

Key West and the Spanish American War

By WILLIAM J. SCHELLINGS

Key West, because of its location and harbor, was destined to be of far greater importance than any other city of its size. Ninety-two miles from Havana, its spacious harbor and its naval base meant that the United States Navy would inevitably utilize it as an important supply depot and coaling station. Its strategic value was so great and at the same time so apparent that the failure of the Navy to prepare the base for action in time remains a cause for surprise.

In addition to the strictly military and naval activities for which it was destined, Key West for many years had been deeply concerned with the course of events in Cuba. Prior to the outbreak of that revolution which led to the war between Spain and the United States, the city was a center of Cuban revolutionary agitation. The revolutionary Cuban junta, under the leadership of Jose Marti and Tomas Estrada Palma, had organized a total of sixty-one Cuban political clubs in Key West. These groups participated in raising funds for the rebels, in smuggling arms and men into Cuba, and in disseminating stories heralding the heroic deeds of the rebels.¹

Both men and news traveled quickly between Cuba and Key West, and as a result the residents of the city were more accurately informed of events on the island than any others in the nation. It may have been because of this, and because of the appearance in the harbor of the ships of the Atlantic Squadron, that Key West was able to foresee not only the coming of the war, but to predict when it would begin. The Atlantic Squadron arrived just as the U.S.S. "Maine" departed on its last voyage, on January 24, 1898. On February 3, the Miami *Metropolis*, a weekly newspaper, commented editorially on the fact that Key West was not only talking about the war, but declaring that it would begin within "sixty days or so". Actually seventy days were to elapse before President McKinley sent his message to Congress asking for authority to use the Army and Navy in Cuba.

Key West was the first city to hear about the sinking of the "Maine", and was also the first to have an opportunity to welcome the survivors back home.

The city mourned the loss, but watched succeeding events with mixed emotions. It became aware of increased activity on the part of the warships in the harbor, and received literally scores of correspondents from the major newspapers and periodicals of the nation. As one writer put it, Key West became the seat, not of war, but of war correspondents.² It might be added that the stories filed by those same correspondents, although datelined Havana, frequently originated in one or another Cuban club, and that little if any effort was made to verify them.

Shortly after the "Maine" disaster, the Navy began to take some steps to prepare the Key West base for use. Large stocks of supplies, of coal and ammunition in particular, were sent to Key West, and the Army was requested to strengthen the fortifications that protected the city from attack. The steps taken, however, go far to belie the statement that the Navy was better prepared for war than the Army. The story of the accumulation of supplies without having any place to put them resembles the description of the Army base at Tampa a bit later. The haphazard manner of operation resulted in untold waste of both time and money, and in an inability to fully utilize the facilities of a strategically located base.

Storage space for both coal and ammunition was nearly non-existent. The coal bunkers of the base could not even begin to hold the vast tonnage that was being sent. High explosives and ammunition arrived only to have to be stored temporarily in unsafe wooden buildings. The difficulty was simply that the Navy Department had not separated the command of the base from that of the fleet. The ranking admiral of the fleet automatically was in command of the shore establishment, and, naturally enough, his attention was focussed primarily on the fleet. Not until May 1, a full week and more after the departure of the fleet, was an officer of flag rank appointed to command the base. On May 7 Commodore George C. Remy arrived to take command.³

In the meantime the base had struggled along making whatever arrangements could be made. Warehouses, wharves, and docks of all sizes had been leased from private owners in the city. A contract had been let for the construction of coal bunkers large enough to hold 15,000 tons of coal, and the Army had cooperated by lending the Navy the use of an ammunition magazine at nearby Fort Taylor. Coal was temporarily stored on the barges in the harbor while waiting for the bunkers. The Army mined the entrance to the harbor and hastily began work on the fortifications.⁴

The arrival of Commodore Remy brought a degree of organization to the work, and real progress was made. Even then, however, it was to prove impossible to complete any of the major construction until late in 1899, long after the war was over. The Commodore was first delayed by an inability to find satisfactory quarters in the city for either office space or living room. On May 20, in desperation, he commandeered the newly arrived U.S.S. "Lancaster" and made it his flagship. After that he was able to proceed with the work at hand.

