

The Spanish-American War: 100 Years Ago

# That "Splendid Little War" in the Pacific

Story by R. R. Keene

**I**n this the second in a series about Marines in the Spanish-American War, Commodore George Dewey's Pacific fleet is ordered from Hong Kong to the Philippines to engage and destroy the Spanish fleet.

Dawn on Manila Bay broke to a horrific crack of thunder from heavy, American naval guns. The dense tropical heat whined at being torn by high-speed shells as they streaked 5,000 yards southeast toward Spanish ships at anchor off Sangley Point, near the Cavite naval base on the island of Luzon.

The impact triggered a reveille of enormous geysers of water that splashed across

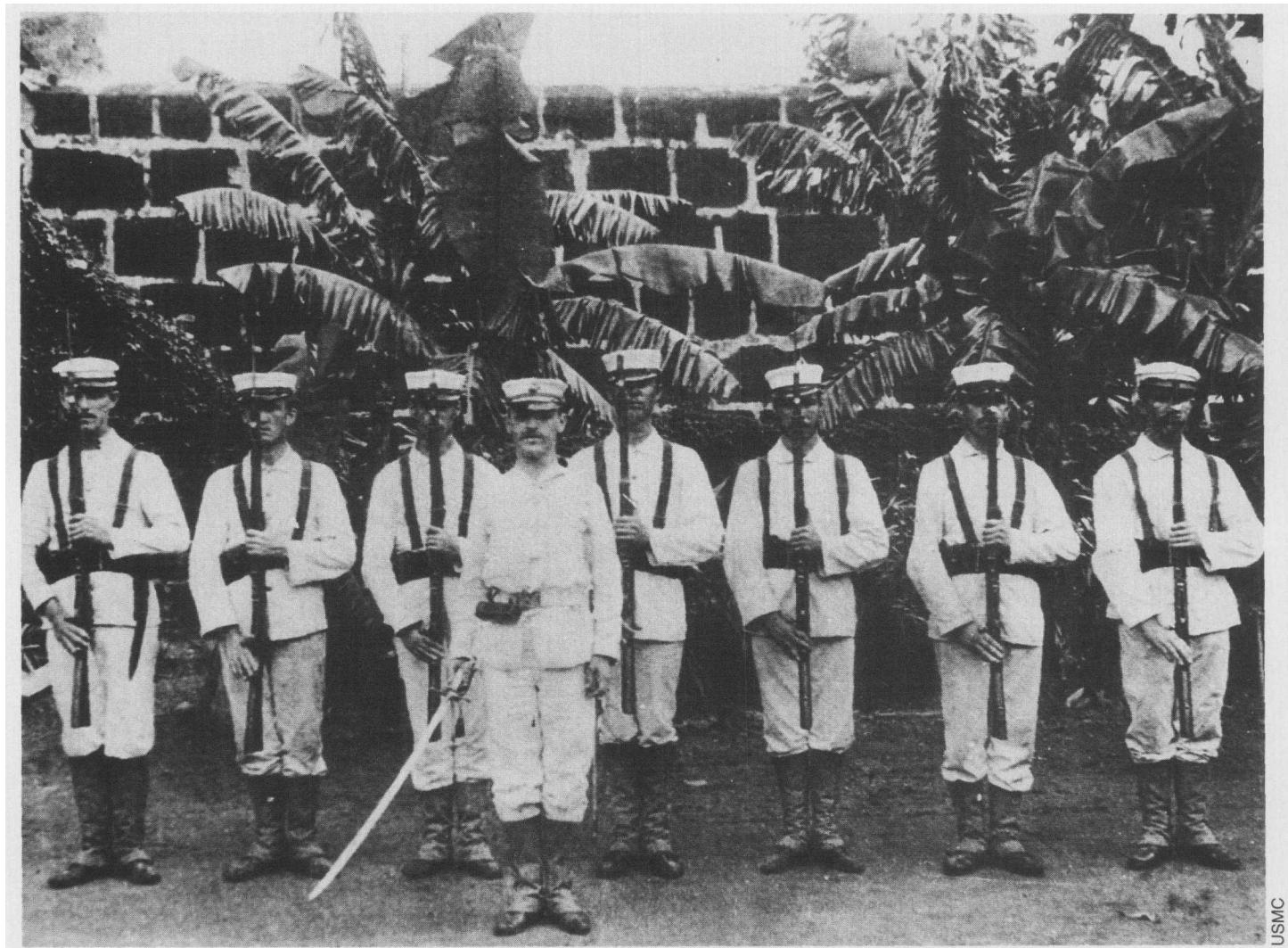
the decks of Admiral Patricio Montojo y Parson's squadron.

