

100 Years Ago



The "Asia hands" of the Corps:  
Marines who enlisted specifically to  
serve in the exotic East

# The Lure of Asiatic Service:

## America's Legionnaires Battle Filipino Insurgents on the Fringes of Our Nation's Tropic Empire

Story by R. R. Keene • USMC photos

**T**hat the Philippine Islands are beautiful is beyond doubt to anyone with eyes. Yet, such pleasures were difficult to behold for Marines, hefting Krag-Jorgensen rifles above their heads and up to their armpits in the mangrove swamps of the island of Luzon.

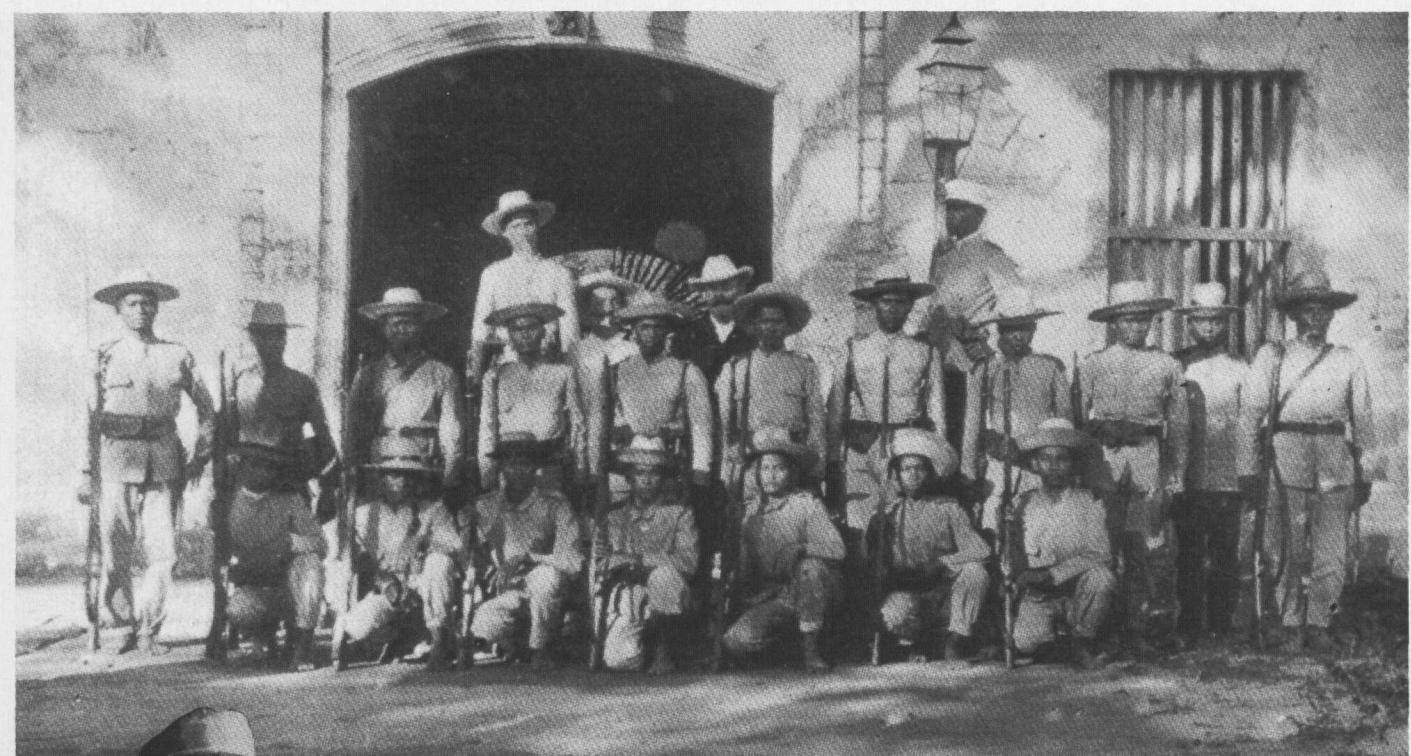
The heat was debilitating. Under it, nearly 50 leathernecks were exhausted beyond effectiveness. A swamp itself was a fearful thing—a simmering stew of wet muck that sucked at leggings and shoes as it stirred up generations of fermentation, releasing gaseous odors. The swamp caused the dark and muddied tidal runs to swirl with only the vague outlines of alien creatures the Marines

could never readily identify. Vicious insects swarmed in waves, enveloping men's exposed faces and hands, stinging and biting, leaving welts and disease. And, somewhere in that primeval forest, hid the Filipino *insurrectos* waiting with Mauser rifles and machetes. The Marines worked hard to keep together. Falling behind was an option that no man considered or even wanted to think about, although invariably each man, as he painstakingly made his way, must have asked himself: "Why me?"

