

WINCHESTER & THE FIRST FOREIGN WAR

By Ellen Knight¹

On Feb. 15, 1898, the battleship *Maine*, at anchor in Havana Harbor, exploded and helped ignite war between America and Spain. Beginning as a toast, “Remember the *Maine*” turned into a war slogan repeated around the country. It became a rallying cry also for people in Winchester who patriotically served and supported the troops.



The Spanish-American War brought the country to a turning point from an isolated nation to an international power, a change firmly established by the end of World War I. Fought for the purpose of liberating Cuba from Spanish rule, the Spanish-American War was understood in past times to have been “the first known in the history of the world waged by any government purely for the sake of humanity,” as Roland H. Sherman put it while writing for the 1925 book, *Winchester’s War Records*. Extensive damage to U.S. property also helped precipitate the war against Spain.

One letter from a Winchester volunteer made it clear why they joined up. “It is the Maine we [are] all fighting for,” Augustus Coffin wrote. “When you speak to a soldier about the first thing that comes to his mind is the Maine.”

War was declared in April 1898. American troops went to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Though hostilities ended that summer, the peace treaty was not signed until December or approved by the Senate until February 1899. By the terms of the final treaty, the United States was ceded the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. War with the Philippine Islands, which were unhappy at not receiving independence, then followed from February 1899 to April 1901. Then known as the Philippine Insurrection and now also called the Philippine-American War, this war was less popular with the public, many of whom were strongly anti-imperialistic.



Samuel J. Elder

Though these two conflicts were overlooked when the town’s history was written,² Winchester became involved in the 1898-1899 wars. After war was declared against Spain, the first Sunday in May (May 8) was declared “Maine Memorial Sunday.” At a memorial service held in Town Hall, Samuel Elder, one of Winchester’s leading citizens, gave an address denouncing “the Spanish cruelties and the cowardly sinking of the battleship *Maine*.”

“At the beginning of hostilities,” the Town’s 1898 Annual Report stated, “but a small proportion of our townsmen was in the permanent establishment of the United States forces, but a number were members of the state militia, and when the national government called for volunteers, they with others of our young men, nobly responded, and

some of them are now supporting our standards in the field." A list of 35 men followed.

The newspaper printed patriotic songs on the front page for two months and carried letters, news, and special articles.

SPIRITED BEGINNINGS

While some Winchester men never left the country, some others went to Cuba, Puerto Rica, and the Philippines. Some of the most interesting items in *The Winchester Star* were the letters home that were shared with the paper for the entire town to read. They tell the story of camp life, combat, and new cultural experiences.

George Chesley wrote a cheerful description of camp life. "When we struck this place I tell you the boys were discouraged, for the mud was ankle deep, but now the ground is hard as pavements and we have the best site on the field and there is plenty of water for drinking purposes, but for bathing we have to get a pail full of water and wash in out tent or we can walk about a mile into the woods....

"Through the kindness of Congressman Fitzgerald of Boston we were allowed to celebrate Bunker Hill Day.... We had a ball game in the morning between the 9th and 6th regiments, both of Mass." This was written at Camp Alger on June 20, 1898, eight days before fellow townsman Leon Warren died there of typhoid fever.

Not knowing what lay ahead, one Winchester native was eager to enlist. Edwin B. Smalley, then working in a western state, refused a salary raise and other inducements to remain offered by his employer and returned home to enlist in Co. H. of Stoneham. He also was sent to Puerto Rico. He survived, resettled in Winchester, and became a selectman in 1922.

MISERY

Cheerfulness deserted Private Beverly Belyea after he got to Puerto Rico. Conditions were terrible. "We started from Guanica and have got to Utuado, 18 miles from the other side of the island. The first march we took was 9 miles, after being on board the Yale 17 days and that cramped us all up, and besides they half starved us on board. The next was 10 miles, 13 1-2 miles, 18 miles, 6 miles, 7 miles, 18 miles.... And then the heat. After we would stop marching for that day our clothes would be wringing wet from the sweat....