Moments before at 5:40 a.m., May 1, 1898, Commodore George Dewey on his flagship, cruiser USS *Olympia* (C-7), had turned to Navy Captain Charles V. Gridley and said, "You may fire when ready." *Olympia*'s 8-inch guns then launched the first salvo.

The cruisers *Baltimore* (C-3), *Boston* (no hull number) and *Raleigh* (C-8); gunboats *Concord* (PG-3) and *Petrel* (PG-2); the revenue cutter *Hugh McCulloch*; plus the transports *Nanshan* and *Zafiro* combined to unleash a broadside of 3,700 pounds of ammunition. The steel

Spanish flagship *Reina Marina Cristina*, the wooden cruiser *Casillo*, the small iron cruisers and gunboats *Don Antonio de Ulloa*, *Don Juan de Austria*, *Isla de Cuba*, *Isla de Luzon*, *Marques de Duero*, *Elcano*, *General Valasco* and transport *Isla de Mindanao* sporadically fired back, but were no match.

Five passes and five broadsides later, it was all but over. Dewey's fleet broke off for breakfast and returned later to quell what little fight the Spanish had left. It was a one-sided victory for the Americans, who often tout the date as the birth of the modern Navy. Historically, it was the first time two fleets of



Lt Dion Williams executed a sword salute with members of USS *Baltimore*'s Marine detachment during Commodore George Dewey's first visit to the Cavite navy yard on June 13, 1898, little more than a month after Williams and his leathernecks secured Cavite from its previous Spanish occupants.

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iron and steel warships turned their guns on each other and fired. The result was twisted carnage and catastrophic for Adm Montojo's squadron. Three of the Spanish ships went to the bottom of the bay. Three more soon joined them, having been damaged so heavily they had to be scuttled. With them went 161 Spanish seamen, while another 210 of their shipmates suffered horrible wounds inflicted from modern naval warfare.

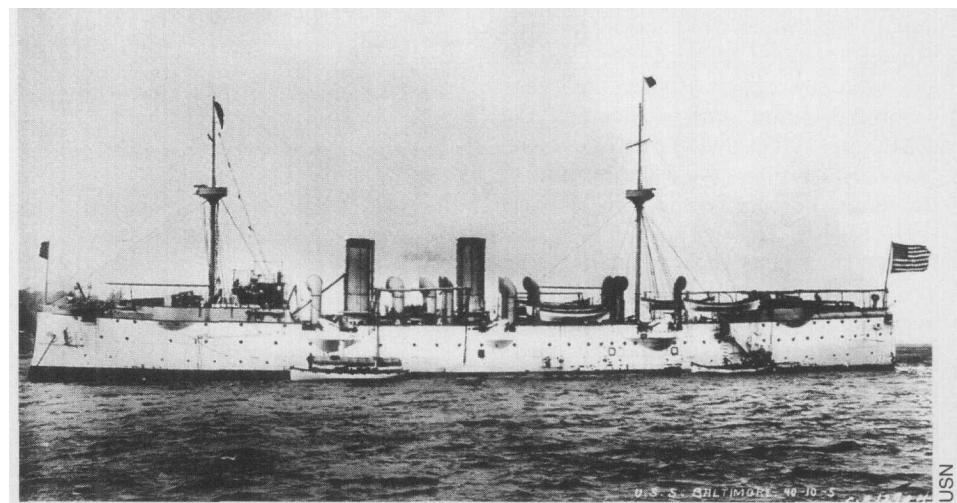
The American flotilla took only minor damage, had six wounded and one dead of heat prostration. Dewey and Gridley became national heroes. Upon returning to Madrid, Montojo was court-martialed and cashiered.

