

Soldiers In Miami, 1898

By WILLIAM J. SCHELLINGS

In 1898, when the United States and Spain engaged in their war over Cuba, Miami was still an infant. It was too busy to pay much attention to the revolution in Cuba, and too busy to even pay much attention to the crisis that led to the war. Its efforts were concentrated on the problems that beset every city that is experiencing a period of great development and growth. Miami, in 1898, watched the revolt in the nearby island, and observed the growing acerbity of Spanish American relations, but did so with a rather detached air, as though it were not at all concerned; as though it were completely apart from the rest of the country.

From time to time the Miami *Metropolis*, the weekly newspaper, would comment on the situation in Cuba, or the diplomatic exchanges taking place, but it failed to note any great interest in either for Miami. It was as one with the other Florida newspapers in deploring the rising demand for war that was evident in the press of other sections of the country. Even when it noticed that the city of Key West was excited about the possibility of war, and that there the belief was common that war was inevitable, the *Metropolis* gave no indication that Miami was or would be involved. That attitude, however, began to change once the battleship "Maine" had been blown up in Havana harbor on the evening of February 7, 1898. Then the newspaper, and the people of the city, began to give signs that they were being infected with the virus of war fever. By the first of April, the city had been swept up in the excitement, and patriotic demonstrations were the order of the day.

Even before the actual outbreak of war on April 24, Miami had begun to feel the effects of it. Perhaps the first real sign of this was the arrival in the city of a large group of people from Key West, people who were certain that war was certain, and that Key West was in danger. Many of these took up at least temporary residence in Miami.¹ At about the same time the possibility that the Spanish navy might attack the seaboard cities seems to have occurred to many, and the result was a demand that the army erect coast defenses to protect Miami from such attack. When the army did finally promise to install a battery of guns at Ft. Brickell, progress was so

slow that it was decided to form a volunteer home guard unit, arm them, and drill them to repel any attack. Over two hundred Miamians joined the unit, and they elected Mr. B. E. Hambleton as their Captain. A petition was sent to Tallahassee for a supply of rifles and ammunition. When these arrived, on May 18, drilling began in earnest.²

Not to be outdone, the neighboring settlement of Coconut Grove also formed a similar home guard outfit, and with both units drilling and armed, the lower peninsular finally relaxed. However, there was some resentment because the up state city of Jacksonville received faster service in the matter of the construction of batteries, and one bitter Miamian wrote: "Jacksonville need not worry about invasion. All that would be necessary for them to do would be to cut loose a bunch of water hyacinths, start them down the river, and no ship could possibly get through."³

There were a few other signs of unusual activity in Miami, but no real war activity. There was additional traffic between Key West and Miami, and the International Telegraph Company installed additional instruments to serve war correspondents who could not use the Key West service. Four men of the Florida Naval Militia arrived with a Lieutenant Bland, and set up a signal station at the old lighthouse on Cape Florida. Apart from that, Miami continued to concentrate on its efforts to develop more land, and erect more buildings. The *Metropolis* commented on the rising demand for private houses and business structures.

When it became known that the War department was looking for a camp site upon which it could gather the troops of the regular army, Miami made no attempt to have itself considered as a possibility. Even when the Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen* urged that Miami be utilized as an army base, no effort was made by the city itself.⁴ The *Metropolis* did express a hope that the Navy would realize Miami's value as a supplement to Key West, but made no mention of the Army. On May 3, it did grumble that the war had come too soon, saying that "if the war had been delayed a couple of years, until the deep water port was complete, Miami would be in a good location for an army base."

Even though the city made no effort to have an army camp established, the Florida East Coast Railroad, with its southern terminal at Miami, was not idle. Inspired by the thought of having vast quantities of freight and large numbers of troops pass over its lines, the railroad officials from Henry Flagler himself down to the Jacksonville freight agent, began stirring in the effort to have some soldiers sent to Miami.