The answer lay with the leathernecks' government. Imperialism is always tempting. It was no less so for the United States after 6 Feb 1899, when the Senate

ratified the Treaty of Paris, effectively ending the war with Spain. In the process, the United States had annexed the Philippines, added Guam and the Hawaiian Islands to the South Pacific protectorate of Samoa, and joined with other nations eyeing the vast potential of China.

The decision by President William McKinley to annex the Philippines was in response to foreign and domestic pressure for the United States to take an active role on the global stage and grab its economic share of Asian markets. There was also religious pressure behind the decision. Disregarding the fact that the vast majority of Filipinos were Catholic, American clergy pushed for Congress to



Filipino insurgents (above) at the outbreak of insurrection were reasonably well-disciplined, well-uniformed and well-armed. That changed, however, as fighting wore on and their losses mounted. They, however, never swerved in their devotion to Emilio Aguinaldo (left), their self-proclaimed leader.

send American troops to "civilize and Christianize the heathen tribes."

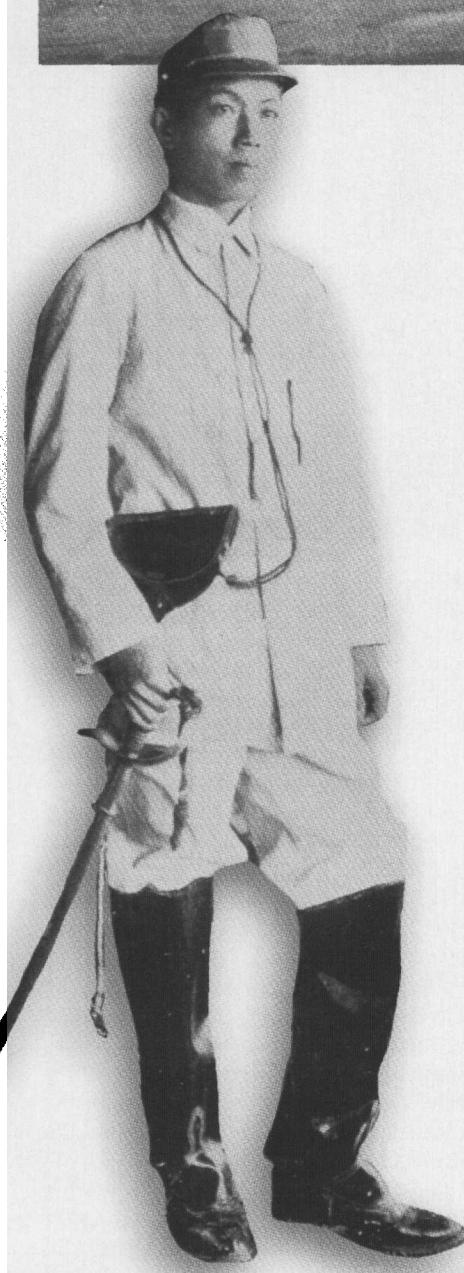
Although the Senate hotly debated whether these newly acquired places and tropical climes should be governed or ruled, it was left to be settled on the bayonets of Marines and soldiers backed by the might of naval guns belonging to the Asiatic Fleet. Thus America entered an era of colonialism, and the American military found that the duty of soldiering abroad would be called "foreign service."

On 22 Feb 1899, Filipinos, who initially had welcomed American protection, reeled at annexation and shed blood for independence under Emilio Aguinaldo. They rose up against Americans in the capital of Manila. The U.S. Army took the brunt, suffering losses. They did not suffer stoically but struck back, defeating some 3,000 insurgents caught south of Manila at the Zapote River. This was the start of a bloody and vicious four-year ordeal throughout the archipelago.

