**The battle for Cuzco Well**
Keene, R R
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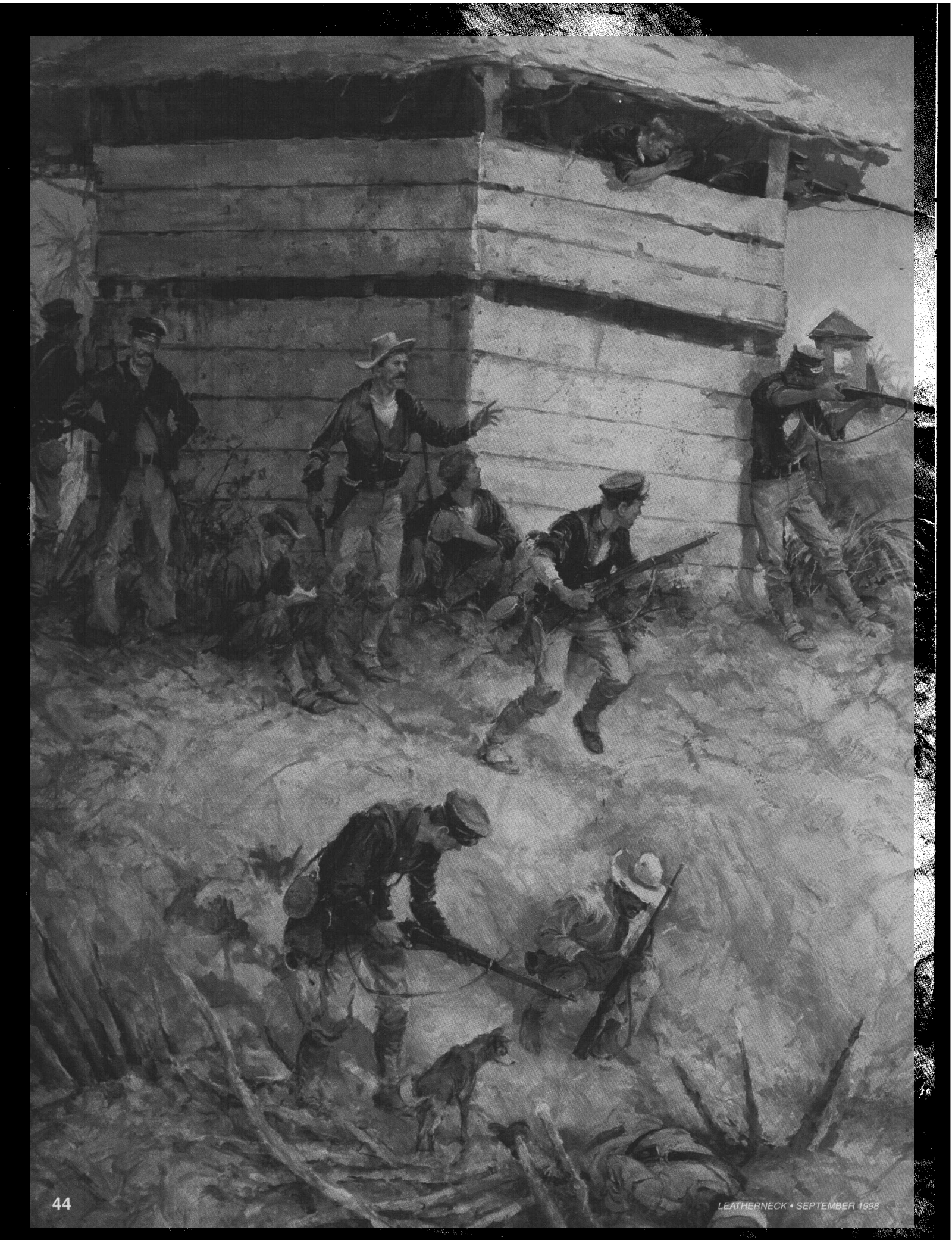
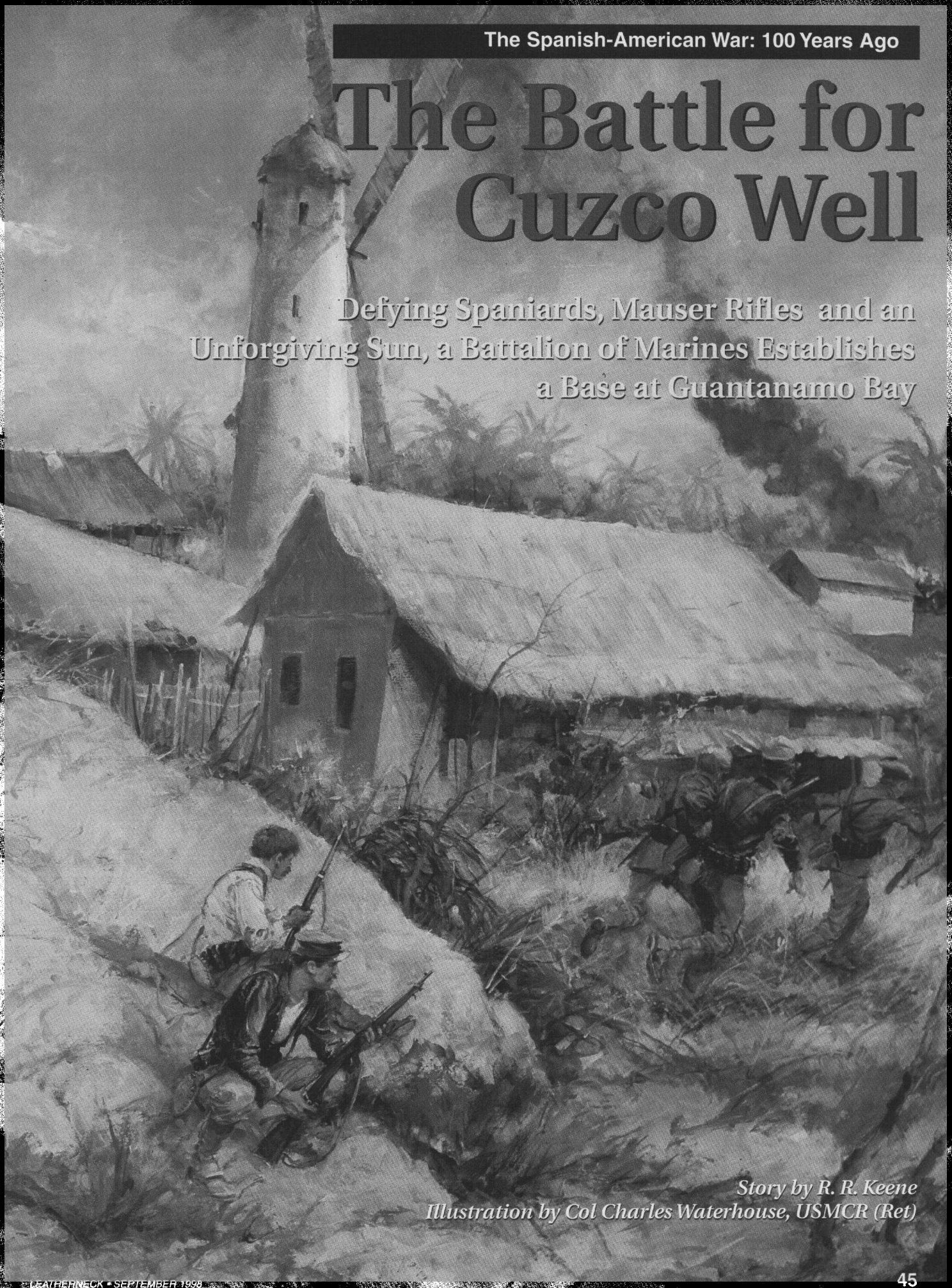
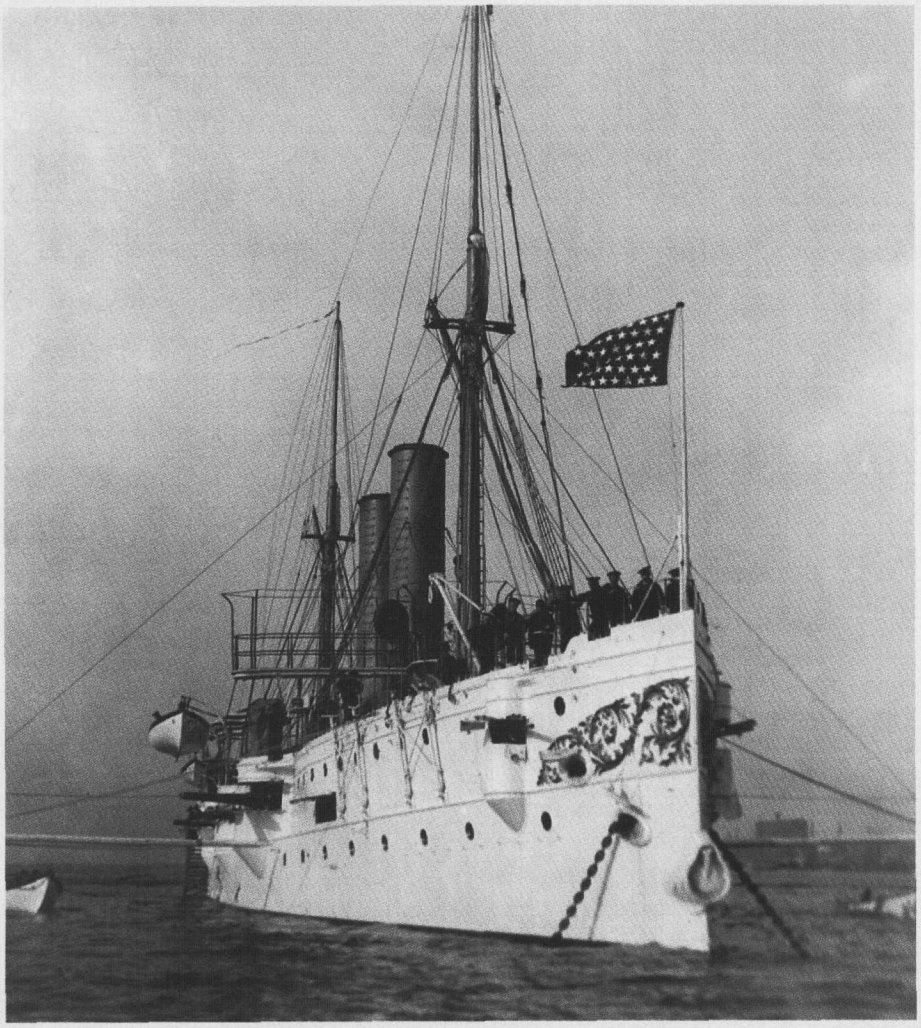


