

Superintendent of the Iowa Hospital for the Insane at Mount Pleasant.
Eighteenth Biennial Report to the General Assembly. Des Moines:
State Printer. 1895.

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TO SAN FRANCISCO AND BEYOND

The 51st Iowa Volunteers in 1898

by
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Mr. Stobridge, a graduate of the University of San Francisco, is a Regular Army officer stationed in the Washington, D.C. area. He came across the story of the 51st and their popularity in San Francisco while doing research on Camp Merritt.

The 51st Iowa Regiment of Infantry Volunteers rode in comparative luxury on their 1898 railroad trip to San Francisco. Unlike other Volunteers who were also ordered assembled on the Pacific Coast for the Philippine Expedition, the "boys in blue" from Iowa enjoyed plush Pullman travel instead of ordinary coach cars. The 51st arrived in San Francisco at the ferry dock after daylight on June 10, 1898 and were greeted with smiles and flowers by citizens of the city by the Golden Gate. San Franciscans cheered loudly and waved American flags when the Iowa regiment marched down Market Street to Golden Gate Avenue with bunches of flowers pinned to their hats and white calla lilies poked into their rifle barrels. They wheeled on Golden Gate and went on to Camp Merritt, a sometimes damp, sometimes dusty military tent city hastily organized three weeks before the 51st arrived to join the Far East-bound force. The 51st had a strength of 839 officers and men under Colonel John C. Loper and the

184 tents they brought from Iowa were pitched alongside those of other troops in the wind and sand of Camp Merritt. A California newspaper noted approvingly that the Iowa Regiment was really not made up entirely of country boys.¹

California was a logical assembly point for troops bound for the Philippine Islands and it was that green tropical archipelago which set the 51st Iowa Volunteers on their journey to San Francisco and beyond. The Philippine Islands were far removed from Iowa's farms and minds in the spring of 1898 when trouble seemed imminent with Spain over the Cuban problem. After a good share of the Regular Army and numbers of newly-called Volunteers had begun concentrating in Florida and Georgia, President McKinley decided he had better help Admiral George Dewey with troops to finish the job in the Philippines. Dewey had sailed for the Spanish-owned Philippine Islands where he destroyed Madrid's fleet in Manila Bay. He was concerned over the thought of trying to take and hold the city of Manila without accompanying



Col. John C. Loper and Field and Staff Officers—51st Iowa Volunteer Infantry, and Gen. J. R. Lincoln. Bottom (l to r): Dr. Fairchilds, Lt. J. D. Cady. Middle: Maj. W. J. Duggan, Lt. Col. Miller, Brig. Gen. J. R. Lincoln, Col. Loper, A. T. Davidson, adj., Chaplain Williams. Top: Maj. John T. Hume, Lt. J. A. Reed, Lt. H. C. Love, Lt. Compton.

soldiers and signaled the President his estimated need of 5,000 men. In response to McKinley's decision to order troops to the Philippines, as well as to Cuba, the War Department asked Western states to send Volunteers to San Francisco for an expedition to Manila. Major General Wesley Merritt in New York City was placed in command of the newly formed corps designated for overseas duty in the Pacific.

Formation of the thousands of Volunteers and Regulars into brigades on June 13 placed the new command at Camp Merritt in a more military posture. Brigadier General Arthur MacArthur was given command of the 4th Brigade, made up of the 51st Iowa and Volunteer regiments from North Dakota and South Dakota. Brigadier General MacArthur personally checked the bivouacs of the newly-brigaded Volunteers the date he took command. Four days later he again inspected the 51st Iowa and the same day learned that his son Douglas had achieved a brilliant score on the admissions examination for West Point. In addition to inspections at Camp Merritt, there was company drill, battalion drill, and a day for target practice on the rifle range. Reveille was at 5:50 a.m. following which the 51st Iowa conducted physical exercise before breakfast. Call to quarters at 10:00 p.m. finished the day's drills, calls, and details with taps sounding in the darkness at 10:20 p.m.²