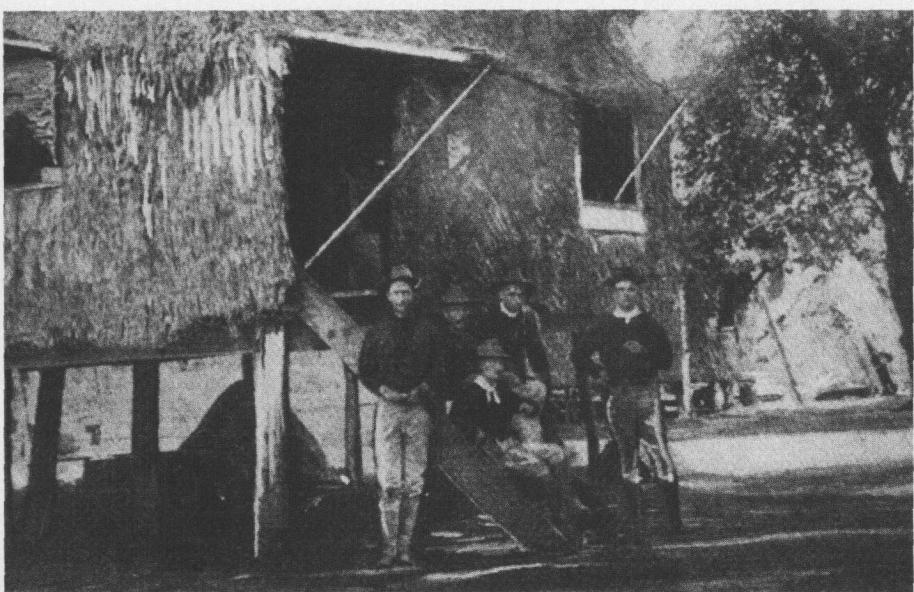
The Marine role in the Philippines gradually increased as volunteer units of the Army, having served their time overseas, rotated Stateside. The leathernecks by now considered themselves professional soldiers of the sea who had manned naval guns and led boarding parties from U.S. Navy battlewagons and cruisers during engagements with the Spanish. They landed and were bloodied in nasty skirmishes on Samoa and Cuba, as well as on other islands of the Caribbean.

Their senior officers were old but gristle-tough veterans, including Colonel Percival C. Pope, who commanded the 1st Battalion, which arrived at Cavite Naval Base in May. Pope, a veteran of the Civil War, had been Col Robert W. Huntington's executive officer at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Lieutenant Colonel George F. Elliott led the 2d Bn, which arrived in September. A year earlier, as a very senior captain, he had led the attack on Cuzco Well near Guantanamo Bay and was destined to become the 10th Commandant of the Marine Corps. Then there was Major Littleton W. T. "Tony" Waller who was "a most excellent officer," wrote one lieutenant of his small, dashing commander with a fiery mustache, "the only man I have ever known who talked a lot about himself, but who could always deliver the goods. The Marine Corps was his god. He never let you forget it." And Maj William P. Biddle, who had been with Commodore George Dewey at the Battle of Manila Bay, would become the Corps' 11th Commandant.

The Naval Personnel Act of 1899 had increased the Corps' strength to 211 officers and 6,062 enlisted men. One hundred new lieutenants and 1,500 recruits had joined the ranks in 1899, specifically to serve in Asia. With them came a new breed of company grade officer, young and eager, who would provide the Corps with a generation of leadership primarily in Asia. Among them were:



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**Above:** Guarding outposts was mundane to Marines who wanted action. **Right:** They often found it in skirmishes such as this one against *insurrectos* in 1899.

Captain Ben H. Fuller, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., who would someday become the 15th CMC; Capt John Twiggs "Handsome Jack" Myers, who would soon distinguish himself at Olongapo and, later during the Boxer Rebellion in China, would be awarded the Brevet Medal and eventually retire as a lieutenant general; Capt Herbert L. Draper, who would also distinguish himself at Olongapo fighting *ladrones* or bandits; Capt Dion Williams, one of the first to lead Marines ashore at Cavite against the Spanish; and Capt Henry C. Haines, described as "rugged, gentle and strikingly handsome," by a young lieutenant named Smedley Darlington Butler.

