

Celebrating African-American heritage:

# Buffalo Soldiers AT SAN JUAN HILL

By Dr. Frank N. Schubert

Finding the middle, where the truth sometimes rests, requires you to know the edges. When it comes to responsibility for the victory of the U. S. Army at San Juan Heights, Cuba, on July 1, 1898, the edges are easy to find. On one side, there is the Teddy-centric view, first and most clearly expressed in the writings of Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt of the 1st Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, the legendary Rough Riders. Roosevelt's memoir of Cuba so emphasized his own role that Mr. Dooley, the barroom pundit, created by humorist Peter Finley Dunne, said the book should have been called *Alone in Cuba*.

Roosevelt augmented his campaign of self-promotion by carrying along his personal publicist. Richard Harding Davis' dispatches from the front, picked up by many newspapers and magazines, spread the word of Roosevelt's heroics. They also followed a time-honored tradition: George Custer had taken a reporter on the 1874 expedition that discovered gold in the Black Hills, and Nelson Miles had had one along to record his exploits against the tribes of the southern plains. Now Davis, of the *New York Herald*, did the same, providing Roosevelt with public relations.

The view that Roosevelt dominated the battle at San Juan Heights still has adherents. I saw first-hand evidence, when I made a presentation for African-American History Month at Oyster Bay, N.Y., the great man's home. The press release announced that I would talk about Medal of Honor heroes among Buffalo Soldiers, the black regulars who had served on the frontier and who also fought in Cuba. The notice went on to assert that these Soldiers had "assisted" Roosevelt in achieving victory at San Juan Hill. Clearly, the text implied the more than 2,000 black troopers dodging bullets and pushing their way resolutely forward in the Cuban sun were merely supporting players. Roosevelt still got top billing.

Lately, a competing view has emerged to challenge Teddy-centric claims. This new assertion puts the Buffalo Soldiers at the center of the fighting, relegating Roosevelt to a supporting role. Most recently, this view was stated by Edward Van Zile Scott in his 1996 book, *The Unwept*. According to Scott, "in the Spanish-American War of 1898, veteran black troops ... were more responsible than any other group for the victory."

The new interpretation replaces one extreme position, represented by the emphasis on Roosevelt, with another, focusing on the contributions of African-American Soldiers. These competing viewpoints represent the edges but don't help us understand what happened on the battlefield.

For that, we have to look at the order of battle, read the reports of the commanders and follow the movements of all units on maps of the campaign. The record shows that about 15,000 American troops of Maj. Gen. William R. Shafter's Fifth Army Corps participated in the battles near Santiago, Cuba, on July 1, 1898. About 13,000 of them were white; 2,000 or so were black. Of the 26 regiments in this force, three were volunteer organizations; the vast majority was regular. More than 200 Soldiers were killed in action, and nearly 30 of those who fell were from the four black Regular Army regiments, the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry.

There were two major battles that day, one at El Caney and one on San Juan Heights. Both objectives were east of the city, with El Caney the more northerly of the two. Brig. Gen. Henry W. Lawton commanded his own 2nd Division and the Independent Brigade, a force of about 6,500, which took El Caney. Lawton's troops included more than 500 men of the black 25th Infantry. This regiment was in the thick of the four-hour fight, and one of its members, Pvt. Thomas Butler of Baltimore, was among the first to enter the blockhouse on the hill.

The main objective was San Juan Heights and was attacked

by 8,000 troops of Brig. Gen. Jacob F. Kent's 1st Division and the dismounted Cavalry Division, commanded on this day by Brig. Gen. Samuel S. Sumner. San Juan Heights had two high spots along its north-south axis, one called San Juan Hill and the other later named Kettle Hill by the troops. Both were part of the same objective.

San Juan was a stage for Roosevelt, of whom it was said that he never attended a wedding without wishing he was the bride or a funeral without wishing he was the corpse. The commander of his regiment, Col. Leonard Wood, had been conveniently promoted out of the way, so Roosevelt had the Rough Riders all to himself.

He did not have the battle for San Juan Heights all to himself. There were, after all, 8,000 men in the operation, a total of 13 Regular Army regiments and two regiments of volunteers, including Roosevelt's Rough Riders. The force included about 1,250 black troopers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry in Sumner's Cavalry Division and the 24th Infantry in Kent's 1st Division.