"The worst thing we had to put up with was where they made us sleep. We would have to sleep in any place they picked out for us and that would be in about 7 inches of mud and water, and all we would have under us would be our rubber blankets and they were full of holes."

"They have got us all into houses now because most all of the boys are sick with cramps, diarrhoea, and some with typhoid fever and malaria fever. There were 334 answered sick call yesterday morning. I have been sick about a month with cramps and diarrhoea. It is no use in

going to the hospital as they can't cure you—they have nothing but pills.”

Belyea also described the food, “we get in the morning hard tack and sour pork, for dinner, hard tack and tomatoes, and for supper we get rice or beans.... We have not had any vegetables or any strengthening food since the first day we landed in Porto Rico.”

His letter concluded, “I don't want to discourage you but you might as well know the truth, since I have left home I have lost 18 pounds.”³ Belyea survived, to be mustered out in Jan. 1899.

TRIUMPH

A few letters were triumphant. Joseph Howard was aboard the *Brooklyn* when the U.S. navy defeated the Spanish forces in the Battle of Santiago de Cuba, the largest naval engagement of the war.

“Yesterday was the greatest day in the history of the U.S. navy,” he wrote on July 4, 1898. “We were all at quarters at 9.30 a.m. when a ship was sighted coming out of the harbor. She was made out to be the flagship Vizcaya of the Spanish navy, and the Oregon opened fire on her at once, she retaliating. Behind her was the other [six] ships.... The last three named ships were sunk as soon as they were clear of the harbor. Now there were the four big armored cruisers left for us to fight. It seemed as though we were in the midst of a perfect hell as the four ships concentrated their whole fire upon us, thinking they could quickly sink us and then run away, but their aim was decidedly wild, and we poured a deadly fire of 5-inch and 8-inch shells into them and soon had two—the Maria Teresa and the Oquinda—seriously damaged and on fire, whereupon they were run upon the beach to save the lives of the crews.

“Now there were two ships left.... When we were in good range our forward 8-inch turret opened fire on the Vizcaya striking her amidships which sent a cloud of smoke skyward and at the same time creating a severe fire aboard her which was uncontrollable, so she was beached burning at a furious rate. This left us but one of the enemies' ships to encounter.... We gave her a hot chase which lasted about an hour, when she ran herself on the beach, at the same time striking her colors.

“We boarded her and the Admiral surrendered unconditionally to Schley.... We were on fire twice, but soon put it out. The Spanish Admiral said if it wasn't for the Brooklyn his fleet would have got away, but as it was we outwitted him and thus caused his ruin.”

Writing in Santiago de Cuba on July 14, 1898, Walter Britton described the fighting from a soldier's point of view: “We went into the firing line at 6:50 a.m. and came out about 5 o'clock. All of our company experienced the same sensation of fear and trembling at the first volley and after that we took things cool and in a matter of fact way. I remember the order to load and the shakes following. We could not see the enemy, only the breast works and blockhouses. That was what we aimed for. We sent hot volleys and got hot ones in return.” At the end, he reported “The Spanish surrendered 20,000 troops and arms.”

PHILIPPINES

The Philippine-American War apparently raised less local interest than the conflict in Cuba and Puerto Rico.⁴ A copy of a state petition against extending sovereignty over the Philippine Islands was available for signatures at Young and Brown's drugstore in Dec. 1898. Some sentiment was expressed publicly against imperialism, but in print at least the conflict received less local recognition.

A letter from a college friend of a Winchester man printed in the local newspaper made a striking contrast to letters from Puerto Rico. The writer, George Campbell, voyaged on the *Grant* in Sept. 1899. "Everything on the boat exceeded our expectations, we could ask for no better accommodation, in fact we lived like kings."

