Spanish American War Text #1

Account of The Battle of Cusco Hill

 "Crane related that the two companies of marines formed for the start of the foray immediately after breakfast.  The Cubans gathered for the expedition numbered about fifty.  "Most of the latter were dressed in them white duck clothes of the American jack-tar,..." Crane wrote, "which had been dealt out to them from the stores of the fleet.  Some had shoes on their feet and some had shoes slung around their necks with a string all according to taste.  They were a hard-bitten, undersized lot, and with the stoop and the curious gate of men who had one time labored at the soil. They [the Cubans] were, in short, peasants -hardy, tireless, uncomplaining peasants- and they viewed in utter calm these early morning preparations for battle."

The Americans, undergoing inspection, were in sharp contrast: "Their linen suits and black corded accoutrements made their strong figures very businesslike and soldiery.  Contrary to the Cubans, the bronze faces of the Americans were not stolid at all.  One could note the prevalence of a curious expression -something dreamy, the symbol of minds striving to tear aside the screen of the future and perhaps expose the ambush of death.  It was not fear in the least.  It was simply a moment in the lives of men who have staked themselves and have come to wonder which wins- red or black.

 The march began -along a narrow path through the bushes, up a chalky cliff, then into a tangled mass of vegetation that hid the camp and the ships at anchor.  After about an hour they came upon clearer country- "tall, gaunt ridges covered with chaparral and cactus" shouldering down to the sea and in the valleys "palms and dry yellow grass."  [Note the yellow grass it means that it had not rained recently.  The rains in Cuba vary with location and time of year, also describes the time of the hurricanes that never came that year. Rainfall in Guantanamo is low perhaps 16 inches a year and thus the spread of the mosquito vector Yellow fever, which lays its eggs in stagnant water also low]. Cuban scouts reported that the enemy was over the next ridge.  The troops were deployed and moved carefully forward. Then the firing broke out.

Reaching the crest of the hill, the marines and Cubans encountered a barrage of Mauser bullets from the Spaniards in the valley below.  "The sky was speckless," Crane wrote; "the sun blazed out of it as if it would melt the earth.  Far away on one side were the white waters of Guantanamo Bay; on the other a vast expanse of blue sea was rippling in millions of wee waves. The surrounding country was nothing but miles upon miles of gaunt, brown ridges.  It would have been a fine view if one had had time".

   "The toiling, sweating marines, the shrill, jumping Cubans, the shouts of the officers, crashing rifles -to Crane the razor-back hill seemed to reel. But in the clamor and confusion he says "a spruce young sergeant of marines, erect, his back to the showering bullets, solemnly and intently wigwagging to the distant DOLHPIN [a warship]."  "It was necessary that this man should stand at the very top of the ridge in order that his flag might appear in relief against the sky," Crane wrote, "and the Spaniards must have concentrated a fire of at least twenty rifles upon him. His society was at that moment sought by none.  We gave him a wide berth."

 In the frantic din and simmering heat one of the Cubans was shot, toppling over with no outcry "as if he were senseless before he fell," and under a bush a marine private lay wounded in the ankle, his face wearing an expression more of weariness than of pain.  Soon the rifle noises were joined by the crashing roar of the DOLHPIN's guns.  "Along our line the rifle locks were clicking incessantly, as if some giant loom was running wildly," Crane continued, "and on the ground among the stones and weeds came a dropping, dropping rain of rolling brass shells. And what was two hundred yards down the hill? No grim array, nor serried ranks.  Two hundred yards down the hill there was an -a thicket, a thicket whose predominant bush wore large, oily, green leaves. In military terms this means that although the bushes obscured the Spanish, neither the bullets nor shell fragments were stopped by thick tree trunks like in a forest.  It was about an acre in extent and on level ground, so that is whole expanse was plain from the hills.  This thicket was alive with loud popping of Mausers.  From end to end and from side to side it was alive. ..." Then the quality of the battle suddenly changed with the shout of: Theere they go! See 'em! See'em! Unable to withstand the pelting bullets longer, the Spaniards broke from the cover of the manigua (bush) and began running.  To Crane the battle became a "most extraordinary game --of trapshooting-- and coveys of guerrillas got up in bunches of five or six and flew frantically up the opposite hillside."

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