# The Battle for Cuzco Well

## Defying Spaniards, Mauser Rifles and an Unforgiving Sun, a Battalion of Marines Establishes a Base at Guantanamo Bay



*Story by R. R. Keene*
*Illustration by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret)*



Courtesy of USMC

**The cruiser *Marblehead's* captain, Cdr Bowman H. McCalla, understood the value of Marines. Among *Marblehead's* contributions in the Caribbean campaign was providing fire support for Col Robert W. Huntington's battalion at Guantanamo.**

*In this, the third and final article in a series about Marines in the Spanish-American War, Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Huntington's battalion, which left the States in April 1898, arrived off Florida and was later sent to Cuba to face the Spanish.*

The leatherneck battalion, 24 officers and 623 men crammed into the sweltering holds of the destroyer transport USS *Panther* (AD-6), had lost much of its fervor for war as it sailed from Brooklyn, N.Y., en route to the Caribbean.

For them, shipboard life consisted of one endless and dreary chow line. The food was bland and salted with drops of their own sweat. Their days, when not spent standing in lines, consisted of lectures on the many aspects of warfare. The classes themselves turned into minor battles to keep eyelids, weighted heavily with heat and tedium, open.

It didn't help that the crowded ship's skipper, Commander George C. Reiter, envisioned the Marines simply as guards for his vessel and minions for maintenance. Col Huntington, however, had been a lieutenant at Bull Run, where he had watched a battalion of woefully prepared Marine recruits march on line to face Confederate miniballs and cannon, and he had witnessed the disastrous results. Now, whiskered and wizened, Huntington was not about to let his infantrymen become mere orderlies and kept the leathernecks busy mastering the nomenclature of their new Lee rifles, firing 10 rounds each for familiarization and to zero in their battle sights.

The frustrated Reiter persuaded the naval commodore at Key West, Fla., to order the Marines ashore, there to await further orders. On May 24 Cdr Reiter saw to it that the battalion was unceremoniously dumped, at night, into a swampy area of the Keys without its supplies.

Huntington, on the other hand, wasted no time complaining about Reiter or anyone else. He had a war to fight. He saw the swamps as an ideal area to conduct tactical exercises and to further improve marksmanship.

The war was about to catch up with the Marines. Across the strait and off Cuba's southeast coast, Commodore W. S. Schley's Flying Squadron had forced the Spanish Atlantic Fleet into the harbor of Santiago de Cuba on May 28. The harbor's narrow channel entrance effectively kept the American squadron from following, but also checkmated the Spanish flotilla.

To keep the Spanish squadron bottled up would require more fuel for the U.S. Navy's ships. Guantanamo Bay 40 miles east was considered an ideal temporary harbor for coaling. Rear Admiral William T. Sampson, Commander, Atlantic Fleet, was ordered to "take possession of Guantanamo and occupy as a coaling station." Adm Sampson cabled Washington and then Key West, saying: "Send Colonel Huntington's Marines."

The Marines finally had a mission. On June 7 they clamored up *Panther's* gangplank with orders to seize and secure Guantanamo as an advanced base.

Meanwhile, three warships under Cdr Bowman H. McCalla had entered Guantanamo Bay on a fire and reconnaissance mission. On June 10 a landing party of 40 leathernecks from the battleship USS *Oregon* (BB-3) and cruiser *Marblehead* (C-11) scouted the proposed base and located friendly Cuban insurgents. They also reported that a garrison of 7,000 Spanish troops, commanded by General Felix Pareja, was concentrated inland and around Guantanamo City.

Later that day, *Panther* appeared on the horizon and began disembarking Marines ashore while the ship's band played martial music.

The blue-shirted, khaki-trousered leathernecks wearing blue bell-crown caps splashed through surf up to their canvas leggings and crossed the beach with Lee rifles and fixed bayonets at the ready. They came in light and ready for combat, wearing little more than their canvas cartridge belts. Their pouches rattled and bulged with rounds and canteens full of precious water. They initially met no resistance except that which came from an unrelenting sun.

