

Col. B.K. Ashford Introduction to WW I Combat Medicine, USS Relief, Hormigueros “Silva Heights” Firefight & the Skirmish at Las Marias, Notes on the Puerto Rico Western Campaign

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Introduction:

The Spanish American War (SAW) has not received as much publicity as other military conflicts and some of its battlefields are not well known. There may be several reasons for this. It could be because of its short duration; the war lasted approximately three and a half months. Another reason could be the relatively few combat losses. Of the nearly 3300 war deaths, only about 300 were combat related, mostly in the Cuba campaign. The rest of the deaths were due to disease.

There were two major infectious diseases that decimated United States (US) SAW soldiers; Typhoid and Yellow Fever. Typhoid fever ransacked the training and embarkation camps in the southeastern in the US and caused most of the deaths due to illness. Yellow fever, accounted for most of the combat theater infectious disease deaths in the Caribbean. However, this “splendid little war” as Secretary of State John Milton Hay would call it; was a hemispheric conflict that propelled the United States into the global stage as a major world power while sun-downing the last days of the Spanish Empire.

Most people have heard of the SAW Philippine Islands and Cuban campaigns. The first shots fired in SAW happened in the Philippines on 1st May 1898 when Admiral Dewey’s dued against the Spanish Fleet under Admiral Montojo y Pasaron. After sinking and subduing the Spanish Fleet, Dewey blockaded the Philippines until Brigadier Arthur McArthur, (father of Douglas McArthur), could land. He quickly gained control of most of the islands with the help of Filipino rebels and by August had occupied Manila. An armed conflict against the Tagalog and the Moro would follow for the next few years.

The Cuban campaign would begin with the 1st Volunteer Cavalry Regiment landings near Santiago on 19th June 1898. Follow up landings on the 22nd (Daiquiri) and 23rd (Siboney) would quickly follow. The Cuban campaign would have military luminaries like General Leonard Wood and Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy at the outbreak of the war, and he resigned his position after convincing Colonel Leonard Wood to organize the 1st Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. Better known as the “rough riders”, they would be the first American force to land in Cuba and would become famous after the battle for “Las Guasimas”, a wooded area outside Santiago.

However, the sea and land campaign in Puerto Rico (PR) are much less well known. They have been obscured by its brevity, the land campaign was about 3 weeks, lack of mass casualties, small unit engagements and the fact that most of its battles occurred as the war was ending.

PR Land Campaign; Landings, Hormigueros “Silva Heights” and the Capture of Mayaguez.

The land campaign in PR began on 25th July 1898 with the landings in the south western town of Guanica. The invasion forces had embarked in Newport News VA, Charleston SC and Tampa FL. Like most of the Soldiers that served in the Spanish American War, it consisted mostly of regiments of volunteers. These men were not professional Soldiers and lacked in all aspects of military training, including general field sanitation. They were grouped together in large national training camps with marginal pre-planning for the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. At the time of embarkation, many were already infected with *Salmonella typhi* and would become symptomatic in route for Puerto Rico.

Central military plans called for the initial US invasion of PR to happen on or near Fajardo, on the eastern tip of the island with a march west towards the capital city of San Juan to follow. However, General (G) Miles, in overall command of the invasion, changed his plans in route from Cuba, landing his I Corps in Guanica instead. G. Miles thought, (correctly), that the small village with a wide, deep harbor entrance, would not be well defended and he would achieve both surprise and concentration of force at the same time. Early on the morning of the 25th July 1898 the gunboat USS Gloucester approached and entered the bay of Guanica landing a small detachment of marines and sailors to secure the village (photos 1&4).



Photo #1 USS Gloucester in Guanica bay firing at the defending Spanish militias (National Park Service photo)

Robustiano Rivera, keeper of the lighthouse to the east of bay, saw the USS Gloucester at the mouth of the bay in the early morning hours from the tower as well as the invasion fleet beyond and sent word to the village, but the US forces landed unopposed and a brief skirmish ensued between the combined landing force and the militias who retreated northeast towards the town of Yauco leaving the shore party in possession of the village (photos 2 & 3).



Photo #2 Guanica Lighthouse before the war 1897 (Photo from Wikipedia)



Photo #3 Guanica Lighthouse Today (photo taken by author June 2016)

Several wooden boats found on the shore were commandeered and used to land the 6th Massachusetts and 6th Illinois Volunteer Regiments later on the same day.