Overlooked in the euphoria that followed in the wake of victory was the fact that Dewey's cruisers had fired 5,800 rounds of which only 141 hit the hapless Spanish squadron which, for the most part, had remained dead in the water. Obviously, American naval gunnery needed honing.

The Colonel Commandant of the Marine Corps Charles Heywood, who had been a seagoing Marine in the Civil War, knew in his soul that Marines were better gunners. Once on a man-of-war, he had said, "There is no duty on this vessel that a Marine cannot perform...as well as a sailor." Heywood believed that had Marines manned some of the ships' main batteries, Manila Bay would have been a greater victory for the nation, the Navy and, of course, the Corps. Leathernecks of the ships' Marine detachments had manned some of the secondary batteries and rapid fire guns, but not enough.

The Commandant's words were meant to be more than salty bravado. In 1889 a Board of Organization, Tactics and Drill headed by Commodore James A. Geer recommended total removal of Marines from warships of the Navy. Over the years more than a few Navy leaders had come to see the Marine detachments as outdated and a nonessential anachronism. However, Heywood and some he considered to be "progressive men of the Navy" thought that while sailors could be more like Marines in discipline, the Marine detachments should take on the ships' fighting roles, from landing in whale boats with rifles and cutlass, to firing the main batteries in engagements on the high seas.

The war, of course, put the debate on the back burner of the service rivalry stove. Heywood, however, would not let



The cruiser *Baltimore* (above) sent her Marine detachment ashore to capture Cavite, and while Marines manned secondary batteries of the Pacific Fleet at Manila Bay and other naval engagements of the war, none manned the large 8-inch guns depicted (below) in this artist's rendition of Dewey's victory.



it go. He voiced his disappointment at initial naval reports which failed to include the actions of Marine guards and conducted his own investigation into not only the Battle of Manila Bay, but other naval engagements of the war. His investigation, however, proved inconclusive for it was difficult to confirm how many rounds from Marines firing secondary batteries had punctured Spanish ships.

But his investigation did reinforce what he, no doubt, already knew. Heywood found the leathernecks had been calm and cool under fire doing every assignment from firing secondary batteries to employing their skills as riflemen, signal men, messengers, orderlies, medical assistants and passers of ammunition, all the

while displaying efficiency and valor. Despite his misgivings about the Navy, he found the sister service not only appreciated the leathernecks' fortitude and fidelity, but had shared the praise as well. At sea, there were many individual acts of heroism: During the war, 13 of the 15 leathernecks who won Medals of Honor were assigned to ships' Marine detachments.

It should also be noted that seven future Commandants were veterans of the Spanish-American War. Five of them were afloat with ships' detachments: Capt William P. Biddle would become the 11th Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1911; Lieutenants George Barnett, the 12th in 1914; John Archer Lejeune, the 13th in 1920; Ben Hebard

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Fuller, the 15th in 1930 and John Henry Russell Jr., 16th CMC in 1934. Two others, who saw action ashore, were Capt George F. Elliott, who became the 10th CMC in 1903, and First Lieutenant Wendell Cushing "Whispering Buck" Neville, who became the 14th CMC in 1929.)

First Lieutenant Dion Williams would not become Commandant, but his place in the Corps' history was assured two days after the last round of American naval bombardment splashed in Manila Bay and the Spanish fleet ran up the white flag of surrender.

The Philippine capital of Manila, approximately 10 miles northeast of Cavite, was occupied by another 13,000 Spaniards. The governor of Manila, however, feared the destruction of the city and sent word that the American ships would not be fired on and handed over the defenses on the harbor island of Corregidor.