Once the first riflemen occupied what was left of a Spanish blockhouse on a hill near Fisherman's Point, LtCol Huntington started asking those around him where their supplies were. They didn't know. He went back to the water's edge and saw his own men wet from surf and sweat acting as longshoremen and stevedores while *Panther's* sailors simply watched in amusement.

Huntington went to Reiter, who appeared unconcerned about the Marines having to unload their own supplies. Reiter further explained that he didn't like the way *Panther* was riding and had decided to keep the remainder of the leathernecks' small-arms ammunition on board as ballast.

Huntington was an old, ramrod-straight Marine, who had no time for petty bickering. He left Cdr Reiter and reported directly to the senior officer, Cdr McCalla on board *Marblehead*. Once aware of the situation, McCalla went immediately and directly to Reiter and exploded at him.

"Sir, break out immediately and land with the crew of the *Panther*, 50,000 rounds of 6-mm. ammunition," McCalla ordered. "In the future, do not require Colonel Huntington to break out or land his stores with members of his command. Use your own officers and men for this purpose, and supply the Commanding Officer of Marines promptly with anything he may desire."

Had Reiter been less self-absorbed he might have noted that McCalla was a naval officer who appreciated and understood the value of Marines. Months earlier on May 11, volunteer Marines and sailors from *Marblehead* used long boats to slip into Cienfuego Harbor, located on the underbelly of the Cuban island, to cut the communications cable that linked Havana to Spain. Most figured it would be a one-way mission.

One of those Marines was a 20-year-old German immigrant, Private Hermann W. Kuchmeister. A crack-shot rifleman, he was anxious to fight for his new country. Less than 100 yards from the beach, the Americans used grappling hooks to snag the cable and worked feverishly to sever it while Spanish riflemen rained bullets into their boats. Although shot in the face, Kuchmeister continued to return fire as others fell around him.

"Another [bullet] hit in nearly the same place," he later wrote, "taking part of the jawbone and teeth and a piece off the tongue in the back of the mouth, coming out behind the ear just one-sixteenth of an inch from the jugular vein."

The exposed raiders finally hacked through the cable and retreated to *Marblehead*. Kuchmeister was mistaken for one of the dead until he moved. The private was one of 12 Marines who were awarded Medals of Honor for that action.

For his part, Huntington was an appreciative, savvy soldier. After his Marines finished burning local shacks as a precaution against yellow fever, and Color Sergeant Richard Silvery of Company C raised the American flag for the first time in the war over Cuban soil, Huntington promptly named the occupied hill and the leatherneck base Camp McCalla.

Although Huntington was now assured by Cdr McCalla of naval gunfire support, Camp McCalla proved to be tactically unsound. It was on the evening of June 11 that the Marines felt the first real sting and learned to respect the 7.65-mm. Mauser Espanol Model 1893 rifles and the Spanish sharpshooters who wielded them.

Courtesy of USMC

**An artist's rendition of the beginning of the battalion's "100 Hours of Fighting." The Marines came in light and ready for combat, wearing little more than their canvas cartridge belts.**

The Marine positions in the bright Cuban sand were ideal targets for snipers who used the island's thick inland brush to conceal themselves. Spanish riflemen sighted in and drew first blood. Marine Privates William Dumphy and James McColgan assigned to picket duty never knew what killed them. Mauser rifle fire also sent up geysers of water in the surf where Marines would bathe. A correspondent for the *New York Journal* wrote: "Up from the sea came a line of naked men, grabbing their carbines and falling into place as Lt. Col. R. W. Huntington issued his orders getting a formation in a semicircle behind the brow of the hill, and waiting to see how much force would develop against them."

*Leatherneck* file photo

**At 52, George Elliott was the battalion's junior captain. He went on to become Commandant in 1903.**

There were the snicks of Lee rifle bolts seating their cartridges followed by a volley of leatherneck fire. Then, with the exception of an occasional cry of a gull, it was quiet. Huntington ordered a charge. The correspondent went on: "There was no fun in this for naked men, but they held their places and charged with the others."

For the battalion, it was the beginning of what Huntington's executive officer, Major Henry Clay Cochrane, later called "its 100 hours of fighting." The Marines flooded into their trenches and let loose with more rifle fire augmented by the staccato chatter from machine guns. Overhead, the freight-trainlike sound of naval ordnance roared to a loud impact in the nearby hills. McCalla, true to his word, unleashed a fearsome barrage of gunfire from *Marblehead*.

The Spanish infantry pulled back. Huntington summoned Captain George F. Elliott, who commanded Co C, and said, "Find them!" Then, Huntington with Capt Charles L. McCawley, son of the late Commandant, and Sergeant Major Henry Good led a separate patrol of their own. As it turned out, the Spanish found them first and opened up from close range. No one was seriously injured, and the Spaniards again disappeared into the thick bush.

That night the Spanish hit again. It was a wild nightmare: blackness punctured by explosions from naval gunfire, signal lamps winking in the darkness, alarms being sounded, rifle fire at real or imagined figures in the heavy brush and the steady, unnerving slap of Mauser bullets overhead. Somewhere in that chaos five of those rounds found their marks, wounding three Marines and killing Pvt Goode Tourman and the battalion's acting assistant surgeon, John Blair Gibbs.