One of the first outfits to land on that day, was I company, 6th Massachusetts Regiment. I Company was composed nearly completely of Volunteers from Concord Massachusetts. One of them, PVT George C. King kept in touch regularly with his parents via mail and this compilation of letters comprises one of the best description of the encamping and travel of Puerto Rico US invasion forces. I Company (and the rest of the 6th Massachusetts) encamped at Camp Algers, Virginia after mustering Framingham Massachusetts. Unlike regular Army units, these Volunteer regiments were usually composed of friends (sometimes relatives, even) who volunteered and served together. Their officers were often their civilian employers, and or influential townspeople.

Throughout a month and half, the 6th remained in Camp Algers; about 7 miles from Washington D.C. The camp was more or less in today's Falls Church suburb. These Soldiers were living in tents and were exposed to the rain and heat, many of his fellow Soldiers fell ill from the environmental conditions. In addition to the infectious conditions mentioned at the beginning, (typhoid), PVT King reported some of his friends and fellow Soldiers falling ill to diphtheria, measles, mumps, "indigestion" and "homesickness" (depression?). After 6 weeks, his company

travelled by train to Columbia SC and marched to Charleston docks where they boarded the SS Yale. From there the 6th Massachusetts sailed to Cuba. The Yale was not a “troopship” in the sense that is understood nowadays. From PVT King’s account we know that there were no existing sleeping accommodations and Soldiers “slept anywhere they could find room”, this was mostly on the upper deck to avoid the heat inside the vessel. Target practice on the way to Cuba happened near the Bahamas, where a few boxes were tossed overboard and the Soldiers shot at them. Shortly thereafter, the ship arrived in Siboney, a small village in the south coast of Cuba. By then, yellow fever was endemic among the US land forces in Santiago and Siboney, and the 6th Mass Soldiers were quarantined to their ship. After a few days, the Yale continued on to PR with the invasion force.

The day following the landings, on the 26th of July the 6th Massachusetts Volunteers enlarged the beachhead marching unto to Yauco and capturing the rail connecting the town to the major southern city of Ponce to the east which possessed a deeper harbor, rails and docking facilities.



Photo #4 Entrance to Bay of Guanica from the East as seen today from the Lighthouse ruins. From here, Mr. Rivera could see the USS Gloucester landings (photo taken by author June 2016)

US forces continued landing for another week in both Guanica and Ponce, enlarging the beach head and adding to G. Miles forces. On July 31st, Brigadier General (BG) Theodore Schwan’s

Independent Brigade, (and the only unit comprised of Army regulars) landed in Guanica completing the buildup of the land forces. Once all forces were present, G. Miles designed a strategy consisting of a three column attack. One column, the 1st Division, would march East and was commanded by Major General James H. Wilson. A second column would march towards the north city of Arecibo through interior of the island. This column was commanded by Brigadier General Guy V. Henry and known as the Provisional Division. The 6th Massachusetts would be in this column, and so would be PVT George King. This would be only column that would not encounter combat.

The third column was BG Theodore Schwan’s Independent Brigade. He was to march to the west of the island, capture the port city of Mayaguez (the 3rd largest city of the island) and then march on north-north east, to join the Provisional division in Arecibo. All columns were to converge on the capital city of San Juan. (See photo 5)