Probably the most pressing problem was the matter of the coal. The steam-driven ships required large amounts, and transferring it from the barges to the ships was a time consuming operation. Furthermore, it was belatedly discovered that the new bunkers under construction were being so placed that large warships could get no closer than six miles! Shallow water thus made the continued use of the barges necessary, unsatisfactory as they were. Remy solved this difficulty by reclaiming and using some old navy facilities located in the Dry Tortugas, near Fort Jefferson. Coal sheds were renovated, and new ones built, large enough to hold 20,000 tons. This, together with the 15,000 tons in the city, was deemed ample for the needs of the Navy at the time. To make the city bunkers accessible to the largest ships, arrangements were made to have a deep channel dredged through the shallow water. The channel, as well as the new bunkers, was completed the following year.⁵

By this means the coal problem was taken care of, and through the only too rare cooperation between the Army and the Navy the ammunition was properly stored, but many other matters demanded attention. Remy and his staff were to be kept busy. One task was to find a means whereby the base could fulfill one of its more important duties, the repair of vessels. Key West Naval Base did possess machine shops, but they were antiquated and totally inadequate. It was necessary to enlarge and modernize them at least so they could make minor repairs to ships and machinery. This was perhaps the simplest of the problems facing Remy. New machinery and tools, and skilled mechanics and workmen were imported from the Navy Yard at Philadelphia, and temporary wooden buildings were quickly thrown together. Plans were made, and work begun, on permanent shops, but in the meantime Key West was able to successfully repair sixty-four naval vessels that would otherwise have been forced to go to a larger base farther away.⁶

Apart from the naval activity, which alone would have been enough to strain the port facilities, the harbor was busier than it had ever been.

Innumerable freighters and transports were constantly arriving and departing, and there was a constant flow of tugs and yachts acting as dispatch boats for the newspapers. But probably the most interesting group of ships in the harbor was the collection of captured Spanish vessels. These ranged from small fishing boats to freighters of considerable size. Thirty-four were brought into port, and the courts condemned and sold as prizes of war a total of twenty-nine. Some 444 crew members and twenty-two passengers were being held as prisoners.⁷

At first the captured Spaniards were held on board the ships under guard in the harbor, but an incident that took place early in May brought an order to transfer them to Fort Taylor. A boatload of young Cubans demonstrated their hatred of the Spanish by rowing out to one of the prizes and circling it while shouting curses and insults up at the hapless prisoners. The incident was roundly condemned in the Florida newspapers, and the guards aboard each ship were ordered to open fire on any boat making an unauthorized approach. Residents of Key West atoned for the action after Clara Barton, aboard the National Red Cross ship "The State of Texas," discovered that the prisoners were running out of funds, food and tobacco. She appealed to the city for money, and the people of Key West responded generously.⁸

The increased business of the port, and the expansion work underway at the naval base had brought a boom in the business of the city. Hotels were full, and rooming houses turned away prospective customers; every available warehouse was in use, and unemployment was a matter of choice rather than necessity. The Navy had been compelled to import labor from other areas, and add them to the personnel of the base. Construction work was the principal reason for the surplus of jobs over applicants, but even the telegraph office had added to its staff. Navy payrolls had expanded, and whenever a ship entered port, its crew added to the potential business. The merchants were reaping a full harvest, and anticipated a long period of prosperity since it was obvious that the work would not be completed for some time to come.

Making things even rosier for the city was the fact that the Army had also moved into Key West. The Engineers had inspected the defenses of the city in March, and had begun work shortly after. At one time, Key West had been considered as one of the few places in the country possessing adequate fortifications. The defenses consisted of Fort Taylor in the city itself, and

Fort Jefferson, seventy miles to the west on Garden Key. Both forts were old, and were considered inadequate in 1898. Jefferson had been turned over to the Public Health Service for use as a quarantine station, and in any event was too far away. Taylor's guns had been modern when installed during the Civil War, but were outranged by the guns of new battleships. The Engineers decided that Taylor could be of some use, but that Jefferson was too dilapidated for repair.

New batteries were planned, and large caliber coast defense guns were rushed to Key West from the north. Fort Jefferson was reclaimed, and a garrison of two companies of infantry sent out. Work was started on batteries placed at the entrance to the harbor, and new guns were ordered for Fort Taylor. The Twenty-fifth Infantry, plus some coast artillery troops, arrived to garrison the city. Key West Barracks, the only active post in the city, was enlarged, and the post hospital was prepared for service on a larger scale.