Critics have complained that Roosevelt erroneously and undeservedly claimed credit for the victory at San Juan Hill, when he actually was involved in the assault on Kettle Hill. In fact, he did play a prominent role in the fight for Kettle Hill. His volunteers, part of Sumner's dismounted cavalry force, reached the top of Kettle Hill alongside black and white regulars. The actions of Color Sgt. George Berry of the 10th Cavalry, who carried the colors of the white 3rd Cavalry up that hill along with his own regiment's standard, reflected the shared nature of the operation, with black and white regulars, and Rough Riders fighting together and with one group sometimes indistinguishable from the others.

Once Roosevelt reached the top of Kettle Hill, he watched Kent's troops overrun their objective on San Juan Hill. Still eager for a fight, he urged the men around him to follow him into the fray on San Juan. That's when he found out what happens when you sound a charge and nobody comes. Only a handful of Soldiers heard the great man, and he found himself at the head of an assault that consisted of five Soldiers. Roosevelt retreated, regrouped and assembled a more respectable force that reached the Spanish trenches in time to participate in the last of the fight. "There was," he said, "very great confusion at this time, the different regiments being completely intermingled — white regulars, colored regulars, and Rough Riders."

Roosevelt's observation accurately characterized the mix of troops in the battle for the heights. Overall, the great majority of these Soldiers were regulars; the rest were volunteers. "Their battles," Timothy Egan wrote in an article titled "The American Century's Opening Shot," in the *New York Times*, June 6, 1998, "were sharp, vicious crawls through jungle terrain in killing heat." Regulars and volunteers, blacks and whites, fought side by side, endured the blistering heat and driving rain, and shared food and drink as well as peril and discomfort. They forged a victory that did not belong primarily to Roosevelt, nor did it belong mainly to the Buffalo Soldiers. It belonged to all of them.

Despite the fact that these groups shared the victory and despite the attention that gravitated toward Roosevelt, the post-battle spotlight shone brightly on the Buffalo Soldiers. Since the Reorganization Act of 1866, their regiments had mainly served in the remotest corners of the West. They had fought against the Comanches and Kiowa in the 1860s and 1870s, and the Apaches

Buffalo Soldiers prepare for Battle at San Juan Hill in 1898.  
Courtesy photo

Opposite: 10th Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers, 1894.  
Photo courtesy of Montana Historical Society



between 1877 and 1886. They had seen service in the Pine Ridge campaign of 1890 to 1891. Most of this duty had been performed in obscurity. But Cuba was different. All eyes that were not on Roosevelt seemed to focus on the Buffalo Soldiers. For the first time, they stood front and center on the national stage.

A number of mainstream (that is, white) periodicals recounted their exploits, nurses in the yellow fever hospital at Siboney as well as on the battlefield, reviewed their history, mostly favorably. Books by black authors recounted the regiments' service in Cuba and in previous wars and reminded those who cared to pay attention that the war with Spain did not represent the first instance in which black Soldiers answered the nation's call to arms.

In an age of increasing racism that was hardening into institutionalized segregation throughout the South and affecting the lives of black Americans everywhere, the Buffalo Soldiers were race heroes. Black newspapers and magazines tracked their movements and reported their activities. Poetry, dramas, and songs all celebrated their service and valor.

As Rayford Logan, dean of a generation of black historians, later wrote, "Negroes had little, at the turn of the century, to help sustain our faith in ourselves except the pride that we took in the 9th and 10th Cavalry, the 24th and 25th Infantry. Many Negro homes had prints of the famous charge of the colored troops up San Juan Hill. They were our Ralph Bunche, Marian Anderson, Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson."

Almost 100 years passed before the nation rediscovered the Buffalo Soldiers. The process started with the 1967 publication of William Leckie's *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Black Cavalry on the West* and culminated in 1992, with the dedication by General Colin Powell of the Buffalo Soldier statue at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. For the Buffalo Soldiers, "the American century" is ending the way it had started. In a period of increasing informal segregation, growing dissatisfaction with affirmative action, and the spreading emphasis on a separate African-American minority culture, now books, plays, movies, and even phone cards celebrate the service of these troopers. In what appears to be a disconcertingly similar setting of deteriorating race relations, the Buffalo Soldiers have returned to take their place among America's heroes.

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