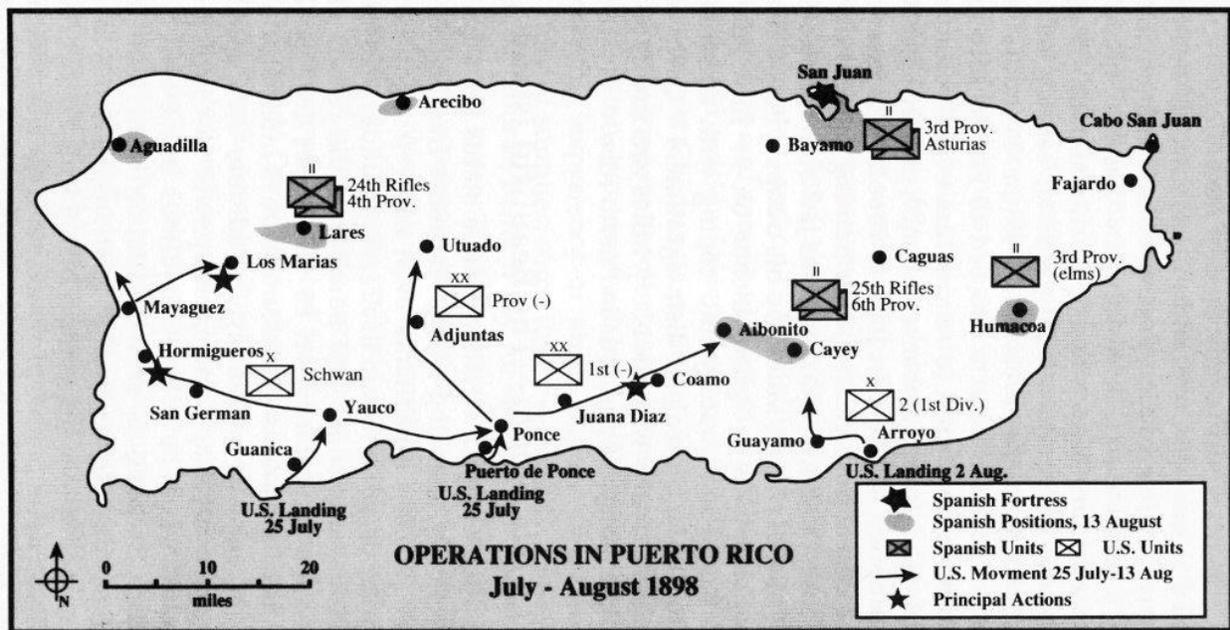


Photo # 5 Army Operations Map, detailing the “three column approach” the arrow to the left shows B.G. Schwan’s approach and the star the location Col. Villanueva on the Silva Heights. Photo from Latinamericanstudies.org

It took the Independent Brigade about one week to complete debarking and setting up camp in Yauco and on the morning of 8th August 1898, Gen Schwan’s troops initiated their march

northwest. After 12 a mile march under the grueling sun, the Brigade arrived in the town of Sabana Grande the evening of the 9th and set about to camp for the night. Early the next morning, the column marched towards San German, reaching the western approach to the town unopposed around noon on the 10th of August after a 9-10 mile march. The Brigade entered San German unopposed and continued on towards the village of Hormigueros, (now a town), in route to Mayaguez through a wagon road a few yards from present day PR state road 114 connecting the town with the city of Mayaguez. The order of march consisted of Captain Macomb Troop A from the 5th Cavalry acting as a screen about 2 miles in front of an advanced guard of two infantry platoons, one artillery platoon and two Gatling guns. Behind them would be the “main body” with the rest of the 11th Infantry platoons and the “trains” to follow. The “trains” consisted of the hospital, ammunition, supply and baggage Studebaker wagons in that order and would be protected by an infantry company bringing up the rear. The Mayaguez Spanish garrison under Colonel (Col) Villanueva had received information from scouts of the approaching US Soldiers and he moved his troops forward to meet them occupying a ridge to the west near an existing sugar mill overlooking valley and the road. There, they waited for the approaching Americans (photo 6). The Spanish force consisted of about 1500 soldiers, a combined force of regulars (Alfonzo XIII Cazadores regiment 24th rifle battalion) and PR militias (6th Volunteer battalion). The ridge was known as “Los Altos de Silva” or Silva Heights, named after a wealthy local landowner. The high ground overlooked a valley planted with bananas and sugar cane, crossed by the now called Guanajibo river but then known as the “Rio Grande”.

On the early afternoon of 10 August, Captain’s Macomb Troop A approached and crossed “el Puente de Silva” (Silva bridge) which crosses the Guanajibo river about 7 miles from Mayaguez. The iron bridge had been built the year prior in 1897 to shorten the route to deliver the valley agricultural products to the port of Mayaguez (photo 7). As the cavalymen crossed the river they came under mauser rifle fire from the scouts of the Spanish combined forces. The fight for the Silva Heights was on!



Photo # 6 Silva Heights today, in front and below to the left is state road 114. A few hundred yards in front of this tree is a ravine through which the river crosses. On it, is the Silva Bridge (photo taken by author June 2016)

Their advance stalled momentarily by the fire from the Silva Heights the cavalry dismounted and returned fire scattering some of the militias who had moved forward from the ridge towards the road. Two companies of the US 11th Inf. part of the advance guard under Captain Hoyt arrived and reinforced troop A with two Gatlin guns. They began firing towards the high ground. The Spanish regulars returned fire on the US troops from the ridge, the foliage and their smokeless mausers making their location difficult. Troop A remounted under fire after the arrival of Captain Hoyt and went on the attack towards the north end of the ridge pursuing the Spanish scouts and trying to outflank the Spanish. Captain Hoyt's soldiers pressed on toward the bridge forming a skirmish line facing west, towards the ridge. The fire exchange continued and Gen. Schwan arrived at the scene about 3 pm ahead of the main body pressing the advance guard companies across the bridge and up towards the high ground. Two artillery pieces under 1st LT. Archibald Campbell and the 2 Gatling guns fired on the Spanish from the dirt road, while Troop

A flanked them from the north end of the ridge. Faced with the outflanking maneuver from the north and the advancing infantry, Col. Villanueva's troops retreated back to Mayaguez 3 or 4 miles away escaping being encircled. The Silva Heights were taken by the early evening and B.G. Schwan rested his soldiers for the night.