**A**mong the first lieutenants, Smedley Butler was the most colorful. He would go on to win two Medals of Honor and rise to major general. Others included: 1st Lt David D. Porter, tall, headstrong son of Commodore David Porter, who, a year later on Samar, won the Medal of Honor; George C. Thorpe, who in 1917 would capture the Dominican Republic bandit Evangelista and later escort the first U.S. diplomatic mission to Abyssinia; and Hiram I. "Hiking Hiram" Bearss, known for his "shirt-tails flying," who would also distinguish himself at Samar, earning the Medal of Honor, and in combat up to and including World War I. Louis McCarty Little would rise to major general; Robert H. Dunlap would be another veteran of Samar, who would lead leathernecks in some of the fiercest fighting of World War I; and Randolph C. Berkeley would become a brigadier general. According to Marine historian Allan R. Millett, they were part of "a host of Corps characters who saw themselves as American for-

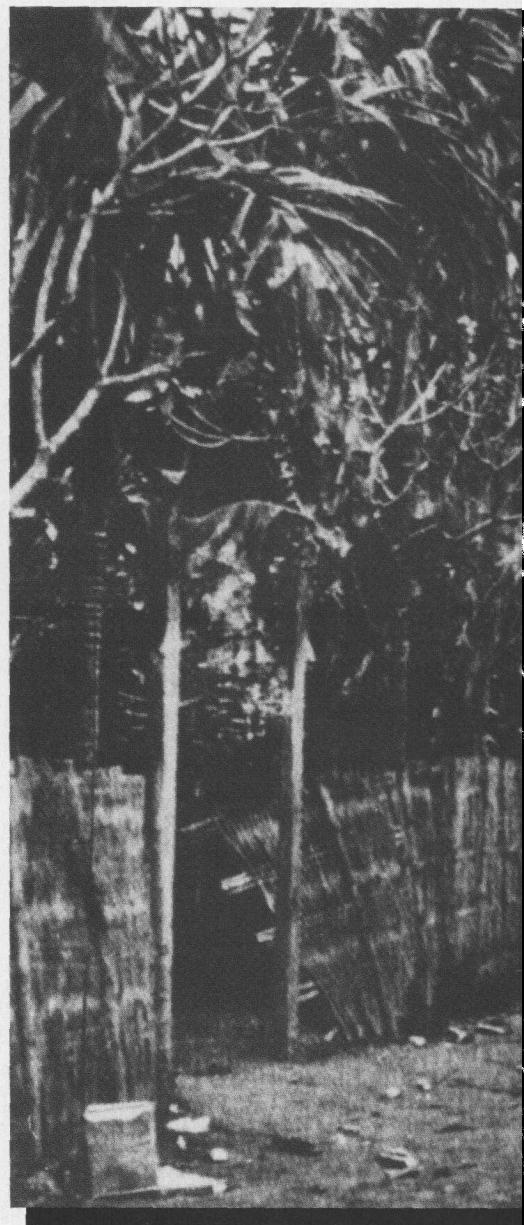
ign legionnaires on the fringes of their nation's tropic empire." When ordered, they willingly became part of the first overseas expedition whose officers shed their swords and armed themselves with only pistols, hoping to get into a fight and make history.

It was these Asia hands who joined with soldiers of the regular Army in operations and manned outlying posts. The first engagement for the Marines took place on 23 Sept when "Handsome Jack" Myers, with 250 Marines and a landing party of sailors, waded ashore north of Manila at Olongapo on Subic Bay, seized the old Spanish Naval Station and destroyed a large, rifled, Krupp gun.

Aside from that engagement, the leathernecks did not initially see much of the rebels, let alone hear the crack of Mauser bullets. Marines did, however, increase their numbers. The two battalions and ships' detachments were reinforced with two more battalions. This was notable in that it was the first time the Corps had fielded a force large enough to be considered a real regiment. It set a precedent on which the Corps would capitalize in the years to come.