Drill and inspections took up a lot of time for the Iowans while at Camp Merritt but there were also salt water smells to be investigated and spectacular California sights to be viewed. The 51st went swimming twice in June at the nearby seaside Sutro Baths, and awarded prize medals at an aquatic match held there. Cold, strong ocean currents precluded much swimming in San Francisco's blue waters but an enterprising group from the 51st later hired a steam launch and toured the Bay. They went as far out as Alcatraz Island and proudly reported none got seasick despite the rocking motion caused when a sea breeze hit the little boat. Song fests at the YMCA tent provided land bound relaxation for the Iowans at Camp Merritt. A supply of writing materials and reading matter was available in other tents staffed by Masons and by the Catholic Truth Society where the Rev-

erend Father Ryan spoke on temperance and urged soldiers to "Sign the pledge." Studious Volunteers were offered classes in the Spanish language by a local lady.³

Vaccinations, unlike Spanish language classes, were not an elective and on June 16 the 51st Iowa offered their bared arms, the same day patriotically inspired citizens of Riverside, California, sent 220 boxes of oranges to the soldiers at Camp Merritt. The Iowa regiment had been relatively free from sickness, a distinction worthy of mention in a local newspaper, when other Volunteer units had lost men to measles and stomach disorders and San Franciscans had become apprehensive over the field sanitation at Camp Merritt. Measles hospitalized the first Iowan on June 22 as Camp Merritt's troop population grew to 14,000, and the entire camp was ordered to disinfect its sinks with a mixture of lime, iron sulphate, and water. Moving the camp to a better location away from ocean wind and chilly fog was one Iowa soldier's solution to the health problem.⁴

Hardy Iowans included a group of musicians in their ranks who were featured at an evening Red Cross aid benefit in the city on June 27. Music by the 51st band was followed by the marching entrance of the Iowa regiment before an estimated 5,000 California spectators, guard mount demonstrations, a physical training demonstration by Company H, company marching drill by Company L, "The Stars and Stripes Forever" by the band, a battalion parade by the 2nd Battalion, bayonet exercise by Company A, and demonstration of tactical drill by Company M. Silvery flashes of bayonets and a steady, snappy cadence drew applause which mounted with the regimental review climax before Major General Merritt, commander of the Philippine Expedition. The Iowans and their popular band again went as a unit into the city on July 4 for the downtown Independence Day parade where San Francisco Mayor James Phelan witnessed the march-by.

Parades were followed by pay day, as much an event for Volunteers as for the longer-term Regulars, so the 51st cancelled all drill on July 11 when the men received their gold and silver coinage. Col. Loper told his Iowans they

were due back in camp by ten that night because they were in California for a serious reason, not a holiday. Next day he lauded his Volunteers for their pay day conduct and observed very few men had ended up in the guard tent for overstaying the ten p.m. deadline. Those Iowans who did commit infractions of military law received punishments ranging from ten days restriction to camp for trying to sneak past the guards after hours to a fine of two dollars for disorderly conduct in quarters after taps.⁵

The Iowans continued at Camp Merritt but shortly after their arrival from Des Moines the 1st Nebraska and several other regiments left on requisitioned ships for the Philippines, followed by Brigadier General MacArthur and the 1st North Dakota among others, while in July the Montana and South Dakota Volunteers sailed out the Golden Gate. Irate San Franciscans had in the meantime complained to Washington over the poor facilities and the unsatisfactory sanitation at Camp Merritt, sufficient to cause dispatch of a War Department telegram ordering the closure of the sandy military encampment. Remaining Philippine Expedition troops were instructed to displace a mile north where the greener grounds of the Regular Army's Presidio of San Francisco met San Francisco Bay. Camp at the Regular's permanent post was to be a new grouping of tents near the eastern end of the Presidio sheltered from the Pacific's winds and overlooking Angel and Alcatraz Islands. The 51st struck its tents at Camp Merritt, packed heavy baggage, and on the afternoon of July 29 moved to the Presidio.⁶