Early on the morning of the 11th, Troop A scouts approached the city of Mayaguez. There were no signs of the Spanish, shortly after 9am Captain Malcomb rode into town unopposed with his troop, and by 11 am the entire brigade marched into the city, Gen Schwan at the head of the column. The brigade was received with the applause of the populace, who watched as they marched from the sidewalk and balconies, the regimental band playing through Candelaria street as they marched to the Plaza at the center of Mayaguez. From one of the balconies a young woman watched the column, waving an American flag, her name, Catalina Palmer. She did not know it, but marching in the column below her balcony was her future husband, a young medical corps lieutenant named Bailey Kelley Ashford. The city had been taken without firing a shot. It had been evacuated by Col. Villanueva who had continued his retreat towards the town of Lares in the center of the island. The battle for the Silva Heights had cost B.G. Schwan 1 KIA and 16 WIA and Col. Villanueva 3 KIA 6 WIA and 136 POW.

That same day the Brigade encamped about 1 ½ miles outside the city and would remain there for a few days. While in Mayaguez, B.G. Schwan's medical officer, Lt. Bailey Kelley Ashford, established a field hospital to tend to the Silva Heights casualties on both sides. This young medical corps lieutenant had been in PR for only 11 days weeks but his life would be inextricably linked to PR for the rest of his life.

Lieutenant Bailey K. Ashford Spanish American War Experience, U.S.S. Relief, Mayaguez and Ponce Military Hospitals: a Prelude to the WWI Sanitary School.

A contemporary of Majors Walter Reed and Leonard Wood; Lt B. K. Ashford was originally from Washington DC and had entered the Army medical corps the year prior. He embarked with the Puerto Rico invasion forces in Tampa but his SAW medical service began prior to his landing in Guanica . Lt. Ashford was put to work soon after embarkation tending to nearly 400 invasion force Soldiers suffering from typhoid fever aboard the 1st purposely designed hospital ship, the USS Relief (photo #7 & #8). Lt Ashford stayed aboard the ship in Guanica Bay for several days treating the sick but was able to join the Independent Brigade's march towards Hormigueros and Mayaguez. He would treat his first combat wounded on the march to Hormigueros. A bullet wound to the jaw in a cavalry adjutant. Combat bullet wounds during the PR campaign were few and less lethal than those of the American Civil War. The muzzle velocity was higher, and the rounds could go through the bone rather shattering them as in the Civil War. The need for amputations was far less, and there were two major advantages.

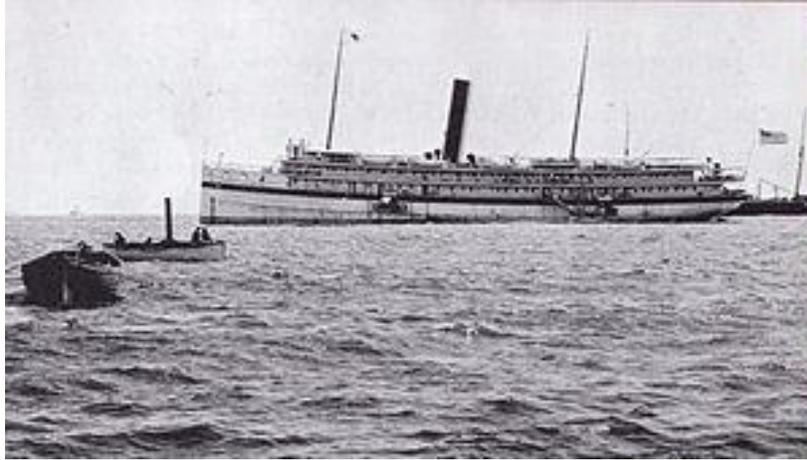


Photo #7 USS Relief 1898. Wikipedia photo.

The X Ray machine had been developed and used in combat operations to locate bullet and bullet fragments (photo #8). Although radiation burns would be prevalent (an average X ray required 10-20min radiation exposure) it out weight the risk of digital worn exploration and its accompanying introductions of infection. The notion that germs carried disease and the use of carbolic acid to disinfect surgical equipment and the surgical field, improved greatly the extremities and chest bullet wounds survival rate. Only abdominal and head bullet wounds remained nearly always fatal. Lt. Ashford had an uncanny interest in preventive medicine and applied these newly acquired discoveries to his practice, plus others. He was an avid proponent of basic sanitary measures. He would establish his field hospitals in high ground, so that water would not stagnate and flying insects would have difficulty accumulating. He also established the sanitary slit trench (“latrines”) down wind, at a lower level and away from water sources and the hospital; keeping flying insects as far away as possible.