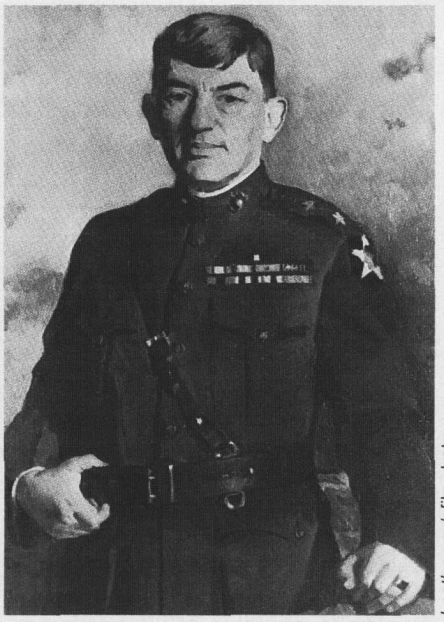
With the dawn came the oppressive heat and glaring sun. As they were situated, the leathernecks were much too vulnerable to sniper fire. Tactical positions needed to be relocated or reinforced. Consequently, noncommissioned officers harried Marines, lethargic from the lack of sleep, to break out shovels, axes and machetes and begin the exhausting labor essential to clearing fields of fire.

Shots rang out again, this time over by Co D commanded by First Lieutenant Wendell C. Neville. It was a fast and vicious attack. When it was over, three more Marines were wounded, and Sgt Charles H. Smith lay lifeless under the morning sun. The incident, however, drove home the need to hurry the shoring of defensive positions.

Driven and exhausted, the Marines labored on. Water became their elixir. Although stale and dank from their canteens, they slugged huge, luxurious gulps to quench their thirst and quell their fears.

That night, they manned their defenses, and the Spaniards with their Mausers came once again and were once again repulsed. Stephen Crane, author of "The Red Badge of Courage" and correspondent for *McClure's* magazine, wrote it was a night that "strained courage so near the panic point." It was also not without cost. At dawn, another Marine took muster for SgtMaj Good, who was dead.

Angered at his Marines being picked off piecemeal by snipers, Huntington, near a state of collapse because of his age, desperately sought to reverse the situation. His opportunity came with the arrival of Cuban guides and about 70 insurrectionists. The Marines and Cubans estimated that while thousands of imperial Spain's troops were around Guantanamo City, they were facing between 500 to 800 troops in the immediate vicinity. A Cuban colonel, sweat soaked and sipping from his canteen, reminded those at officers' call that water was a problem for all combatants on Cuba. Why not, he suggested, mount an expedition and destroy the Spaniards' only drinking water located in their Cuzco Well camp some two miles away?



*Leatherneck* file photo

**John A. Lejeune, then a lieutenant, landed Marines in Puerto Rico. By 1920 he would command the Corps.**

Why not indeed.

Although it was only a few miles to Cuzco Well, the actual route of march was closer to six through breezeless, rugged terrain. Companies C and D (some 150 Marines), commanded by Capt W. F. Spicer, with approximately 50 Cubans set out on a painstaking hike.

Crane, who accompanied them, described the expedition. "The Marines made their strong faces businesslike and soldierly. 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 Cubans, dressed in whites given to them by the Navy, were, according to Crane, "a 'hard-bitten' undersized lot... hardy, tireless, uncomplaining peasants who moved out along a path through the bush and the Marines followed." It was an arduous and thirsty trek up a chalky cliff and over steep ridges. Bent and burdened by gravity that pulled heavier on them as the temperature rose, they all gasped for air. When occasional glimpses permitted it, they looked longingly at the distant sparkling, turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea and the gunboat USS *Dolphin* (PG-24) moving east with them and ready to furnish fire support. The Marines could almost see the ship's lister bags swollen with cool water nestled under shady canvas awnings.

The sun's rays pounded them until some of their numbers, including Capt Spicer, became red-faced, cramped and disoriented. Command then fell to Co C's George Elliott, the junior captain, who at age 52 and with 28 years of service, was also nearing the end of his own physical limitations. Nevertheless, he first improvised a party of stretcher bearers with orders to cut directly to the coast and carry the heat cases immediately to *Dolphin*. The remainder then continued the march.

Three miles from the enemy camp, Elliott told 1stLt L. C. Lucas to take his platoon and half the Cubans to the left and cut off any pickets the Spanish may have posted.

