

## War gave men their fill of the Phi

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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In my last column, Suisun residents Fred Rush, Jackson W. Oliver, George Cooper, Howard Bronson, and Seranus Hastings had made the trip to the Philippines on the transporter S. S. Indiana as part of the 23rd Infantry regiment to take part in the Spanish-American War. They arrived in time to participate in the battle of Manila, which was fought on Aug. 13, 1898.

Letters that Fred Rush wrote to his family back in Suisun during his 12 months in Manila allow a glimpse into the life of these young soldiers, illustrating the hardships they had to contend with from day to day.

"You can never say again that we have never roughed it," Fred Rush wrote from Manila Barracks on Aug. 19, 1899, "For if going for days without sleep, eatinghardtack and canned mule day after day and sometimes eating nothing, eternally carrying a heavy belt, haversack full of ammunition and canteen and when sleeping in mud and filth is roughing, we have roughed it."

Adjusting to the Philippine climate and culture did not come easy, either. "In this country it either rains in streams or the sun shines like fury," Fred continued. "We have pretty good quarters now ... They say that peace is declared and that it was declared on the 12th, the day before we took Manila. But we hear so many reports we can't tell what to believe."

Organizational backup seems to have been slow at the time. Fred anticipated getting paid for the first time on Aug. 20, after having literally been without a penny throughout his whole journey from the United States.

The feeling of homesickness comes through again and again - strange surroundings, strange culture, strange foods: "There is nothing decent to eat on the island but a few bananas. I tell you if you want to touch a fellow, appeal to his stomach ... Why you ought to hear the boys talk about it ... Jack will say 'strawberry ice cream,' Bronson will say 'chicken pie,' then Jack will say 'Oh that cake with the 'Meriken flag.' Honestly, if I should see one of those meals now I really believe I would be so scared I couldn't touch anything, and just as sure as I ate anything like that I would faint."

By September, they had settled down somewhat. On Sept. 19, 1899, Fred reported, "No more fighting to do and lots to eat ... We are quartered in the old Spanish treasury,

have lots of room, facilities for bathing, and good water as water on this island goes. We get up for reveille at 6 am, drill for 1/2 hour at 6 pm, taps at 9:30 pm. Every four days we take turn at guard. The only trouble is the monotony of it, same thing day after day."

Communication with friends and families was scant. News filtered through slowly. The mail took six to eight weeks each way and was eagerly awaited. "Say, you don't know how much we appreciated those humorous papers you folks sent," Fred added on Sept. 19. "There is absolutely nothing to read here. Once in a great while we get a letter or two. Frisco papers, over two months old, we read over and over again."

His plea must have helped, because from then on, Fred regularly thanked his family members for sending him magazines, books and newspapers. He generously shared them with his fellow soldiers, eventually having to catalog the material to prevent it from disappearing into other squadrons. "I don't think you people can realize how the fellows enjoy the papers and magazines," he wrote on Nov. 30. "I get a stand-in with the First Sergeant by letting him see the mags first. I put all the papers in our squadroom, and fellows from all the other squadrooms chased in here to read them."

One of the magazines seems to have had larger pictures on its pages. Called Truth prints, Fred used these to decorate the walls of the squadroom, creating another instant attraction. "The squadroom is quite brightened by the Truth prints on the walls," he reported on Dec. 8. "A soldier will come into the room and go all around carefully rubbing each picture, especially "Teddy's Rough Riders" and "Landing Troops in Cuba." They always sigh when looking at the "Daughters of the Regiment."

Sergeant Smith and other members of Company C showed their gratitude in a letter to the Rush family on Dec. 27.

Sergeant Smith (the First Sergeant) added a personal note: "For myself, I personally thank you for kind remembrance, sure was an agreeable surprise and as Rush says 'Seems like home to be able to eat things our mothers and sisters make.' Can assure you that I will lose no opportunity to do all in my power to make the stay of your friends in the company more pleasant and agreeable."

Fred Rush must not have read that particular line. In a letter to his friend Walter, he wrote on the same day: "...I am on guard today and if the Sergeant knew I was in here writing this I am afraid he would give me a calling down."

Despite the peace treaty, the war between the United States and the Philippines continued. By January, the situation was becoming tense. Filipino "insurgents," as Fred Rush called them, hassled and ambushed the troops constantly. On Jan. 4, 1899,

he wrote in his usual chatty style, mixing different topics: "Jack and I finished up the jam tonight and nearly shed tears because it was all gone. Sergeant Smith says it was the best he ever ate, and I agree with him.

"The 18th (Infantry) and the (51st) Iowas are at Iloilo. We heard today that they lost 18 men to the insurgents. The entire First Calif. (Volunteers) is going to leave today for Iloilo. They are very sauerbawled over it."

In an earlier letter, he had summed up the United States occupation: "I don't think the U.S. should keep these islands although they would make a rich possession. They would give the U.S. too many problems to solve..."

On Jan. 12, he commented that "Things are getting very complicated here. The Phillipinos [sic] are on the warpath and we are expecting trouble any moment ... Men are not allowed to leave their quarters."

By February, fighting had become heavy. Fred had been assigned to be a clerk in the office of "schools and cemeteries," but seems to have been drawn to the front lines on occasion. On Feb. 10, he wrote: "Nearly all the regiments have been allowed to distinguish themselves. The 23rd (his regiment), 18th, 13 Maine and Ore. have been doomed to stay ignobly at home till day before yesterday when one battalion of the 23rd, I, M, K, and B Companies went out and saw some fun. Howard and Seranus were with B ... I have used my pass twice to get out to the front. The second time I was with B Co. 23rd and very narrowly missed a court-martial for being at the front instead of in my office ...."

Despite his somewhat flippant tone, he was deeply affected by this experience. "So far we have lost fifty-seven killed and one hundred-sixty wounded ... The dead Filipinos number in the thousands. It seems terrible to get used to such things but nothing shakes my nerves any more."

From here on, he regularly mentioned death records, acts of barbarism and, later in the spring, an epidemic of smallpox that killed large numbers of Filipino as well as a number American soldiers. The eager exuberance of his early letters had faded, and he longed to be discharged and sent home. "War is hell," he wrote on March 28, 1899. "However I won't bother with any stale adventures, as they are getting too common to be interesting."

He finally was discharged on Aug. 14, 1899 and returned to Stanford University to finish a degree in Civil Engineering. In later years, he ran a ranch on the Twin Sisters and served as the first mosquito abatement director of Solano County.

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