

"Sgt. Smith, First Marine Killed on Cuban Soil in the Spanish-American War?"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Shortly after I started working for the Historical Society, I found a photograph of Sgt. Charles H. Smith inscribed, "First American killed on Cuban soil in Spanish American War." I was intrigued! Over the past few years I have casually looked into his history and I related the following information after dinner at the Marine Corps League State convention held in Westminster on June 22nd.

Sgt. Charles Hampton Smith was born on 15 January 1867 near Smallwood, Carroll County, Md. At about age 20 he left the county and worked in a Baltimore insurance firm. In 1893 he joined the Marine Corps serving as a member of a ship's detachment and traveling extensively. In a 5 January 1898 letter he wrote, "I have made friends in all parts of the world that I have been in: Turks, Greeks, Italians, Spanish, Moors, Austrians and English."

The deteriorating relations between the United States and Spain and the destruction of the Battleship Maine on 15 February 1898 led to war. The Marines were preparing even before the Spanish declared war in late April. On 16 April Col. Commandant Charles Heywood ordered the creation of a Marine Battalion at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The 1st Marine Battalion consisted of 23 officers, 623 enlisted men and 1 Navy surgeon; the new unit was commanded by Civil War veteran Lt. Col. Robert W. Huntington. The unit was composed of five infantry companies and one artillery company armed with four 3-inch rapid fire guns.

On 22 April the Battalion sailed for Key West, Fla., a town described as as lawless as a Colorado mining town. The Battalion sailed for Cuba on 7 June; their mission was to capture the harbor at Guantanamo Bay for use as a Navy coaling station.

The Battalion landed unopposed on 10 June and the Marines established a camp on a hill overlooking the harbor. The first action came during the afternoon of 11 June when Spanish regulars or guerrillas attacked a scouting party containing Sgt. Smith and Pvts. William Dumphy and James McColgan. All were killed. Sgt. Smith is said to have been the first to fall. The Marines remained under attack throughout the evening. The novelist Stephen Crane, who had accompanied the battalion, described the night action as, "a thousand rifles rattling with the field guns booming in your ears; with the diabolical Colt automatic clacking; with the roar of the USS Marblehead coming from the bay, and, last, with Mauser bullets sneering always in the air a few inches one's head." That action claimed the life of the Navy surgeon; several Marines were wounded.

After consolidating their position, the Marines moved out to crush Spanish resistance. They marched six miles and captured and destroyed the fortified Cuzco Well which cut off the Spanish soldiers' source of water. This halted the large scale night attacks and later Army landings led to the capture of Cuba. With their mission accomplished, the Marine Battalion embarked on 5 August and eventually returned to Portsmouth, N.H. where it was disbanded; detachments were sent to East Coast stations.

Sgt. Smith's remains were shipped home and he was buried with full military honors in Deer Park Methodist Cemetery near his parent's home in Smallwood. The Honor Guard consisted of Civil War veterans of Burns Post, No. 13, Grand Army of the Republic. More than 2,000 people attended the funeral. His parents erected a cemetery monument to his memory in August 1903. More than a thousand people attended the dedication of the plain, 8-foot shaft of Vermont marble.

The Marine Corps erected a monument on the site of the 1st Battalion's hilltop camp. The monument consists of a captured bronze cannon and a bronze plaque bearing the names of the five Marines and the Navy surgeon killed in action.

The success of the 1st Marine Battalion solved a long standing argument among Naval officers over the role of the Marines. Some thought that the Navy should retain exclusive control over landing operations but others argued that seamen were far too busy manning guns and working the ship to undertake landing operations. The success of the Guantanamo operation showed that Marines could successfully seize and hold advance bases. The doctrine of Advanced Base Force evolved quickly and Marines were authorized for "assault missions" in 1900.

Photo caption 1: Sgt. Charles H. Smith, Co. D, 1st Marine Battalion, of Smallwood. Sgt. Smith is believed to have been the first Marine killed on Cuban soil during the Spanish American War. Historical Society of Carroll County.

Photo caption 2: Monument at Guantanamo Bay Cuba dedicated to Sgt. Smith and the other casualties. The bronze plaque is inscribed, COMMEMORATIVE OF A BATTALION OF UNITED STATES MARINES UNDER THE COMMAND OF LIEUTENANT-COLONEL ROBERT W. HUNTINGTON WHICH DISEMBARKED AT THIS POINT JUNE 10, 1898: THE FIRST ARMED FORCE LANDED ON CUBAN SOIL AND OF ACTING SURGEON JOHN BLAIR GIBBS, U.S. NAVY PRIVATE WILLIM DUMPHY, U.S. MARINE CORPS ACTING SERGEANT-MAJOR HENRY GOOD, U.S. MARINE CORPS PRIVATE JAMES McCOLGAN, U.S. MARINE CORPS SERGEANT CHARLES H. SMITH, U.S. MARINE CORPS PRIVATE GOODE TAURMAN, U.S. MARINE CORPS HERE KILLED IN ACTION WITH SPANISH TROOPS" Photograph courtesy of HM1c David DeGross, USN.