As early as April 16, the FEC passenger agent, J. P. Beckwith, urged that Miami be utilized by the army. No steps were taken to indicate that serious attention was given to this suggestion until Mr. Flagler wrote to Secretary of War Russell Alger. After that, when Brigadier General James Wade was sent from Tampa to inspect cities on the east coast of the state, he was instructed by Major General Nelson Miles to include Miami on his list of cities. When Wade arrived at Jacksonville to begin his tour, J. R. Parrott, the vice-president of the FEC, offered him the use of his own private railway car for the trip to Miami.⁵

On May 18, Wade began his trip down the coast, stopping at St. Augustine on the way. On his return, he disappointed Parrott by reporting that while St. Augustine and Jacksonville were suitable camp sites, Miami was not recommended. Despite the adverse report, Superintendent Goff of the FEC was sent to Miami to select a specific spot for the camp, and to start at once on preparing the ground for the troops. In Miami, Goff announced that he had no definite word, but was sure the city would receive a contingent of troops.⁶

Once again, General Wade was sent to examine Miami, and this time he was accompanied by General Lawton. They stayed at the Miami Hotel, as the guests of Mrs. Julia Tuttle, and cruised up the Miami River in a launch supplied by Mrs. Tuttle. They inspected the beaches, and examined the site selected by Superintendent Goff. The area chosen was bounded on the north by the FEC terminal track, on the west by the mainline track, on the south by Tenth Street, and faced the bay on the east. Here work had been started to clear the ground of stones and the worst of the palmetto, with one hundred men working under Mr. John Sewell.⁷

As far as Wade and Lawton were concerned, the work was to no avail. They again turned in a report declaring that the city was not suitable for the purpose, and recommended that it should not be used as a camp. The second adverse report had as much effect on the FEC as had the first one. Goff ordered Sewell to rush the work of clearing the ground with all speed, and arranged to have water pipes laid out to the site from the city water supply. He ordered that fifty shallow wells be dug to supplement the supply, and had each well equipped with a hand pump. In other words, Goff proceeded as though Wade and Lawton had promised that troops would be sent!⁸

The final decision to use Miami as a camp came at the insistence of Major General Nelson Miles. On June 16, Miles wrote to Secretary Alger, strongly urging that 5,000 men be sent to Miami, which he described as a

perfect camp site, with ground already cleared, and health conditions that would enable the troops to be protected from any disease. On June 20, the order for a division of troops to proceed to Miami was sent to Mobile, Alabama, to Brigadier General Theodore Schwan. In the division, shortly to be designated as the First Division of the Seventh Army Corps, were the First and Second Volunteer Regiments of Alabama, Texas and Louisiana. Six regiments, with a total strength of just over seven thousand men, entrained for Miami.⁹

The troops began to arrive in Miami on June 24. Each train was welcomed by people from the town, who by now were eagerly looking forward to the establishment of the camp. The soldiers were marched to the areas assigned to them, and began to set up their tents. The first disillusionment was at hand. The men had looked forward to Miami with anticipation of finding a tropical paradise. In other words they had seen some of the illustrations of the Royal Palm Hotel on the railroad folders. Their picture of Miami was shattered on the day they arrived.

The area of the camp had been cleared so that a long rectangle was formed, facing the bay. It was planned that the regiments would all be camped on or near the bay front, but the orders assigning the units to the camp changed that. Instead of the long side of the rectangle facing the bay, the division was so placed that it formed a rectangle, but with the short side on the bayfront, and the rest of the camp extending far into the west. The result was simply that most of the troops were compelled to erect their tents on ground that had not been cleared. Four regiments were thus compelled to spend a week in removing stones and palmetto, and the work was hard enough to cause many an oath to be directed at Miami.¹⁰

Worse than the actual labor of clearing the ground was the effect of the changed position of the regiments on the sewer arrangements. Plans had been made to have simple troughs used, in which deposits of waste matter could be flushed out into the bay. Placing the troops in the rear meant they were too far from the shore to use this system, and another had to be devised.

At first an attempt was made to dig the regular type of sink, but the limestone soil defeated every attempt. Even dynamite was ineffective. The only remaining alternative was to set up a series of half-barrels, each of which was supposed to be emptied daily. The evils of this barrel or bucket system did not appear at once, but when they did, it meant that Miami's name as a healthy spot was to be blackened, and that disease was to be widespread among the troops.