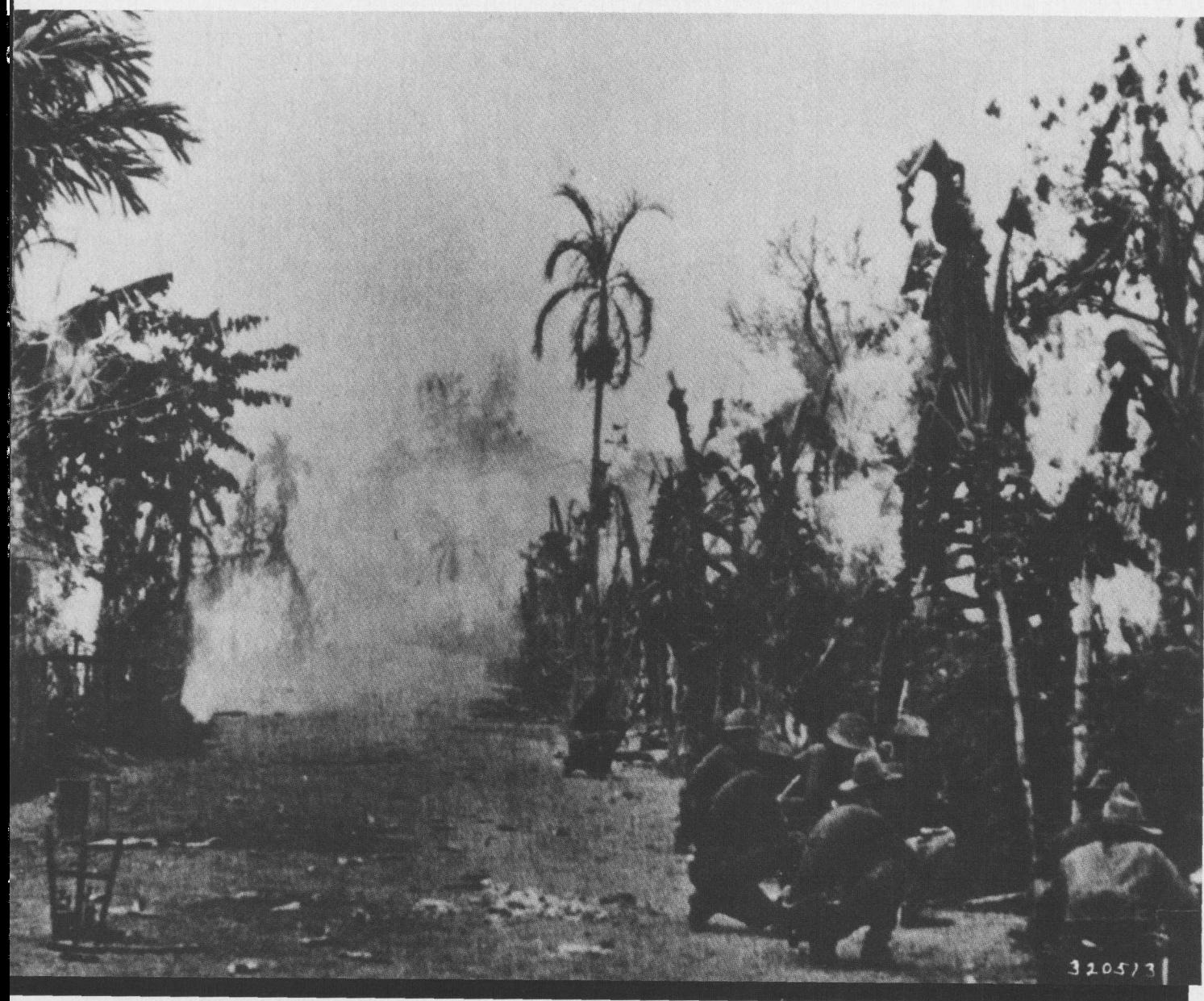
War was becoming their occupation, and the Marines chafed and grew restless with life in garrison. It was explained to them that the problems of establishing an advance naval base took precedence over chasing insurgents. Besides, the admiral who commanded the Asiatic Station was reluctant to commit naval infantry to land campaigns when there were naval bases to guard. It is almost needless to say this did not bode well with the leathernecks who occupied their time on guard with drills and sit-ups.

"We Marines harbored a special grudge



against the 10th Pennsylvania [a volunteer Army regiment], who were encamped just outside the town of Cavite between us and the Filipinos," wrote Butler. "If there was a skirmish they hogged the show, and we were kept in the Navy Yard." When the 10th Pennsylvania broke camp and cased their colors to return Stateside in September, the Marines perked up. Sea lawyers predicted the "First Marine Brigade," which is what the regiment had grown to, would soon be seeing action. For once, the sea lawyers were right.

Intelligence reports suggested the rebels were encamped at a village called Novaleta and at nearby Cavite Viejo. Army commanders reasoned that if they moved decisively and in force with the Marines they might be able to snare the *insurrectos* as they had at the Zapote River, only this time they would, with a little luck, clear Cavite province of rebels as far south as the Imus River. Col



Elliott, a man who understood such patrols, commanded six companies, about 375 infantrymen of the brigade. The heat was as unrelenting as it had been on his patrol to Cuzco Well, and the terrain was even more difficult. It caused him to divide his force into two columns to be led by Captains Haines and Fuller.