Photo #8 X Ray machine aboard the USS Relief. Wikipedia photo.

While encamped in Mayaguez, he would meet his future wife Miss Catalina Palmer and would tend to Spanish and US wounded Soldiers. Unlike the battlefields in Cuba, the South Coast of Puerto Rico is a dryer landscape and the rain precipitation is much less than in Cuba and the North Coast of PR especially in the summer. So; US invasion troops were less likely to develop mosquito borne fevers like yellow fever and dengue. However, they were exposed to other infectious illnesses such as GI parasites as the campaign died down and the mission changed to one of pacification and occupation.

Unlike some of the other Soldiers, Lt. Ashford remained in PR. He was placed in charge of the Mayaguez Military Hospital and investigated the source of the anemia in both US civilians and military in PR. He would eventually command the Ponce Military Hospital in 1899 following the armistice and would develop in WWI the Army Expeditionary Forces Sanitary School. After WWI he returned to PR and founded the Caribbean School Tropical Medicine.

Las Marias, “Embrisques” and Peace.

Following the occupation of Mayaguez around 12th August, General Schwan sent out cavalry scouts to locate the Spanish retreating along the road towards the town of Lares. The scouts located Villanueva’s rear guard about 5 miles east of Mayaguez along the road towards the village of Las Marias. The General was hesitant to follow suit with the entire brigade, there were reports of civilian unrest and of armed gangs of locals who had taken revenge against Spanish landowners. There were also armed Spanish army and militia deserters and much of the countryside was considered unsafe and somewhat lawless. This lasted for a year or two until the

rule of law could be re-established in the island and became known as “el tiempo de los embrisques” the time of the “embrisques” in the local folklore.

Keeping this in mind, he decided to keep the bulk of his force in Mayaguez to protect the city populace and the port, where a transport with the 1st Kentucky Volunteers Regiment had docked that afternoon and had begun unloading Soldiers and supplies. He sent a reinforced column to reconnoiter along the Mayaguez-Las Marias-Lares road under Lt Col Burke. These men made contact with the retreating Spanish after a few miles and exchanged fire at a distance as they continued to retreat. LT Col Burke continued to pursue, harass and delay the Spanish retreat through the mountains. About three miles from the town of Las Marias, the opposing forces had another skirmish from opposing sides of the Rio Prieto. On August 14th the column received news of the armistice. The skirmish at Las Marias would be the last engagement for the Independent Brigade. The Spanish surrendered, about 60 of them, including Colonel Villanueva. General Schwan’s brigade had marched for days, fought two engagements and seized about 450 rifles. He lost one Soldier to enemy fire and had 16 Soldiers wounded. A few days later General Schwan traveled to Ponce, where he boarded the transport U.S. S. Chester and returned to the US. The Independent Brigade campaign had come to an end.

Silva Bridge; A Relic Still Standing

The “Silva Bridge” still stands today (photo # 10). Although it is no longer used for vehicular traffic, its structure is still solid. It is registered in the NPS list of historic places. It is located a few miles from the town of Hormigueros traveling northwest along route 114 in the direction from Hormigueros to Mayaguez a few yards from the road used today. It is freely accessible to anyone with a yen for interest in this forgotten skirmish.



Photo #9 Silva Bridge shortly after the war. Through it 5th Cav. Troop A and 19th Inf. Crossed to occupy the heights (US National Park Service photo)



Photo # 10 Silva Bridge today (photo taken by author June 2016)

Sources:

1 August 10, 1898, The Battle for Silva Heights <https://worldhistoryproject.org/1898/8/10/battle-of-silva-heights> accessed 4 April 2016.

2 <http://www.spanamwar.com/puertoland4.htm> NPS Southeastern Region, The American Army Moves on Puerto-Rico Mark R. Barnes, Ph.D., Senior Archeologist, NPS, SE Regional Office.

3 “Colonel B.K. Ashford, A Brief Military Medicine Historical Review”
Jose E. Nieves, MD; Kathleen M. Stack, MD MILITARY MEDICINE, 180, 9:934, 2015.

4 Guanica Lighthouse, The Lighthouse Friends
<http://www.lighthousefriends.com/light.asp?ID=1176> accessed 12 September 2016.

5 Map from Latinamericanstudies.org accessed 12 September 2016.

Disclosure : the author does not have any conflicts to disclose.

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