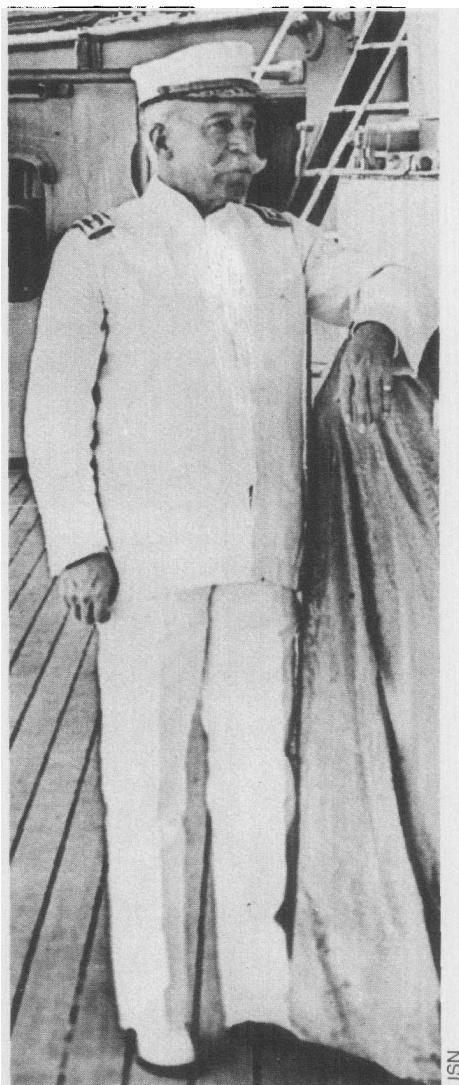
Dewey breathed a sigh of relief.

His ships, nearly out of ammunition, on the other side of the globe, in a place few Americans even knew existed, could not expect to be resupplied for weeks. He ordered 1st Lt Williams and leathernecks from USS *Baltimore* to secure the Cavite navy yard and to make a good show of it. Meanwhile, he notified Washington: "I control [the] bay completely and can take the city any time, but I have not sufficient men to hold."

On May 3, Williams and the Marines stepped onto Philippine soil with fixed bayonets and rifles at high port and became the first American troops to land on Spanish territory. They spread out and quickly secured the navy yard, pausing long enough to hoist the Stars and Stripes. Although it is doubtful they realized it at the time, they became the first to raise the American flag over enemy soil during a war.

Their position was tenuous. No one was sure what, if any, resistance they would encounter. They quickly occupied the Spanish Marine barracks and immediately fanned out to cover the various approaches from Manila. It had gone smoothly, mainly because the 800 previous Marine occupants had obviously left very quickly.

As they set into defensive positions, the Marines more thoroughly explored their perimeter and surroundings. Williams later reported: "In the barracks storerooms were supplies of clothing and rations which reminded us of our own barracks at home, one feature which greatly interested our men being several barrels of red wine as this formed an important part of the Spanish ration. Cavite was evidently an old-time 'navy



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Dewey's victory made him a national hero and, a year later, an admiral of the Navy.

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#### **—Commodore Dewey**

yard town' as shown by the number of liquor shops and other places of amusement for sailors, and some of our Marines said 'it was just like Vallejo,'" near USS *Baltimore*'s California home port of Mare Island.

Dewey sent Marine Capt William P. Biddle ashore as barracks commander and rotated the duties of ground defense for Cavite between four Marine detachments. Cavite was now invaluable to Dewey's ships.

All Dewey, his sailors and Marines could do now was wait for U.S. Army

expeditionary forces to transit the Pacific Ocean from the States. They would wait almost nine weeks.