They moved out from the outpost at Caridad on 6 Oct, under the late morning sun, each man carrying haversack, canteens, poncho and 200 rounds of ammunition. The gunboat USS *Petrel* (PG-2), with her 6-inch guns, followed a good distance offshore. Following closer in was a steam cutter whose signalmen, in an early example of naval gunfire liaison, would relay fire missions by semaphore from the Marines to *Petrel*.

Commanding the Army units was Major General Henry W. Lawton. The Marines heard scuttlebutt that he was a reformed alcoholic, but they also heard of his exploits against Apache Indians in

the American Southwest: He'd received Geronimo's surrender and was as good and daring an officer as any leatherneck who wore a quatrefoil.

Forming a column at Cacoor a few miles east of Cavite, Lawton's troops would swing toward Manila and then hook south, counting on the Marines to drive the *insurrectos* into his soldiers' line of fire.

And that is why, on 8 Oct, the Marines had been making their way for the past several days through the miserable mangrove swamps just south of Cavite. There were about 100 from the cruiser USS *Baltimore* (C-3), commanded by Capt Haines, and they were on the very edge of Luzon with the rest of the Marine forces moving further inland. It was early morning when they stumbled into Filipino pickets and gunfire erupted.

Soon, both flanks of the Marine columns found themselves under fire and spread out. Haines' signalman flagged

the steam cutter, which in turn flagged *Petrel*, which resulted in a whoosh of naval gunfire in the direction of the *insurrectos*. The Filipinos kept firing. The Marines signaled for adjustments. The Navy responded with adjusted gunfire. The Filipinos kept firing.

Had the Marines been able to look back in time, they would have learned that Spain's military, years earlier, had been unable to dislodge the Filipinos from the same positions at Novaleta. It was going to be a tougher nut to crack than the cashews in the nearby trees. The geography, for example, consisted of a single 6-foot-wide causeway leading into Novaleta, and it was flanked by flooded rice paddies. The village itself was hidden amid cool bamboo thickets, which provided nearly perfect concealment.

The tropical sun was climbing higher. The expedition had already lost a lot of men to the heat, and as the day went on they realized it was likely they would



**Ladrones or bandits often looted nearby outposts, especially near the Olongapo Naval Base. Marines, having helped establish the base at Subic Bay, soon ran patrols, ending much of the banditry.**

lose a few more. Canteens were running low. Water discipline was going to be a problem. The Filipinos kept firing. The Marines started taking casualties.

Frustrated, hot and thirsty, some Marines started shooting indiscriminately. It was obvious that the leathernecks would have to attack soon. And still the Filipinos returned fire.

Nonetheless, the leathernecks moved toward the village in grim silence, rifles at high port with fixed bayonets. They crossed a stream over a ruined bridge. Guiding on the causeway they fanned out as much as possible into the rice paddies, marshes and thick grass, which offered no protection from the heavy fire. The Marines brushed aside occasional resistance, but as the fire from the village increased, the leathernecks again began to fire without orders. Noncommissioned officers and lieutenants raced about trying to keep order. All the while, fire from the Filipinos not only increased, but also became more concentrated. More Marines were wounded. Yet, they kept advancing, leaving their wounded to be cared for later.

Elliott said he went in with "young Butler's company, and the first two men were wounded in his command. He [Butler] as well." As the Marines hit the first line of Filipino rebels, forcing them to give way, leathernecks noticed their wounded were being bushwhacked from the flanks. The leathernecks dispatched 20 men to the rear to provide a perimeter of protection.

The advance had stalled as the Marines caught their breath after taking up positions in old rifle pits behind a small dike still 250 yards from the village tree line. Again, officers and NCOs risked snipers' bullets, walking with bold disregard in plain sight of the Filipino riflemen to reposition their companies, which had overlapped.

Then, there came the distinct sound of American rifle fire directed into the *insurrectos'* flank. Gen Lawton had brought his men through a previous skirmish of their own and showed up at precisely the right moment. The Marines adjusted their rifle sights and carefully picked their targets. Rounds started hit-

ting their marks. The Filipinos returned fire with equal vigor.

