldiers separated from their own units that he would fire at them if they turned back, warning them he keeps his promises. His Rough Riders chanted (likely in jest) "Oh he always does, he always does!" The soldiers, laughing, fell in with the volunteers to prepare for the assault.
As the troops of the various units began slowly creeping up the hill, firing their rifles at the opposition as they climbed, Roosevelt went to the captain of the platoons in back and had a word with him. He stated that it was his opinion that they could not effectively take the hill due to a sufficient ability to effectively return fire, and that the solution was to charge it full-on. The captain reiterated his colonel's orders to hold position. Roosevelt, recognizing the absence of the other Colonel, declared himself the ranking officer and ordered a charge up Kettle Hill. The captain stood hesitant, and Colonel Roosevelt rode off on his horse, Texas, leading his own men uphill while waving his hat in the air and cheering. The Rough Riders followed him with enthusiasm and obedience without hesitation. By then, the other men from the different units on the hill became stirred by this event and began bolting up the hill alongside their countrymen. The 'charge' was actually a series of short rushes by mixed groups of regulars and Rough Riders. Within twenty minutes Kettle Hill was taken, though casualties were heavy. The rest of San Juan Heights was taken within the hour following.

The Rough Riders' charge on Kettle Hill was facilitated by a hail of covering fire from three Gatling Guns commanded by Lt. John H. Parker, which fired some 18,000 .30 Army rounds into the Spanish trenches atop the crest of both hills. Col. Roosevelt noted that the hammering sound of the Gatling guns visibly raised the spirits of his men: "There suddenly smote on our ears a peculiar drumming sound. One or two of the men cried out, "The Spanish machine guns!" but, after listening a moment, I leaped to my feet and called, "It's the Gatlings, men! Our Gatlings!" Immediately the troopers began to cheer lustily, for the sound was most inspiring."

Trooper Jesse D. Langdon of the 1st Volunteer Infantry, who accompanied Col. Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders in their assault on Kettle Hill, reported:

"We were exposed to the Spanish fire, but there was very little because just before we started, why, the Gatling guns opened up at the bottom of the hill, and everybody yelled, "The Gatlings! The Gatlings!" and away we went. The Gatlings just enfiladed the top of those trenches. We'd never have been able to take Kettle Hill if it hadn't been for Parker's Gatling guns."

A Spanish counterattack on Kettle Hill by some 600 infantry was quickly decimated by one of Lt. Parker's Gatling guns recently emplaced on the summit of San Juan Hill, which killed all but forty of the attackers before they had closed to within 250 yards of the Americans on Kettle Hill.[20] Col. Roosevelt was so impressed by the actions of Lt. Parker and his men that he placed his regiment's two 7mm Colt-Browning machine guns and the volunteers manning them under Parker, who immediately emplaced them - along with 10,000 rounds of captured 7mm
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Mauser ammunition - at tactical firing points in the American line.

Colonel Roosevelt's example of valor and fearlessness in the face of danger served as motivation to his men to promptly follow his command and spring into the fray. Had it been another leader with less charisma and spunk, the order to charge may not have been given and the cavalry may not have had the same enthusiasm in their charge uphill.[22] As for Roosevelt himself, he gave most of the credit to Lt. Parker and his Gatling Gun Detachment:

"I think Parker deserved rather more credit than any other one man in the entire campaign...he had the rare good judgment and foresight to see the possibilities of the machine-guns..He then, by his own exertions, got it to the front and proved that it could do invaluable work on the field of battle, as much in attack as in defence."