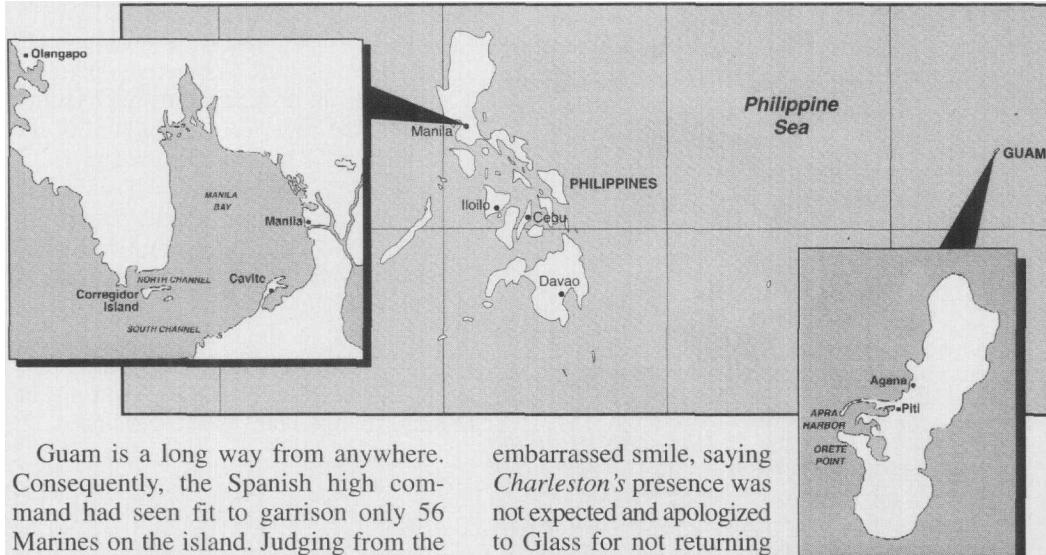
In the interim, Filipino insurgent leader Emilio Aguinaldo arrived from Hong Kong to rally his people against the Spanish imperialists. Aguinaldo would soon become revered in the Philippines, but was a delicate problem for Dewey. As leader of the insurrection forces, Aguinaldo insisted that they be the ones to occupy Manila and asked Dewey for a declaration of Philippine independence. The commodore had no authority to recognize the Filipino forces, much less issue such a declaration, and Washington would later refuse to recognize the insurgents. Aguinaldo began to suspect American intentions, fearing the Philippines would trade one colonial master for another.

The situation became tense. On July 2, Aguinaldo declared himself president of the revolutionary republic. Dewey had to contend not only with the Spanish still in Manila, but also a growing force of insurrectionists in the countryside. Dewey did his best. He kept his vessels on alert at Cavite and strengthened the defenses ashore.

He would later complain: "If there had been 5,000 Marines under my command at Manila Bay, the city would have surrendered to me on May 1, 1898, and could have been properly garrisoned. The Filipinos would have received us with open arms, and there would have been no insurrection." As it turned out, 17 months later, the Marines and Filipinos would be fighting each other, and the Philippines would become an American commonwealth. But in early summer of 1898, unable to take and hold more ground, Dewey could only wonder when the Army would show up.

At this time, the Army expeditionary forces were on six troopships 1,600 miles to the east, off the Mariana Islands watching the Marines make Guam an American protectorate. The cruiser USS *Charleston* (C-2) was escorting the convoy which carried the expeditionary forces bound for the Philippines. On June 20, *Charleston*'s skipper Commander Henry Glass was ordered to disarm Spanish forces headquartered in the town of Piti. The Army troopships remained on the open ocean while *Charleston* steamed with crew and Marines at battle stations into Apra Harbor.

Cdr Glass sighted the fort of Santa Cruz and let loose a salvo of 12 rounds from *Charleston*'s guns. There was no return volley of fire, for the fort had been abandoned for years. The naval guns ceased their bombardment, and the cruiser steamed forward cautiously.



Guam is a long way from anywhere. Consequently, the Spanish high command had seen fit to garrison only 56 Marines on the island. Judging from the lack of communication with the garrison, the high command also had seen fit to forget about them. As a result, they had no clue that anybody they knew was at war. Upon hearing the report of naval guns coming from the harbor entrance, the island's military commander took it to be a salute from a visiting ship.

As *Charleston* moved menacingly closer into the inner harbor, Glass, his sailors and Marines were more than a little surprised as a boat with a Spanish officer boldly approached them from Piti, the inner city of the harbor. The officer, accompanied by three attendants, wore an

embarrassed smile, saying *Charleston*'s presence was not expected and apologized to Glass for not returning the "salute." Glass waited for the proper translation, stared for a moment at the Spanish officer and then explained that *Charleston*'s broadside had been a hostile act since a state of war existed between Spain and the United States. He then dutifully informed the officer that he and his men were prisoners of war.

Once the Spaniards overcame their astonishment, Glass granted them a parole provided they informed Spanish Governor Juan Marina of the situation and conveyed Glass's demand that the governor report to *Charleston* for a conference.