Before that happened, other difficulties arose. It would be safe to say that neither Miami nor the soldiers were happy about the situation for more than a week. The men discovered that while the city may have been ideal for a winter vacation, it simply was not the ideal spot for 7,000 soldiers in the middle of the summer. Facilities for recreation just did not exist. Such places of amusement that did spring up were totally inadequate, consisting of shooting galleries, lemonade stands, and the like. When the regiments attempted to establish canteens to help fill the need, the fact that some regimental commanders were non-drinkers hampered their usefulness. The Louisiana regiments sold beer and wines in their canteens, but the 2d Alabama canteen, and one or two others, were of the "temperance" variety.

In addition to the lack of recreational facilities, the troops were disappointed in several other ways. As Chaplain H. E. Carson of the 2d La., wrote "There was a most magnificent and gorgeously appointed hotel right in the midst of a perfect paradise of tropical trees and bushes. But one had to walk scarce a quarter of a mile until one came to such a waste wilderness as can be conceived of only in rare nightmares."¹¹ Other men bitterly contrasted Miami with the camp at Mobile. According to one, "At Miami we have to walk only two miles to reach the drill field, while at Mobile we had to march four hundred yards! Here at Miami we have heat, mosquitoes and sandfleas that beat anything we have ever met. We even hang our hats on the mosquitoes at night! But we cannot complain. We have the privilege of going to the Royal Palm barber shop, where we can receive a shave for only 50¢!" Another wrote, "If I owned both Miami and hell, I'd rent out Miami and live in hell!"¹³

The citizens of Miami had reason to complain, too. Cases of rowdyism were common, and clashes between soldiers and the colored population of the city frequent. On one occasion, two white men were injured by gunfire near the camp. Dr. L. M. Dodson, the dentist, tried to oblige some soldiers and suffered for his trouble. While he was drilling holes in a pair of dice for them, they stole his watch!¹⁴ Miami began to regret that the camp had been established.

The most serious charge leveled at the camp in Miami was simply that it was unhealthy; that the water supply was impure; that, as one writer put it, "this is the unhealthiest spot in the country." The charge was supported by a sick rate far in excess of that at other camps in the state, a rate that ran as high as 10 per cent of the total strength of the command. Most of the men in the hospital and listed as sick in quarters were ill with various intes-

tinal disorders, but many of them were afflicted with typhoid fever, and this was a serious illness.¹⁵

The intestinal disorders and the typhoid were both blamed on the water supply at the camp. The water supply, however, was tested by Tulane University, and was found to be pure, but unpalatable. The disagreeable taste was laid to the fact that the pipes through which it ran lay in the hot sun. This left the water overheated by the time it reached the taps, and although the situation was partially corrected by mid-July, the men never returned to the use of that water. The corrective measure was to run the pipes through barrels of ice, thus reducing the temperature somewhat.

With the principal water supply in disfavor, the men turned to the shallow wells that had been dug, but here the water had become contaminated, and the pump handles were removed to prevent the use of the water. The water had become impure simply because of the poor sanitary facilities, and because of the total disregard of ordinary sanitary precautions by both the officers and the men. The bucket system of waste disposal was partly to blame, as when they were carried to the shore to be emptied, frequently a part of their contents was spilled on the porous ground, and was carried to the level of the water. Then, too, many of the men were too careless to use the regular buckets, and relieved themselves on the ground near the wells and the mess tents. Orders issued to correct this situation were ignored, as were orders issued to boil all water before use.

When General Schwan was replaced by General J. Warren Kiefer on July 4, an inspection was undertaken. Kiefer was more than satisfied with the conditions he found, and reported that Miami, in his opinion, was "the best place in the country in which to train men for service in Cuba or Porto Rico."¹⁶ Whether or not he meant that as a compliment to Miami is hard to say in view of the conditions then existing in those two places.