As soon as *Petrel* learned the supporting Army column was in position for the attack, that ship, on Col Elliott's signal, commenced firing to cover the Marines' advance along the causeway. Marine trumpeters worked hard to summon enough saliva to wet their lips and sounded the charge. As the Marines moved forward, they forced their way through the difficult chaparral. The Filipinos kept firing, but their shooting became less concentrated and more sporadic.

The attack was succeeding in part because "a great deal of personal bravery among the officers and men was shown," Elliott later reported, "even up to reckless bravado, of which I highly disapprove."

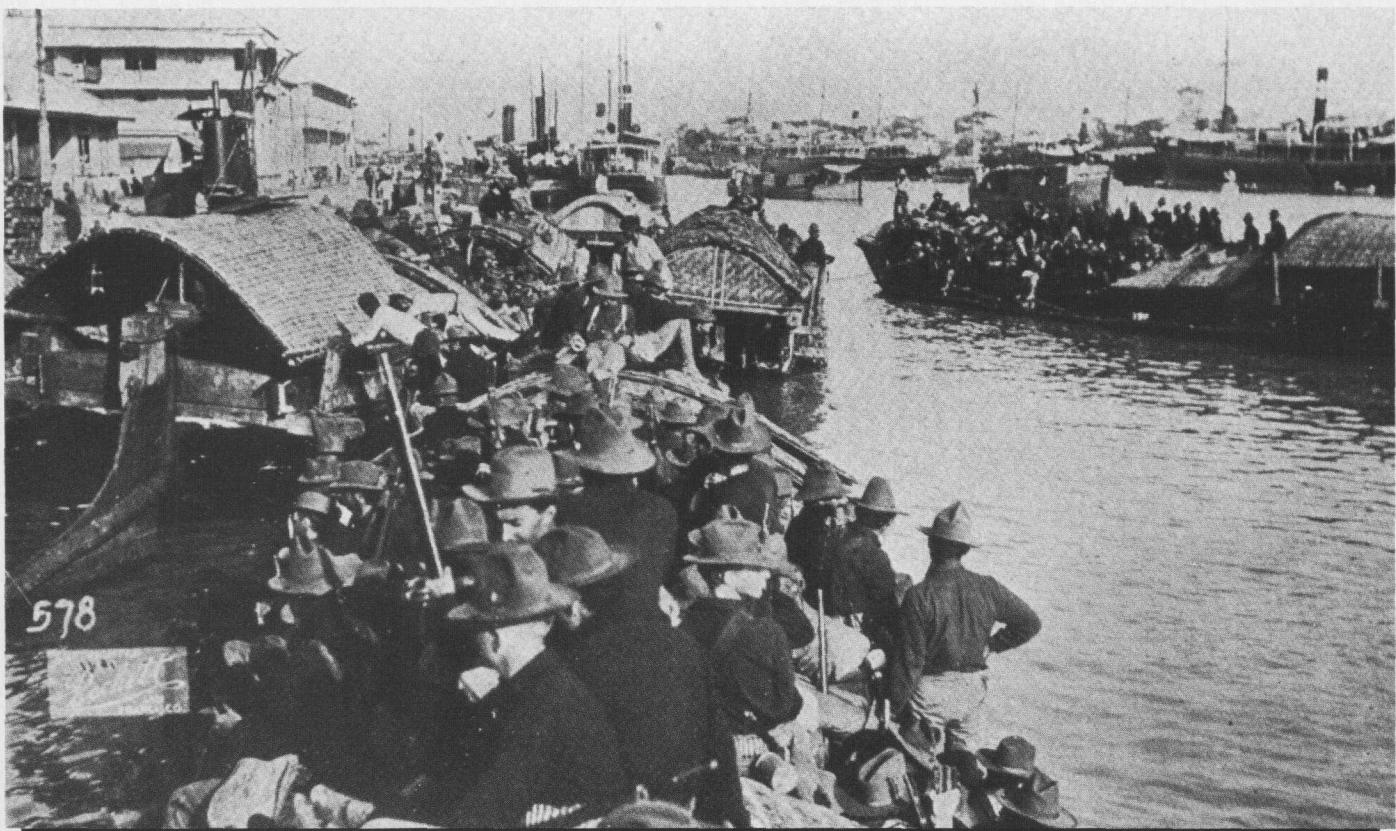
First Lieutenant Porter had been the first into the enemy's position, followed by 1st Lt Thorpe. The insurgents fled. Some hid their weapons, pretended to be friendly peasants and carefully faded into the countryside, and with them faded most of the rebellion on Luzon.

