



COURTESY MARY L. JONES

DEWEY

THE SOLDIER DOG

by Mary L. Jones



He was just a pup when he joined a company of soldiers for a life of adventure. His story is still told in Red Oak, Iowa, a tale intricately woven into the lives of the men and the community that loved him.

As the 19th century was winding to a close, the country was stirred into war fever over Spain's treatment of its colonies in Cuba and the Philippines. By 1898 the U.S. had committed itself to a conflict spanning both sides of the globe. For Red Oak, the interest in the Spanish-American War was not just patriotic—it was personal. When the U.S. battleship *Maine* exploded in Cuba's Havana harbor on February 15, Assistant Engineer Darwin R. Merritt, the son of Red Oak's postmaster, was killed, one of more than 260 men who died in the disaster. And so when the call came for the Spanish-American War, Red Oak was ready.

A few years earlier, Red Oak had vied with other communities for its own National Guard unit, finally winning out to form Company M, 3rd Regiment, and by 1896 the community had built a fine brick armory (*top right*). Now with war at hand, the regiment became part of the 51st Regiment and mustered at Camp McKinley, located at the state fairgrounds in Des Moines.

It was there that Company M was joined by a little dog of dubious parentage, "a present of an old colored barber who soldiered in the civil war," according to Company M chronicler Joseph I. Markey. The men were told that the pup was born on the day the battleship *Maine* went down. The black and tan dog was christened Dewey, named for Rear Admiral George Dewey, the commander of the naval squadron that sank the Spanish fleet anchored in Manila Bay.

Joining Dewey was Bob Evans, "a handsome fox terrier," whom the soldiers had obtained from the 49th Iowa Regiment "without their consent." Bob also had a famous namesake—Rear Admiral Robley "Fighting Bob" Evans, commander of the USS *Iowa* at the Battle of Santiago de Cuba.

In early June 1898, Dewey and Bob Evans departed with Company M for San Francisco, where disease would take its toll.

Twenty-seven of the 51st Regiment died while in California—five from Company M.

As the men waited months for their orders, Dewey and Bob were in great demand. Dewey seemed especially attuned to the men who were feeling low. "He was the refuge of many a poor fellow," wrote Markey. "When human companionship failed to bring comfort Dewey was always ready with a show of affection almost human."

Dewey knew all of the bugle calls and watched as each man took his place in rank. If a soldier moved during the playing of the "Star-Spangled Banner," he got a rebuking glance from Dewey. At evening retreat the pup took his position beside the first sergeant at roll call. When the company was turned over to the officer in charge, Dewey would advance along the company front, taking note of each man. At the inspection of the rear rank, "he marched very stately by the side of Capt. [Jesse] Clark." And both dogs posed front and center in the photograph of Company M (*above*).

Dewey's canine comrade Bob Evans maintained his "headquarters" with Company M, but "every regiment knew Bob and at some time tried to steal him. Every night he had to be accounted for or Captain Clark couldn't sleep." Apparently Bob passed the time in camp by scrapping with other dogs, including a bulldog twice his size from the Tennessee unit. Nearly dead, Bob was nursed back to health by regimental surgeon Donald Macrae Jr. and Company M Corporal Ed Logan. His opponent died.

After four months, the 51st boarded the transport ship *Pennsylvania* for the Philippines. Markey recalled, "The first few days at sea he [Dewey] and Bob . . . were sick and miserable like ourselves. During the long voyage they were in demand as playmates and did much to relieve the monotony of the trip. . . . One day Dewey fell heir to a choice bone of fresh meat from the engineer's table. The piece was larger than he could manage and after getting his fill he carried it to the stern of the ship and hid it, then went in search of Bob, whom he brought to the hiding place and presented him the bone."



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PHOTO AND RIBBON: SHS (IOWA CITY)

When the *Pennsylvania* reached Manila Bay on December 8, the war was already over, but troops were put on standby to control the rising number of insurgents. Shuttled to several locations for potential duty, the men finally made camp in early February in Manila. "Night guard duty [at the navy yard] was dangerous work," Markey noted, "and any kind of company relieved the tension. Here Dewey made the rounds of every post all through the night, spending a few moments of each watch with company M boys."

In April they were moved to Malolos. In swampy terrain the company undertook long marches towards trouble spots. Dewey and Bob accompanied the men to the front lines; there was no place to leave them. The number of wounded mounted, and soldiers suffered from heat and malaria, with up to 80 percent of the unit down at one time or another. Somehow Dewey lost the use of one hind leg. "Many times in a long march he would struggle behind, and when night would come we would think he was gone for good. In some manner he always managed to show up, looking desperately worn and hungry," Markey wrote. "We would beg, borrow and steal food for [the dogs]. They always had something to eat even if their human friends had to go hungry."

Dewey was also a "fire-eater." At the crack of bullets, he would move in front of the line and snap at the smoke. Bob Evans, however, wasn't such a stellar representative of his name. "When the firing started it was a signal for him to have business back with the wagon train."

Towards the end of the campaign, Dewey lost an eye—no one was sure how—but he remained good natured and struggled to follow and comfort his men.

Relieved of duty in September 1899, the 51st Regiment headed for San Francisco and eventually to Iowa. So did Dewey and Bob Evans, although whatever happened to Bob is lost to history.

Back in Red Oak, Dewey didn't take well to civilian life. He raced through town looking for his army buddies and refused to settle into any one home. He "held himself aloof"

from other dogs and settled into a routine of going from restaurants to meat markets to demand his rations—barking until he got what he most desired.

Dewey survived the Spanish-American War only to lose his life on February 3, 1901, in the depot hotel in Red Oak. The newspaper reported that the dog "was in his usual good health all day Sunday and his death, which came suddenly and violently, is thought to have been caused by poison—perhaps not intended for him." His obituary described Dewey as "the gamest and best canine soldier that ever fought for the United States or any other country."

Immortalized through taxidermy, Dewey stood sentry first in the old National Guard armory and then in the new one built in 1954. For years he took part in practical jokes, showing up in various parts of the armory, aided, of course, by soldierly pranksters.

Battered by the years, he still stands in the armory. There are some who say he can still be heard late at night, scratching at doors and padding down the armory halls. Perhaps Bob Evans joins him there, too, searching for the Red Oak men they followed into battle. ❖

The author is the cultural resources manager for the Iowa National Guard at Camp Dodge, Johnston, Iowa.



NOTE ON SOURCES

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