

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The Call to Arms

Based upon press accounts of appalling conditions in Cuba, public opinion in the United States was strongly in sympathy with the Cubans in their struggle for independence from Spain. And when the news flashed from the wires that the battleship *Maine* had been sunk in Havana Harbor on the night of February 15, 1898, with the loss of two hundred and fifty-nine of her crew, a wave of belligerent indignation swept over the country. In southwestern Iowa the tragic character of the episode was realized especially when word came that Darwin R. Merritt of Red Oak, a graduate of the United States Naval Academy and an officer on the ill-fated *Maine*, was one of the victims of the disaster.

Throughout the United States there arose a popular clamor for war which steadily grew in volume. On April 19, 1898, the anniversary of the battle of Lexington and of the first bloodshed of the Civil

War, Congress passed a joint resolution demanding "that the Government of Spain at once relinquish its authority and government in the island of Cuba, and withdraw its land and naval forces from Cuban waters." The Spanish Cortes replied on April 24th by formally recognizing the existence of war with the United States and Congress passed an act on the following day declaring that a state of war had existed between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Spain since April 21, 1898. The President was "directed and empowered to use the entire land and naval forces of the United States" and "the militia of the several States" to such extent as might be necessary.

The declaration of war occasioned little surprise: it was in fact a reflection of the will of the people. National-guard companies in Iowa as elsewhere had been expecting such an eventuality since the disaster in February, and had increased their drills from one to three or more a week. Many new recruits enrolled in the guard including a considerable number of high school boys of eighteen and over. On April 21st Adjutant General Melvin H. Byers sent General Order No. 15 to company commanders to prepare the Iowa National Guard for mobilization.

On April 23, 1898, President McKinley issued a call for one hundred and twenty-five thousand volunteers, and pursuant to this call Governors of the States through their adjutant generals ordered the national guard to assemble at the various State

capitals. Following the receipt of the order from Adjutant General Byers, feverish activity marked the preparations of the various companies in Iowa to be ready to depart when the word for mobilization came from Des Moines. Uniforms were donned, knapsacks were packed, frequent drills were held, and an air of excitement pervaded every community that boasted a company of the national guard.

On Monday, April 25th, came the order for the companies to entrain on the following morning. All Iowa was in a furor of excitement. Public meetings were planned for Monday afternoon or night in opera houses, armories, or other public halls, to express the good wishes of the community to the boys so soon to depart. Everywhere people thronged to these meetings. Veterans of the Civil War made speeches glowing with patriotic fervor, local orators kindled enthusiasm with their impassioned eloquence, while doctors warned the young soldiers about the dangers from camp diseases and emphasized the need of keeping in perfect physical condition, particularly in the tropics. At many of these meetings silk battle flags were presented to the companies; while patriotic songs including improvisations such as "Marching through Cuba" were sung. Not since the stirring days of 1861 had an occasion arisen for the people of Iowa communities to make such a demonstration.

Early in the morning, Tuesday, April 26th, in localities where national-guard companies were sta-

tioned, the clear call of the bugle announced to guardsmen and townspeople alike that the time of departure was not far distant. People began to throng the streets and for the time being all business was suspended. Flags were flying from every flag-staff. Members of the G. A. R. and the W. R. C. placed themselves in line to escort the boys to the depot, and school children carrying small flags joined the procession. Led usually by the hometown band playing martial music, the escort and the departing guardsmen marched from the local armory to the station. Along the sidewalks moved hundreds of townspeople, while small boys wonder-eyed straggled alongside the band or the soldiers. (For weeks thereafter "marching off to war" was a favorite "make-believe" of small boys in Iowa towns. Blue overalls with white stripes down the outseams served as uniforms, while old felt hats such as the soldiers wore were prized possessions.) A special train awaited the guardsmen at the depot and, climbing aboard, the soldiers were off for the rendezvous at Des Moines.

The progress of the special trains from the four corners of the State to the capital city was marked by a continuous ovation. Flag-waving and cheering crowds gathered at the depot of each town along the way, and at every stop cigars and fruit were given in generous quantities. At Creston, for instance, when the train arrived over the Burlington bearing the Glenwood, Villisca, Red Oak, Shenandoah, Corn-

ing, and Bedford companies, and the men of Company G of Creston joined their comrades of the Third Regiment, pandemonium broke loose. All the engines in the railroad yards at this division point blew a raucous welcome, fire bells were rung, and thousands of people thronged about the station. Business houses were closed, schools were dismissed, and the entire community joined in welcoming and bidding farewell to the companies from the blue-grass section of Iowa.

All day long on April 26th, troops poured into Des Moines. As soon as a troop train arrived it was shunted to the State Fair Grounds to avoid marching the companies through crowded streets. By nightfall the mobilization of the four regiments of the Iowa National Guard was practically complete, and the following companies of the Third Regiment — destined soon to be renumbered the Fifty-first — were in camp: Company A of Des Moines, B of Villisca, C of Glenwood, D of Knoxville, E of Shenandoah, F of Oskaloosa, G of Creston, H of Des Moines, I of Bedford, K of Corning, L of Council Bluffs, and M of Red Oak. Including field and staff officers the total strength of the regiment was six hundred and seventeen. The mobilization following the call to arms had been accomplished with a speed and ease which was a tribute to the military organization of the State.

BRUCE E. MAHAN