Governor Marina wasn't sure of anything except that he did not want to go aboard *Charleston*. The next day Glass sent an ultimatum demanding the surrender of the island. As insurance, Glass ordered up a landing party of 30 Marines from *Charleston* and two U.S. Army companies of Oregon infantry from one of the troopships to prepare for an opposed landing ashore. Glass placed them under Marine 1st Lt John Twiggs "Handsome Jack" Myers, who two years later would be firing point-blank into hordes of Chinese attacking the foreign legations at Peking during the Boxer Rebellion.

Meanwhile, Glass dispatched Navy Lt William Braunersreuther into Piti to personally deliver the ultimatum to the governor and return with his reply. The Spanish officials, still not knowing what to do, again hesitated, but finally capitulated. Marina and his staff were taken aboard a troopship and later sailed as prisoners to the Philippines.

Glass took possession of Guam in the name of the United States. The Stars and Stripes went up over Fort Santa Cruz and Guam for the first time and still flies



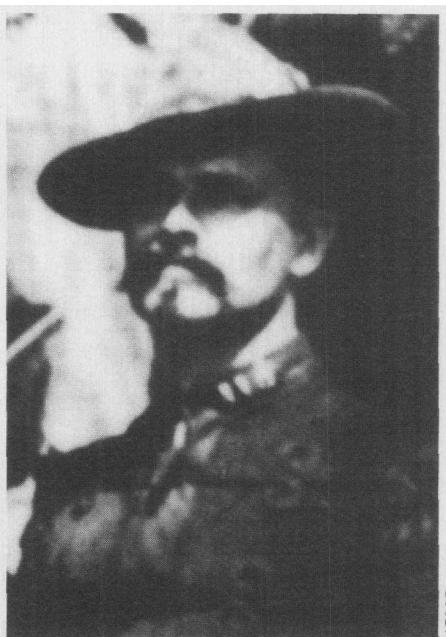
The Pacific fleet (in the distance) with Marines ashore held Manila Bay and Cavite (foreground), but not much else until U.S. Army forces arrived more than eight weeks later.

over that island today. The transports entered the harbor as Army bands played the national anthem. This time *Charleston* did fire a national salute.

That afternoon Lt Braunersreuther, in Piti, waited for the Spanish garrison to present itself with arms and equipment for surrender. A landing force consisting of 30 Marines and 16 tars under Myers was there to welcome them into captivity and provide escort to the ships. A company of native Chamorros, all that was left of Spanish military forces, was allowed to remain on the island.

Apparently, Dewey's situation had finally achieved priority in Washington. The Secretary of the Navy sent word for the convoy to hurry to Manila. The message failed to mention anything relative to the disposition of Guam or establishing an American government. Glass, seeing adventure ahead in the exotic Philippines and having no interest in the administration of an island so far-flung from anywhere, sailed away at flank speed.

The desolate Guam was garrisoned by Marines (except for a few years during World War II) until 1992. Subsequent to *Charleston*'s hasty departure, the occupation and administration of Guam fell to a naval governor, Cdr Seaton Schroeder, known as "Satan" to the Marines of the occupation force. It is reported by several historians that once the leathernecks found the island and its people to be of no threat, they "solaced" them-



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There wasn't much action for Lt John Twiggs "Handsome Jack" Myers at Guam, but as a captain in 1900 at Peking, he'd find plenty of fighting.

selves with a barrel of pirated medicinal whiskey. Consequently, some of the garrison were "reviled" by Schroeder, who officially reprimanded them to the Navy Department for their "detestable spirit of lawlessness."