After a stop in Honolulu, "a paradise," his regiment proceeded to Iloilo, Island of Panay, 450 miles from Manila. The town had been taken by surprise, and the inhabitants had fled. "We found such quarters as palaces, court rooms, hotel and private dwellings for us to occupy, all well furnished, nearly every company having a piano in its quarters."

From the boat Campbell had seen another battalion routed, "which made our blood boil." But apparently when he wrote his letter, he had evidently not participated in any fighting and wrote with unalloyed patriotic and enthusiastic spirit. In anticipation of a march on Santa Barbara, he wrote, "the 26th men are determined to perpetuate the name of the New England regiment they love by doing their full duty no matter what the cost."

Augustus Coffin, a member of the 13th Infantry band, wrote from Manilla on Aug. 6, 1899: "We landed in boats made of grass but very strong.... We were camped on a place called the Lunetta and kept there about a week when we were ordered out to the firing line. It was a march of about 8 miles through rice fields and across streams. We started with 1124 men and when we reached our station 465 men had dropped out...."

"The band in Cuba acted as hospital men, but under the new law they are armed as any soldier. I was put in D Company of Governors Island Battalion and it was the first time I had ever fired at a man.... I fired all the cartridges I had, but the Philipinos were safe as far as I was concerned...."

"The men who served in Cuba are having a hard time now, as the damp ground is the best thing in the world to bring back the chills and fever, but so far I have escaped it and hope I shall."

"This is a picnic compared with Cuba although the U.S. papers I read seem to think it is terrible. The death loss is smaller in comparison than in New York City, so I would advise a person to come to Manilla and go out on the firing line."

DEATH



The saddest story was that of the funeral for Leon Warren, the first Winchester man to lose his life while in the service of his country after volunteering for active service in a foreign war. Like over 90 percent of Americans involved in the conflict, he died not from enemy fire but from disease. At age 19 he died at Camp Alger from typhoid fever.

For nearly a year and a half prior the war's breaking out, he had been a member of Company H, 6th Massachusetts. When the call came, he enlisted with his company. "His father, who was a veteran of the Civil War...tried to dissuade his son from joining the army, but the boy's spirit and love of adventure overcame the difficulty, and he went with his regiment to Camp Alger." Warren was only 19 when he died from typhoid fever, one of the pestilences in the trainings camps which infamously killed more soldiers than the enemy. Not only the first from Winchester, he was also the first from the 6th Massachusetts Volunteers to lose his life in the service during this war.⁵

PEACE

The peace treaty, which for the first time gave the country colonial territories, was signed on Dec. 10, 1898.

After the war, one of Teddy Roosevelt's famous Rough Riders became a Winchester resident. William J. Breen joined the Rough Riders in Washington, D.C., in April 1898 and drilled with them in Texas. During June and July, when he rose to the rank of Sergeant, he saw service at Las Guasimas, San Juan, and Santiago in Cuba. With Col. Roosevelt he watched the naval battle of Manila Bay. As a resident of Winchester for more than 30 years afterwards, he was in a position to give a first-hand account of the charge up San Juan Hill to the townspeople.

Locally, tales of this war could also have been told first hand by Alonzo Woodside, who saw much action from Nov. 1899 through early 1901 and settled in Winchester in 1909.⁶ He may have been the town's longest surviving veteran of the Spanish- and Philippine-American conflicts. Born in 1870, he died while a resident of Lebanon Street in January 1961.

¹ This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Dec. 31, 1998. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Henry S. Chapman, *History of Winchester*, 1936.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 23, 1898.

⁴ Little was published in the papers and no mention of the conflict or Winchester participation made its way into the 1899 Annual Report.

⁵ There is a short sketch of Warren's life in "The '98 Campaign of the 6th Massachusetts, U.S.V." by Lieut. F. E. Edwards; Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1899. The quotation, however, is from *The Winchester Star*.

⁶ Woodside's wife was the first woman candidate for the Board of Selectmen.