Kiefer's report, moreover, must be contrasted with the recommendations made by Lieutenant Colonel Curtis Guild, of the Inspector General's Department, and by Alex Kent, of the Red Cross, and Dr. S. S. Peeples, of the Medical Department. All three made separate inspections and reports, and all three were agreed in recommending that the troops be removed immediately. They all condemned the camp, and particularly the water supply. Colonel Guild further stated that the drill field, one and one half miles away from the camp, was under one to two inches of water at the time he inspected it. Since these reports were made within a few days of each other, and of Kiefer's, there was evidently a clash of opinion.¹⁷

The recommendation for removal of the troops reached the War Department, but also reached the office of Henry Flagler. Flagler wired to Secretary Alger, requesting that no decision be made to move the troops until after Flagler's secretary had an opportunity to give his side of the story.¹⁸ That was on July 22, and on July 24 another team of medical officers was sent to inspect the camp. When these men joined in the request that the troops be taken away from Miami, the orders were issued to break up the camp and send the division to Jacksonville. The order reached General Kiefer on July 29, and the last regiment left Miami on August 13.¹⁹ The effect of the removal order had been miraculous, at least as far as the health of the men was concerned. The number of sick was reduced by half, and recovery was the most rapid ever seen. By August 13, only fifty men were still in the hospital, compared to an average of 260 to 270 when the order had arrived.

It was just as well that the troops moved when they did. Nasty stories were becoming current in the newspapers concerning the part of the city in the poor health of the men, and about the part played by Flagler in having the camp established. The Ocala and the Pensacola newspapers both published stories to the effect that Flagler had spent \$50,000 to secure the camp, and had made profits of \$275,000 for his railroad.²⁰ Such charges were without any base in fact, as far as the record shows. Flagler did profit, without any doubt, but so did every businessman in Florida. It was established that Flagler had spent over \$10,000 in having the ground prepared, and in donating ice and other items, but no other expenditure ever showed up in any records. As far as his profits went, they were small compared to those earned by other railroads, particularly the Plant System in its operations in Tampa.

In any case, the soldiers were happy to leave, and Miami was happy to see them go. Relations had gradually grown worse, and the profits earned by the city's businessmen were not large enough to make it worth while. Then too, the amount of bad publicity brought by the camp was bound to hurt the reputation of Miami as a winter resort if allowed to continue. Finally, the war was over, the winter season was approaching, and a vacation was needed in order to rest up and prepare for the coming season.

NOTES

¹ Miami *Metropolis*, April 8, 1898.

² Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen*, May 1, 13, 18, 1898.

³ Miami *Metropolis*, April 8, 1898.

⁴ Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen*, April 5, 1898.

- 5 *Ibid.*, April 16, 1898. See also: Flagler to Alger, May 14, 1898, item No. 111287, Record Group 92, QMGO Document File 1800-1914, in National Archives, Records of the War Department, Old Army Section.
- 6 Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen*, May 18, 25, 1898.
- 7 *Ibid.*, June 2, 1898. Miami *Metropolis*, July 1, 1898.
- 8 *Ibid.*, June 24, 1898.
- 9 *Reports of the War Department for the year ending June 30, 1899*. 8 Vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899.) Vol.1, Part 1, p. 214. See also *Report of the Commission Appointed by the President to Investigate the Conduct of the War Department during the War with Spain, 1898*. 8 Vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899). Vol. 1, p. 214; Vol. 7, p. 3276.
- 10 Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen*, August 1, 1898.
- 11 H. R. Carson, "Recollections of a Chaplain in the Volunteer Army", address to Church Club of Louisiana, (copy in Library of Florida History, University of Florida).
- 12 Troy (Alabama) *Messenger*, July 6, 27, August 3, 1898.
- 13 Tampa *Times*, July 12, 1898.
- 14 Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen*, July 29, 1898.
- 15 Walter Reed et al. *Report on the Origin and Spread of Typhoid Fever in U. S. Military Camps, 1898*. 2 Vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904). Vol. 1, pp. 507-530.
- 16 *Report of the Investigating Commission*, op. cit., Vol. 8, pp. 8-81.
- 17 *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, pp. 72, 81-83, 85-86.
- 18 *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, p. 73.
- 19 Record Group 92, op. cit., item 111287, dated July 29, 1898.
- 20 Pensacola *Journal*, July 29, 1898. Ocala *Banner*, August 26, 1898.