By high noon, Novaeta was in American hands. The seriousness of war set in when Marines took stock. Private Bartholomew O'Shea was dead, with a bullet in his abdomen. First Sergeant A. McKinnon was wounded on the left wrist. Privates M. L. Barker was shot in the hand; J. McDonald suffered two head wounds; F. C. Linnehan was hit in the wrist; G. Williams took a round through his thigh; H. S. Buehler bled a lot but suffered only a flesh wound; and P. Harnan had a flesh wound above the right ankle. Pvt J. F. Albright, gut shot, suffered and later died, becoming possibly the last Marine to die in combat during the 19th century. First Lieutenant C. S. Hill was wounded in the left thigh and scrotum. Navy assistant surgeon C. D. Langhorne was wounded in the arm while attending Lt Hill. Six others suffered lesser wounds.

Col Elliott was not happy. He considered the attack to be less than professional. He voiced his disapproval in his report to the commander in chief of the Asiatic Station even though he cited First Lieutenants Thorpe and Porter for bravery in action.

He then added: "I respectfully request that the Admiral will admonish these young officers for bravado, which might have caused failure in carrying the fort, provided these officers had been killed or wounded."

In the fall of 1899, an effort to crush what was left of the *insurrectos* on the island was carried out by several Army columns pushing Luzon. The more west-



It was about as exotic as it got in 1899 in the Philippine Islands. American troops, both Marines and soldiers, mixed with commercial traffic as they went ashore and marched off to the tropical fringes of America's colonial empire.

ward of these columns was advancing along the island's west coast, pursuing forces under Aguinaldo with the support of U.S. Navy warships.

A mission to support the Army advance and protect the Spanish and other inhabitants of Vigan, near the northwestern corner of the island, fell to a company of leathernecks and the Marine Detachment from the battleship USS *Oregon* (BB-3). Supported also by the gunboats *Callao* and *Samar*, the leathernecks landed 26 Nov and marched approximately three miles into Vigan.

Taking the town was not a problem. The town officials welcomed Capt Dion Williams, and had they been able to fashion a key, would have gladly presented him the key to the city. Most of the residents cheered the leathernecks' arrival.

Williams was nonetheless cautious. It had been reported that *insurrectos* were still in the vicinity and that an American Navy lieutenant commander was their prisoner. The officer's status as a prisoner was questionable. According to 1st Lt Randolph Berkeley, who had been detailed to close down the cantinas, the officer had left chits in most, asking American liberating forces to settle his bar bills because he had run out of funds.

An outpost was established. Patrols hiked into the interior to locate the

enemy. The Marines did find and arrest more than 100 Spanish remaining from the recent war with Spain. They eventually embarked them in *Oregon* for transfer to Manila.

In December, still another battalion, led by Maj Tony Waller, was dispatched to Cavite and, by the end of 1900, six Marine battalions had been sent to the Philippines, where an improvised brigade was then converted into a real one: two infantry regiments and two artillery companies—59 officers and 1,547 enlisted men in all.

By December 1899, the conventional war with the Filipino insurgents was ending. It was replaced with another type of war, one the Marines in the next century would fight often in Asia, the Caribbean and Central America: a war of classic guerrilla action and population control. The Army, faced with growing demands to garrison towns and mount combat patrols against Aguinaldo's insurgents held up in mountain bases, surrendered the responsibility of garrisoning most of the northern Cavite province to the Marines. In addition, a Marine company took control of the town of Olongapo and began the military pacification of Luzon.

During the next 18 months, Marines under Capt Herbert Draper chased small bands of guerrillas and *ladrones*, set ambushes, controlled the flow of rice

and supplies, supervised public works projects, held elections, established schools, guarded Navy facilities and reorganized as a two-regiment brigade. Fortunately, there were few leatherneck casualties. The Marines for the most part fought boredom by contributing to the Army's successful campaign against the insurrection on Luzon.

In mid-December, MajGen Lawton, veteran of one too many campaigns, was killed on a river bank north of Manila. It had been hoped that he would pacify the islands with a policy of conciliation. Command, however, eventually fell to MajGen Arthur MacArthur, described by one historian as, "the precise, arrogant, dandified general who would finally tranquilize the islands by a policy of relentless subjugation."

*Author's note: The following were used as references: "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; and "A History of the United States Marine Corps" by Clyde H. Metcalf.*

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