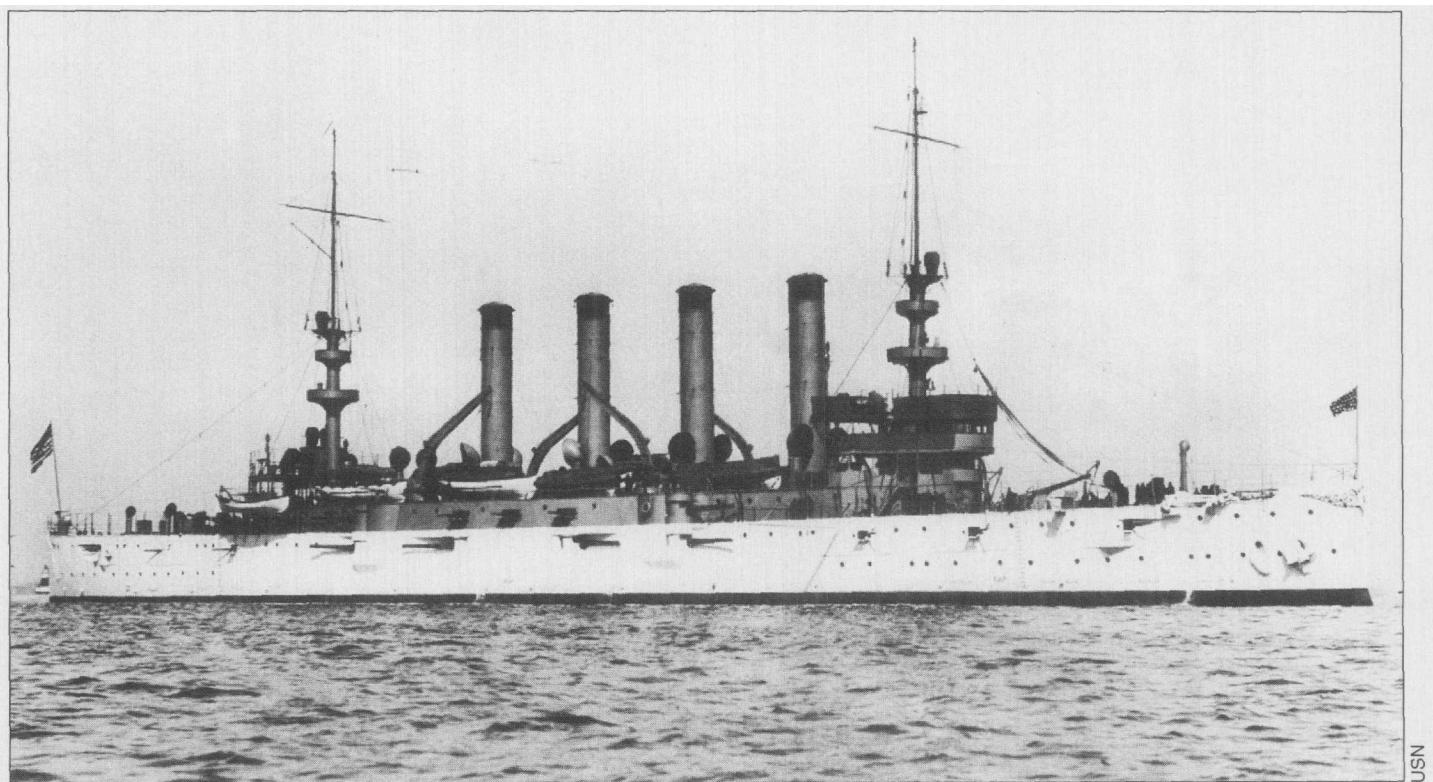
The Army eventually arrived to liberate the Philippines. The war ended shortly thereafter. The Spanish occupiers ceded the Philippines to the United States and

sailed home for Madrid. Aguinaldo would later become a Philippine national hero who led his insurgents in bitter battles against the Americans at the turn of the century until he was captured in 1902. Dewey went on to become an admiral of the Navy and gained a great respect for the Corps saying, "No finer military organization than the Marine Corps exists in the world."

At least in the Pacific, the conflict with Spain was indeed what many called "a splendid little war." It would not be quite so "splendid" in the Caribbean.

*Author's note: The following were used as references and are recommended for further reading: "The History of the United States Marine Corps" by Allan R. Millett; \*"The U.S. Marine Corps Story" by J. Robert Moskin; \*"Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps From 1775-1962" by Col Robert Debs Heinl Jr, USMC; "A History Of The United States Marine Corps" by Clyde H. Metcalf, "American Naval History: An Illustrated Chronology" by Jack Sweetman; "U.S. Marine Corps Biographical Dictionary" by Karl Schouen; and \*"The Home of the Commandants" published by the Marine Corps Association.*

*\*Available through MCA Bookservice, 1-888-237-7683.*



The cruiser *Charleston* steamed into Guam's Apra Harbor at battle stations, guns firing, and received an apology from the Spanish garrison for failure to render her honors.