Spanish American War Text #3

Native Americans in the Spanish American War

When the Spanish-American War began, Congress authorized President William McKinley on 22 April 1898 to assemble specific units from company to regimental size, "possessing special qualifications, from the nation at large." Under the aegis of this Volunteer Bill, Secretary of War Russell Alger stipulated that three volunteer cavalry regiments were to be formed "exclusively of frontiersmen possessing special qualifications as horsemen and marksmen." A prewar letter to McKinley, dated 2 April, in which Governor Myron T. McCord of the Arizona Territory offered to raise a regiment, suggested certain additional “special qualifications” shared by potential recruits from that region: self-reliance, inurement to camp life, ability to understand the Spanish language, and better resistance to tropical weather conditions. The First Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, known to history as the “Rough Riders,” was to be comprised of troops raised from Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) and the territories of Arizona and New Mexico. The Second Regiment, commanded by Judge Jay L. Torrey, was to incorporate soldiers from Torrey’s state of Wyoming. The Third, formed in the Dakota Territory, was placed under the command of that region’s Adjutant General, Melvin Grigsby.

Despite decades of oppression, Natives from several tribes of the southwestern United States answered this call, along with their white counterparts. For many, wartime military service was a long-standing family tradition. Akin to their white comrades, they likely also sought adventure. In addition, some may have hoped that they would be able to use their experiences in the armed forces to obtain better subsequent socio-economic status (as had several fortunate African-Americans and Natives in earlier wars). At the end of April, Troop Captains William “Bucky” O’Neill and James McClintock screened the flood of eager applicants in Arizona for the First Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. Formally mustered on 30 April, two hundred Arizonans reported for duty at the regiment’s training grounds, Camp Wood in San Antonio, Texas. Other officers culled recruits for the unit from neighboring territories. 340 men came from the New Mexico Territory. Among them were two brothers, Joseph and Frank Brito of the Yaquí Tribe, who became privates in Troop H of the New Mexico contingent. From Indian Territory came 170 men, under the command of Allyn Capron, Jr. Among them were Thomas Isbell, of partial Cherokee descent, and William Pollock, a full-blooded Pawnee. Writing from Camp Wood to fellow Pawnee Samuel Townsend, Pollock took pride in his bold decision to take up arms, seeing it as a continuation of a family tradition:

 “At last I am going to see civilized people fight against half-barbarians as they term Spaniards. Sometimes it seems hard, but I have put myself thus far and will stay with it. I am not going to predict any or do any boasting, but I’ll only say that in the memory of our brave fathers I will try and be like one of them, who used to stand single-handed against the foes. Being the only full-blooded Indian in this troop, I am somewhat a conspicuous character. Some folks at home thought I was very foolish to put myself into such a situation where dangers of all kinds are inevitable. If my mother was yet living, I would not take any such step; my brothers, they are all men and will not worry about me, but will rather be somewhat proud of me even should I fail at my duty as a soldier under the service of the U. S. Government.”

http://www.spanamwar.com/NativeAmericans.htm