The Iowans new encampment was more comfortable, better organized, and much cleaner than Camp Merritt. From Council Bluffs a soldier's father wrote to a California newspaper thanking the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce for their efforts to get the Iowa regiment moved away from Camp Merritt to a better location. Bunk platforms were constructed inside the new tent sites at the Presidio so the men could sleep away from contact with the damp ground and one Iowa soldier described their new quarters as comfortable as Pullman cars. Another Iowa tent occupant recorded his pleasure in having a dry, canvas home equipped with a floor and a stove

at the new cantonment, named Camp Merriam in honor of the Department of California commander.⁷

At Camp Merriam, on the Presidio grounds, the 51st was placed in the 2nd Brigade under Brigadier General Charles King who put the Iowa regiment, along with the 20th Kansas and the 1st Tennessee, through their paces in August with brigade-size drills on the open grass and pine hills of the Army post. Training continued after Brigadier General Marcus Miller replaced King in command, though with the approach of California's rainy season drills were sometimes interrupted so the men could dash to their tents and escape a drenching. Brown uniforms were still worn at drill, but at Camp Merriam the blue uniform was prescribed for guard mount, inspections, and parades of the Iowa regiment.⁸

Uniforms and equipment had been issued to the 51st because they had offered to serve the United States in an overseas campaign but the government was plagued with the continual problem of finding enough shipping to move the Philippine Expedition across the Pacific. Spain and the United States declared a military armistice on August 12 and in the Iowa ranks the question on men's minds became not when would they go to Manilla but instead would they go at all. Great disappointment was proclaimed to the Secretary of War by an Iowa editor over lack of sailing orders for the 51st Volunteers. The word was out on August 22 that the 51st would get an issue of two white uniforms and depart for station at recently-annexed Honolulu. Two days later there was mumbling at Camp Merriam when Iowa movement orders were cancelled and on August 27 information was that the 51st would be mustered out because there was no more need for troops around Manila. Countermanded orders and rumors continued into September when the press said the 51st would positively be off for the Philippines as soon as transports were available to convey the regiment from California. Iowa's soldiers doubted they would sail at all.⁹

The 51st did move in September but only a hundred feet uphill at Camp Merriam. Shifting the Iowa tents a hundred feet was a sanitary precaution designed to forestall repetition of any spread of sickness such as Volunteer regiments had

experienced at Camp Merritt and there was definite cause for concern with cases of typhoid reported in the new garrison. General Miller ordered soldiers in camp to bathe their entire body at least once a week and to take foot baths more frequently.

There was a limit to how much drill and inspections the troops could endure living in tents amidst conflicting announcements and fluctuating rumors on the 51st Iowa's ultimate destination. Diversions were sought from the Volunteers' daily camp routine. A rifle match was held among the regiments at Camp Merrian which the Iowans won handily on September 30 with a score of 834 over point totals of 710 for the 1st Tennessee and 699 for the 20th Kansas. Company M of the 51st took a silver trophy as the winner of a competitive marching drill in San Francisco between the Iowa and Tennessee regiments. On a less military air, the Iowan's with their goat mascot played Stanford University's football team on October 19, and beat them 6-0.¹⁰

An Iowa soldier wrote home on October 7 that he thought the 51st would never go to Manila. The 51st had arrived in California the previous June and with months passing and monotony increasing an Iowa chaplain took advantage of the lull to apply for furlough home to get married. He returned to San Francisco with his bride on October 22 where the newlyweds were serenaded by the Iowa band. Orders for the 51st swiftly followed and on November 3, 1898, the Iowa Volunteers marched along Lombard Street under threatening morning skies and boarded the chartered transport "Pennsylvania." Coffee and sandwiches were served the embarking soldiers by the Red Cross, with one, notable, over-celebrated exception the Volunteers walked soberly aboard ship, and a large crowd of San Franciscans waved to the popular Iowans on their departure. The chaplain's bride was not among those who waved; with war's end in the Philippines and insurrection not yet fully begun, she had received special permission to accompany her husband to Manila. By evening the "Pennsylvania" was out to sea and some of the 51st had experienced the first sharp pangs of seasickness.¹¹