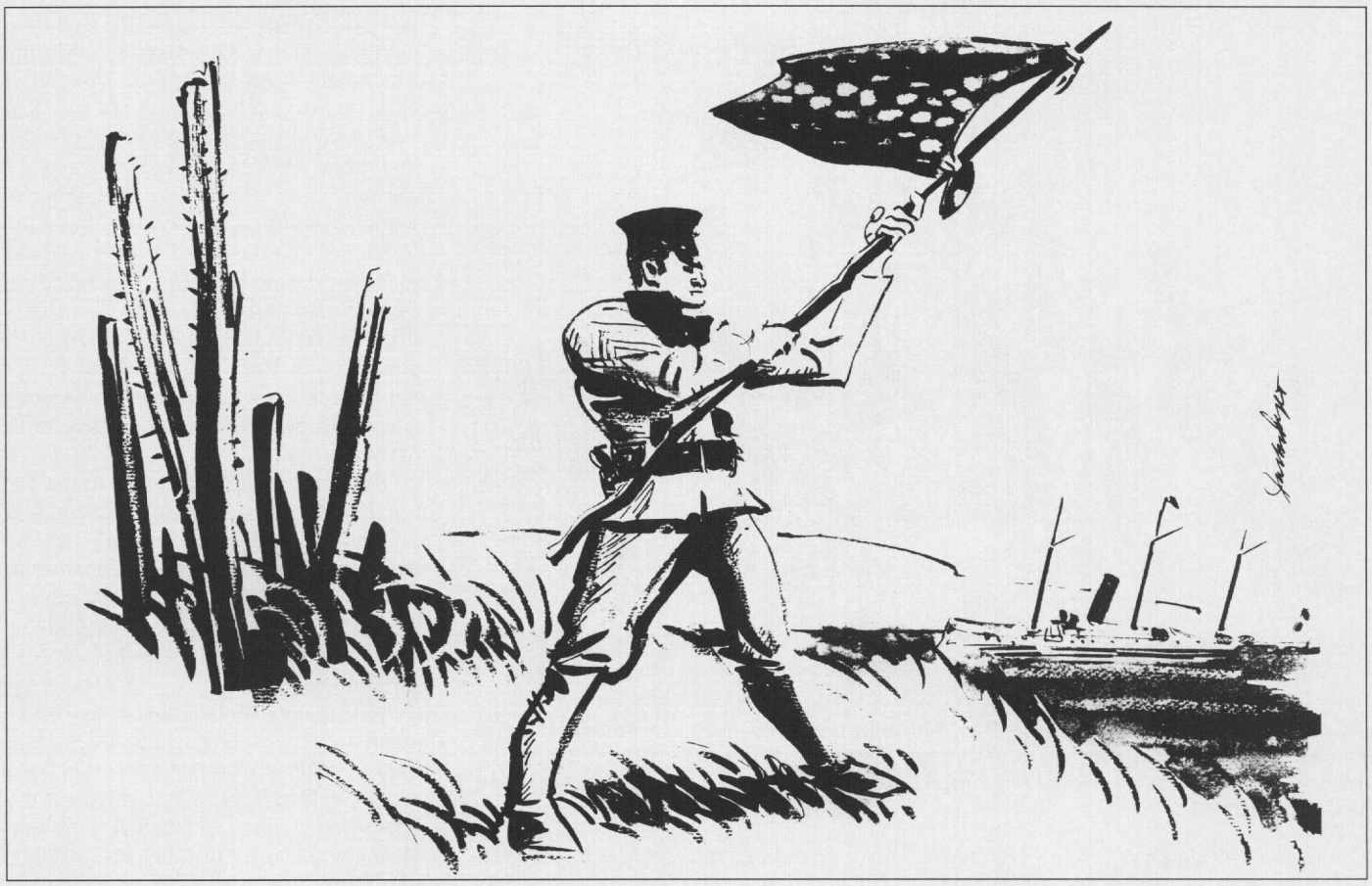
But it was just too hot for the element of surprise. Noise and stealth disciplines had been abandoned several miles earlier on the trail behind them. Consequently, the platoon was spotted, and the Spanish outposts ran for their camp, sounding the alarm.

Elliott realized that the high ground, a large razorback hill which dominated the Cuzco Well camp, had been left unoccupied. Elliott and his expedition scrambled up the steep incline coated in brush and cactus, in a foot race for the summit. It was a three-minute sprint that saw them strung out over the face of the rugged slope, grunting, panting and gasping, too pained to swear as they forced their legs to pump and carry them upward. Meanwhile, in the camp below, six companies of enemy riflemen from the Sixth Barcelona Regiment manned the gun ports of the camp, adjusted their sights and prepared to rely on the long-range accuracy of 500 Mausers to stop the Marines.

The first leathernecks and Cubans no sooner reached the crest when they became targets of bullets which even at more than 1,000 yards still "sang in the air until one thought that a good hand with a lacrosse stick could have bagged many," wrote Crane.

