

"Sgt. Smith Falls in Battle in Cuba"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, the United States Marine Corps sent a new unit, the 1st Marine Battalion, to secure the harbor at Guantanamo, Cuba as a coaling station for American warships. The 600-man force included Sgt. Charles H. Smith, a Carroll County native from Bird Hill. Sgt. Smith became the first battle casualty, as reported in the June 18, 1898 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper:

"A Battalion of United States Marines were landed in Cuba, near Guantanamo, on Friday of last week, and were almost immediately attacked by the Spaniards. A sort of guerrilla warfare was begun at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and was kept up all night and until about 6 o'clock Saturday morning. The Spaniards opened the attack from a thick tropical undergrowth, and it was difficult for the marines to locate them. In the night, however, they came out and advanced nearly up to the American position and the contest for a time was nearly a hand-to-hand affair. The Spaniards ceased firing Saturday morning. The Americans had four men killed and one wounded.

In this fight, the first on Cuban soil, the first man to fall was Charles H. Smith, a sergeant. He was born at Bird Hill, this county, about six miles from this city, and his parents, Howard T. Smith and wife, now live near Smallwood. Young Smith remained upon the farm until he reached his majority, when he went to Baltimore, where he found employment as collector for an insurance company. In August, 1893, he left Baltimore and it was about that time that he enlisted in the United States navy [Marine Corps]. The last letter he wrote home was in December last, in which he described how he spent Christmas, and observed "God only knows where I will be next Christmas."

Sergeant Smith was a man of fair education, medium height, deep blue eyes and dark curly hair. He was quiet in disposition, and as a boy was prompt in his duties. He was cool and courageous, and just the sort of a man for an ideal soldier.

Mrs. John E. Deeds, of Westminster, is a sister to the late sergeant, and he has a brother at Wengerlawn, Montgomery county, Ohio. Two other brothers, Walter H. and George F. Smith, are at home with their parents, also three sisters, Misses Martha A., Mary E. and C. Grace Smith.

When a representative of the Advocate called to see Mrs. Deeds on Monday morning, to learn something of her brother's history, she was not aware of his death, not having read the news in the morning paper. She was deeply affected by the sad news, but observed that she had concluded, after war was declared, that she would not see him again.

Advices received Tuesday night state that the six hundred marines who have established a camp on the shore of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, were again attacked from the bushes by Spaniards Sunday night. The Spanish had a body of sharpshooters, who kept constantly firing at the Americans from the bushes. Two marines were killed and four were wounded. The loss of the Spaniards is not known, but the bodies of 15 of their dead were found."

Sgt. Smith's remains were sent home in May 1899 and he was buried in the Deer Park Methodist Cemetery in Smallwood. The local press carried a lengthy article about his funeral:

"A large concourse of people attended the funeral services of Sergeant Charles Hampton Smith, the first American killed on Cuban soil in the recent war with Spain, on Sunday last. The services were held in the afternoon, at Deer Park chapel, Methodist Protestant Church, about five miles from this city. Among the relatives of the deceased hero present were his father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Howard Thomas Smith; his two brothers and four sisters, and his aged grandfather, Mr. Robert Caple, now in his eighty-sixth year. Not more than a fifth of the people present were able to get into the church, the number in attendance being estimated at not less than 2,000. It was an immense assemblage and some estimates placed the crowd at 3,000 to 4,000 people.

The coffin containing the remains was taken into the church, and rested before the altar railing during the services. It was covered with the American flag, and some rare and beautiful roses laid upon it formed the principal floral tribute. Prayer was offered by Rev. S. W. Coe, of the Methodist Protestant Church, Finksburg. The other services and the sermon were by Rev. Walter R. Graham, D. D., pastor of the Methodist Protestant Church of this city, who based his discourse on 11 Timothy, iv., 2: "I have fought a good fight."

At the conclusion of the services in the Church the remains of the dead hero were borne to the adjoining cemetery, where they were interred with the religious services of the Church and the ritual of the Grand Army of the Republic. Prayer was offered by Rev. Mr. Coe and the burial service for the dead was read by Dr. Graham. The Grand Army burial ritual, which followed the religious services was terminated by firing three volleys over the grave. The remains were in charge of Burns Post No. 13, G. A. R."

Sgt. Smith's grave was decorated on Armed Forces Day this year by a Marine Corps color guard and by the local Young Marines unit. The event provided an opportunity for a public recognition of Smith's service of a century ago.

Photo Caption: Sgt. Charles H. Smith, Co. D, 1st Marine Battalion, of Bird Hill, Carroll County, was the first Marine killed on Cuban soil during the Spanish-American War. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.