California had been an unexpected interlude for the 51st

Regiment and a much more pleasant experience than that of the Iowa regiments who went east. For the United States the mingling of Iowa, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and Colorado regiments amidst patriotic San Franciscans and the splendid new sights at the Golden Gate helped erase vestiges of Civil War grudges. For the Iowans, the military prowess they had built at Camp Merritt and Camp Merriam was drained away on a prolonged ocean trip. Following shore leave in Honolulu the 51st arrived at Manila on December 7 but was not allowed to debark. Once again orders had been changed for the Iowa regiment. They spent December 1898 and January 1899 on the "Pennsylvania" after being ordered from Manila to the island of Panay where the Spanish garrison was found to have already surrendered to Filipino insurgents. Rather than risk misunderstandings with the Filipinos the "Pennsylvania" stood off Panay until finally ordered back to Manila to allow the 51st ashore. After three months aboard ship the 51st Iowa landed on Luzon. It had been a long journey from Des Moines, but they were all volunteers.¹²

Notes

¹J. C. Loper to AG, USA, June 5, 1898, Letters Sent, Hqs. 51st Iowa Inf. Vols., Records of Army Commands, Record Group 94, National Archives Building; *Correspondence Relating to the War With Spain* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), p. 593; *San Francisco Daily Report*, June 10, 1898, p. 3.

²Regimental Orders, 51st Iowa Inf. Vols., General Orders 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, RG 94, NA; *Daily Report*, June 13, p. 6, June 14, p. 2, June 18, 1898, p. 2.

³Letters, Paul Bellamy, July 21, 1898, July 26, 1898, I. D. Weeks Library, University of South Dakota; *Daily Report*, June 17, p. 1, June 20, 1898, p. 2.

⁴Letter, P. Bellamy, July 21, 1898; *Report of the Commission Appointed by the President to Investigate the Conduct of the War Department in the War with Spain* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), Vol. VIII, pp. 164-70; *Daily Report*, June 16, pp. 1, 2, June 17, 1898, p. 6.

⁵Regimental Orders, 51st Iowa Inf. Vols., General Orders 10, 14, RG 94, NA; *Daily Report*, June 27, p. 2, July 4, p. 6, July 11, 1898, p. 3.

⁶Report of the Major-General Commanding the Army. *Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1898*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), p. 176; *Official Correspondence*, pp. 556, 602, 618, 734-36, 742.

⁷Letter, P. Bellamy, October 7, 1898; Iowa State Department of History and Archives, Diary of Martin Dunlap, August 8, 1898; *Daily Report*, August 6, 1898, p. 6.

⁸Letter, P. Bellamy, October 7, 1898; Regimental Orders, 51st Iowa Inf. Vols., General Order 20, RG 94, NA.

⁹Letter, P. Bellamy, October 7, 1898; *Official Correspondence*, pp. 739, 748-49; *Daily Report*, August 22, p. 1, August 24, p. 1, August 27, 1898, p. 3. Of the other Iowa Volunteer regiments, the 49th went to Cuba, but the 50th and 52d had their journeys limited to Florida and Georgia respectively.

¹⁰*Official Correspondence*, p. 794; *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 1, 1898, p. 11; *Daily Report*, September 17, p. 1, September 30, p. 3, October 19, p. 6, October 26, 1898, p. 8.

¹¹Diary of Martin Dunlap, November 2, 3, 4, 1898; *Official Correspondence*, p. 832; *Chronicle*, November 3, pp. 3, 6, November 4, 1898, p. 9.

¹²Diary of Martin Dunlap, November 12, 13, 14, 16, 1898; *Official Correspondence*, p. 862; William T. Sexton, *Soldiers in the Sun* (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1939), pp. 71-73.

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