First Lieutenant Neville, commanding

**It was a wild nightmare: blackness punctured by explosions...signal lamps winking...rifle fire at real or imagined figures...and the steady, unnerving slap of Mauser bullets.**



Courtesy of USMC

**At great personal risk, Sgt John Quick signaled *Dolphin* to cease firing on Marines mistakingly caught in the ship's gunfire. He earned the Medal of Honor and became one of the Corps' legends.**

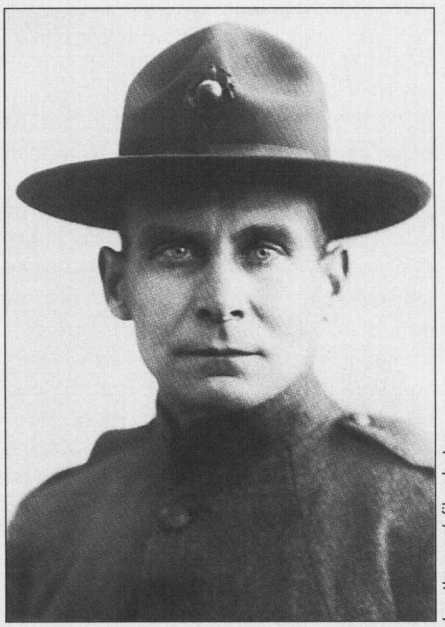
Co D, used his thunderous voice to rally those around him. As a result, even later when he became Commandant, Neville would facetiously be known as "Whispering Buck."

Leathernecks calmly chambered rounds into their Lee rifles. A thousand yards was not impossible for men in a Corps that stressed marksmanship. The battle became a long-range shooting match that could be heard all the way back to Camp McCalla.

Second Lieutenant Louis J. Magill with 50 men of Co C outposted not far from the fight was sent to cut off a Spanish withdrawal. Another detachment commanded by lstLt J. E. Mahoney was dispatched by Huntington to reinforce Elliott at Cuzco Well.

Elliott signaled *Dolphin* requesting naval gunfire. *Dolphin's* officers misread the signal, and Magill's men, already engaged in a firefight, started taking U.S. Navy shells meant for the Spaniards. The shelling did, however, cause the Spanish to break cover, and Marine sharpshooters found very visible targets.

Something still needed to be done quickly to save Magill and his men from becoming victims of friendly fire.



*Leatherneck* file photo

Up jumped Sgt John H. Quick, a tall, lean leatherneck with a blue polka-dot handkerchief he'd mounted as a flag on a stick. With his back arrogantly exposed to Mauser bullets, he coolly waved in Morse International Code, signaling *Dolphin* to cease fire. Crane described it thusly: "I watched his face, and it was grave and severe as a man writing in his library.... I saw Quick betray only one sign of emotion. As he swung the clumsy flag to and fro, an end of it caught on a cactus pillar. He looked annoyed." Many bullets were aimed at Quick, but none touched him as he stood alone on the skyline.

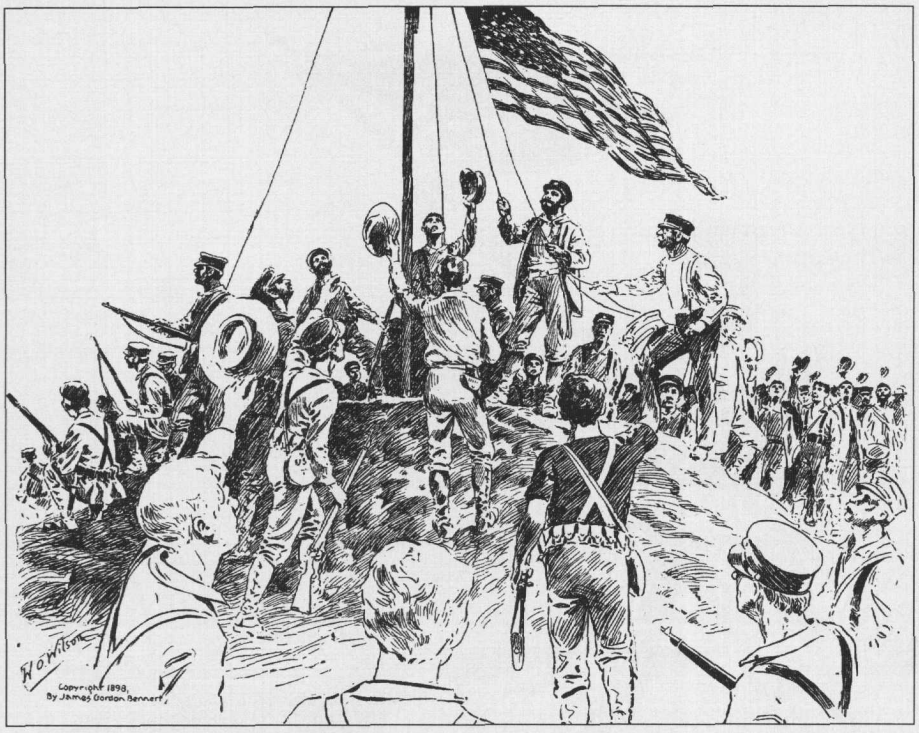
*Dolphin* stopped firing, and Sgt Quick would later be awarded the Medal of Honor. (Another Marine, Pvt John Fitzgerald, who displayed exceptional gallantry throughout the battle, was also later decorated with the Medal of Honor.)

The battle continued for almost another hour before the Spanish decided they'd had enough and started looking for a way to exit Cuzco Well. From their vantage points the Marines watched as the Spanish started to withdraw and gave chase. At 3:15 p.m. a platoon entered Cuzco and wrecked the well.

