

"The Roughest Rider" by Steven Campbell

For two centuries the Roosevelt family, of Dutch stock, had lived and prospered in New York City. On Oct. 27, 1858, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., was born into this wealthy and elite American family. From the time he was three "Teedie" (TD), as he was called, developed severe asthma and poor eyesight. Though physically challenged the young boy's mind and spirit were strong. A voracious reader, he soaked up knowledge like a sponge does water. In April 1865 he viewed President Lincoln's funeral procession from his grandfather's Broadway home, and later in life stated how that solemn event had impacted him. Before his mid-teens he traveled to Germany, England, Austria, Italy, Belgium, Turkey, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. At one point he lived in Germany for several months and learned the language (he spoke French as well). In 1876 Theodore entered Harvard where he proved a competent student and a valued member of the boxing team. Being slight of frame, he constantly exercised and remained active. His close relationship with his father (Theodore Sr.) abruptly ended when, at the age of 47, he was claimed by stomach cancer. Theodore returned to his studies at Harvard and in 1878 (after breaking up with his long time love interest Edith Carow) he met and became enchanted with the Boston heiress Alice Hathaway Lee while she was vacationing with high society friends along Oyster Bay, New York. Initially Miss Lee found young Roosevelt too brash. Throughout his two remaining years at Harvard he "wore her down" and after his graduation they were married. He then en-rolled in law school at Columbia University, however, decided the bar was not where he wished to serve. Not having a full-time profession did not deter his energies and, having had his appetite whetted by politics, he became the youngest man elected to the New York State Assembly. "Learning the ropes" of back room politics and political party ways, he served in the Assembly until 1884.

"The Light Has Gone Out of My Life" In February 1884 Alice gave birth to their first child, a daughter. Two days later on Valentine's Day, Alice perished due to kidney failure at the age of 22. Only hours before, Theodore's mother, Martha, who resided with them, died of typhoid. Overwhelmed by grief, Theodore sold his home, placed his new born daughter Alice in the care of his sister, and headed westward to the Dakota Territory.

For the next two years Roosevelt entered a successful partnership with two men from Maine and established Elkhorn Ranch. The physically demanding lifestyle on the frontier hardened his physical stamina. He herded cattle, hunted, fished, and in 1886, while serving as a U. S. Deputy Marshal in Billings County, tracked and captured three (3) horse thieves along the Little Missouri River through sleet, snow, ice and mud. (He collected \$50 for the arrests and fees.) In 1885 he saw to the building of his new home named Sagamore Hill on Oyster Bay (NY). It was also at this time that he re-established contact with his childhood sweetheart Edith Carow, and upon leaving the Dakotas they were married in London in 1886. Their union would result in the birth of four sons and a daughter. Roosevelt penned several successful selling biographies, and in 1889 President Benjamin Harrison appointed him as the U. S. Civil Service Commissioner, a post he held for six years.

In 1895 he was recruited to serve as the New York City Police Commissioner. Rampant with corruption, he reformed the agency to a more professional standing. In 1897 President William

McKinley appointed him as the Assistant Secretary of the U. S. Navy. It was during this time that the Spanish colony of Cuba became the scene of a revolution against Spanish rule. Sympathy for the Cuban plight was high in the United States and Spain was an unwanted colonial power in the western hemisphere.

“To Hell with Spain, Remember the Maine” On Tuesday evening, February 15, 1898, the U.S.S. Maine exploded while anchored in Havana Harbor. Public outcry resulted in the United States declaring war on Spain (though later research has revealed that the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine was not a result of hostile action). Theodore resigned his post as the Navy’s Assistant Secretary and assisted in establishing the first U. S. Volunteer Cavalry under the command of his friend Col. Leonard Wood (graduate of Harvard Medical School and winner of the U. S. Congressional Medal of Honor in the Apache Wars). Quickly learning military protocol, drill, supply, and tactics, Lt. Col. Roosevelt’s “Rough Riders” were a blend of America: cowboys, lawmen, Indians, adventurers, and social elite (i.e. William Tiffany of the famed New York City family). Forming in San Antonio, Texas, the unit trained and adopted a uniform of canvas color and blue polka dot kerchiefs unlike the regular Army’s blue uniform. At the end of May 1898, U. S. Army forces were ordered to deploy from Tampa, Florida, to Cuba. The Rough Riders, along with the U. S. 9th and 10th Cavalry (the Buffalo Soldiers) were placed under the command of former Confederate Cavalry leader “Fighting Joe Wheeler”. Wheeler was a U. S. Congressman when President McKinley offered him a 2 star command. Traveling through the south via railroad the troops were greeted by thousands of enthusiastic citizens all along the way to Florida. Due to transport restrictions, only two-thirds of the Rough Riders were able to ship out, and even though they were a Cavalry unit, only the senior officers were able to take their horses. The amphibious U. S. landing at Daiquiri, Cuba, encountered no resistance. Cuban partisans linked up with American troops, and under Gen. Wheeler’s hard charging leadership style, the U. S. Cavalry units were first to engage Spanish forces. The confusion of combat embraced the Rough Riders, and at a pivotal moment Gen. Wheeler yelled, “Come on, we’ve got the damn Yankees on the run.” After gaining a foothold, intense fighting ensued between the American and Spanish forces.

Within seven (7) miles of the Spanish stronghold of Santiago, Spanish troops with German advisors were entrenched with artillery and machine guns along the San Juan Heights. With heavy rains now falling, the American advance stalled. On June 3rd, Col. Leonard Wood was promoted to Brigadier General and the colonelcy of the Rough Riders was awarded to Roosevelt.

“The Great Day of My Life” On July 1st, Col. Roosevelt was up before dawn. A coordinated attack by U. S. forces at El Caney signaled the assault upon San Juan Heights. While awaiting final orders to attack, the Rough Riders came under heavy enemy fire resulting in the loss of many troopers. To the front and left of San Juan Hill rose occupied Kettle Hill. Kettle was the objective of the Rough Riders, the 9th and 10th Cavalry, and the 71st New York Regiment. At the point of the attack Roosevelt’s unit took Kettle Hill, and upon observing devastating fire from San Juan Hill raining down on U. S. forces, he ordered an attack. Not hearing his command, the Colonel pressed on about 100 yards with only five (5) men following. Seeing that his troops were not following, he angrily called them “cowards”. The overall reply from the men was, “We didn’t hear you Colonel, we didn’t see you go - lead on and we’ll follow.” And follow they did. At the conclusion of the close-quartered combat the U. S. forces took San Juan Hill and the

Spanish control over Cuba ended, as did the war in less than six (6) months. Gen. Wheeler recommended Theodore for the Medal of Honor (political shenanigans stopped it, yet in the 1990's it was duly awarded). American victory resulted in political, economic, as well as territorial gains, with the United States obtaining Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

The Rough Riders existed for 133 days and suffered 33% casualties. At the demobilization ceremony for the 1st U. S. Volunteer Cavalry, Col. Roosevelt stated: "I am proud of this Regiment beyond measure. It is primarily an American Regiment and it is American because it is composed of all the races which have made America their country...."

Returning home, Brother Theodore Roosevelt's next official stop would be the Governor's Mansion in Albany, New York....