In the end Elliott had handily defeated a force of 500, but getting an accurate body count was difficult. Best estimates gleaned from 18 Spanish prisoners ranged from five to 60 of the Barcelona Regiment killed and about 150 wounded. The Marines suffered one wounded and 20 more heat casualties. Their Cuban allies had two dead and two wounded.

Back in Guantanamo City, the survivors of Cuzco Well told Gen Pareja they'd been attacked by 10,000 Americans. Whatever, it was enough to discourage the Spanish from attacking leatherneck positions again for the rest of the war.

A squad of correspondents, including



Courtesy of USMC

**At McCalla Hill on Guantanamo Bay, Marines did what they are known for and raised the American flag on enemy soil. This rendition was drawn by W. O. Wilson, an artist for the *New York Herald*, who accompanied the leathernecks on the deployment.**

Crane and "Moby Dick" author Herman Melville, went to work filing dispatches with colorful, if not completely accurate, accounts of the fight for Cuzco Well.

Although the fighting at Guantanamo Bay was the first serious action by Americans on Cuban soil, it was of little consequence to the war. "But it took on incalculable importance for the Marine Corps," wrote Marine Corps historian Allan R. Millett. "As the fighting grew serious...[newspaper] reports made it sound as if Huntington's battalion had been on the edge of annihilation....Crane reported the Cuzco Well battle as an epic of bravery and professionalism that proved the military superiority of the Marines. By the time the skirmish ended, American readers of the big New York dailies, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Harper's Weekly* and the papers served by the Associated Press knew who the Marines were and that they had won a magnificent victory against overwhelming odds. If the Commandant [of the Marine Corps] had staged the campaign for public effect, it could have not been more successful."

So it would seem, for Henry Cabot Lodge, then a senator, wrote: "The Marines had done their work most admirably and fought with the steadiness and marksmanship of experienced brush fighters."

They had seized the ground that today is known as Guantanamo Bay Naval Base. Marines still man outposts that defy the Communist government of Fidel Castro where a century ago their predecessors shot it out with the soldiers of Imperial Spain.

Three weeks after the battle for Cuzco Well, off the coast of Santiago, the Spanish fleet made a desperate July 3 morning run for the open ocean. They almost made it. However, when the American fleet got within range, they wreaked carnage. Seagoing Marines performed as well as their comrades ashore. On board the armored cruiser *Brooklyn* (AC-3), leatherneck gunners fired their 6-pounders, 1-pounders and Colt automatic guns. Pvt Harry Lewis MacNeal's continuous gallantry throughout the battle won him the Medal of Honor. And, according to the ship's log, Marine "music boys Drummer Weisenberg and Fifer Steward...behaved manfully." The Marine detachment on board *Oregon* furnished eight 6-pound gun crews. Marines volunteered to pass coal in the battleship *Texas*, spelling the ship's exhausted "black gang." The battleship *Indiana* (BB-1) guard manned several 1-pound guns from which they fired 500 rounds in 65 minutes. Their detachment commander, Capt Littleton W. T. Waller, then risked his life to pull Spanish sailors from thier burning, sinking ships.

Throughout the Caribbean, Spain continued to lose its grip. At Ponce, Puerto Rico, Spanish forces surrendered without resistance. On July 28 Marine lstLt Henry C. Haines with fellow leathernecks from the auxiliary cruiser *Dixie* raised the American flag for the first time over that island. On Aug. 8 a Marine detachment from the cruiser *Cincinnati* (C-7) guarding a lighthouse at Cape San Juan was attacked, but drove off the Spaniards. Lt John A. Lejeune and 37 Marines from *Cincinnati* and defense monitor *Amphitrite* landed to relieve the lighthouse guard. Later the Corps would establish Marine Barracks, San Juan.

On Friday, Aug. 12, 1898, hostilities officially ceased. By the end of August, Huntington's battalion landed at Portsmouth, N.H., to be disbanded. The American public, however, wouldn't hear of it, just yet.

The Marines shone brightly in the national spotlight because of their conduct at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere. The war had been in general a demonstration of American military unpreparedness and inefficiency. However, the country through the press had noted that the Marines had moved fast and with efficiency. They also noticed that the leathernecks suffered only 2 percent casualties from disease, no deaths from sickness and not a case of yellow fever. The Army, on the other hand, caused a national sensation when it was learned that they had lost four men from disease for every one killed in combat and 50 percent of the soldiers who landed on Cuba fell victim to yellow fever, malaria or enteric disease.

Talk of disbanding the Corps, at least for a time, ended. Instead, Congress authorized a doubling of the size of the Corps to 201 officers and 6,062 enlisted men.

The nation associated Marines with images of bravery and soldierly virtue. Consequently, President William McKinley bade Huntington's battalion to pass in review in Washington, D.C., while the nation applauded and the Marine Band played "A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" and "The Marines' Hymn." By the end of September the battalion was disbanded and belonged to history.

*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; and "A History of the United States Marine Corps" by Clyde H. Metcalf.*

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