Work on the batteries proceeded rapidly, but the task was of such magnitude that it was impossible to complete it until 1899. Vast amounts of material had to be brought to the city in addition to the thousands of cubic yards of sand purchased locally. Labor was recruited in Jacksonville, Mobile, and other Gulf cities. Temporary batteries were hastily emplaced to offer at least the semblance of protection, but the most that could be said for the work of the Army was that it added considerably to the prosperity of the merchants and contractors of the city.⁹

Work on the defenses began in March, a month before the start of the war. With the opening of hostilities, the services faced the prospect of large numbers of casualties, with the Army in particular anticipating numbers of sick and wounded from its projected Cuban campaign. It planned to bring the most seriously injured or sick to Key West, but the hospital facilities at Key West Barracks were not considered sufficient. The solution to this problem was without doubt the easiest and most satisfactory answer that was found to any of the many questions that arose. Just before the war began, the Mother Superior of the Convent of Mary Immaculate in Key West had written to the Navy. She offered the buildings of the convent itself, and of the school operated by the Sisters to the Navy for use as a hospital. The only conditions laid down were that the buildings should be returned in good condition after the war, and that the Sisters remain in the capacity of nurses. This last was a task they were well fitted for, having served in that capacity in many yellow fever epidemics in the past.¹⁰

The Navy had gratefully accepted the offer, but soon afterwards turned the hospital over to the Army. The convent and school were converted into a 500 bed hospital, with small sheds erected on the grounds for isolation wards. The staff consisted of seven medical officers, nine civilian doctors, twenty-three nuns, and thirty-four hospital corpsmen. Between April and August, a total of 547 patients were treated, six of whom died. The hospital thus proved to be of great value. It was probably one of the few service installations that was ready to serve at full capacity when needed. By their action, the Sisters added one more page to an already full history of past service to the community.¹¹

While Key West was thus able to supply hospital facilities, it was completely unable to satisfy all the demands made upon it. The most serious deficiency was the lack of an adequate water supply. Normally the rainfall was sufficient for all needs. It was gathered in large cisterns and stored until needed. However, the swollen population created a demand far in excess of normal, and the situation was complicated by the fact that the previous winter had been an exceptionally dry one. By April the situation was serious, and one naval officer estimated that by July the island would be completely dry.

Once again it was necessary to find a temporary solution while awaiting more permanent relief. The Army was once more asked to cooperate by arranging for the shipment of water from St. Petersburg via barge. This was done, and barges with a capacity of 100,000 gallons began making the trip to Key West, although the water thus secured was rather costly. Between the cost of the water itself and the transportation, the price came to two cents per gallon. Part of this supply had to be sent out to Fort Jefferson, as that islet was even drier than Key West.¹²

Both the Army and the Navy then rushed plans to supplement the normal water supply in other ways. During the Civil War the Navy had constructed a distilling plant capable of producing 7,000 gallons of water per day. This was now brought back into service, and new and larger plants were built. The Army completed the first one on May 25, with a capacity of 50,000 gallons per day. With the others that were put into service in a short time, the water problem was ended. About the beginning of July heavy rains fell and all worries were ended.

During the time when the water shortage was at its worst, Key West escaped what might very well have been disaster. General William Shafter,

in command of the troops in camp at Tampa, was ordered by Adjutant General Corbin to take a total of 10,000 soldiers and take them to Key West. They were then to be sent to Fort Jefferson, and await transportation to Cuba. Since Jefferson was being supplied with water from Key West, and Tampa was then making daily shipments of water to Key West, it is not difficult to picture the consternation had the troops actually been sent. As it was Shafter frantically wired Corbin, reminding him of the water shortage, and the order for the troop movement was cancelled. The incident is difficult to understand, since Corbin, on May 7, had authorized the use of Army funds to purchase water to be sent to Key West, and then in the face of that, went ahead with the troop order on May 10. On top of that, Fort Jefferson was scarcely capable of housing 10,000 troops with all their equipment.¹³

One other service in the city was stretched to the limit by the situation while the Army and Navy were so much in evidence. Ordinarily Key West possessed a three man police force for its nearly 18,000 people. With the services coming to town in force, an additional man was added to the police department, but that was to prove to be little help. The police found themselves completely unable to maintain order, especially in the area of the numerous bars and taverns. The population of Key West, heterogeneous enough in any case, had been made more so by the addition not only of the sailors, but by the arrival of the Twenty-fifth Infantry, a Negro regiment, and the many civilian workers at the base and on the fortifications. The situation was just too much for the four men on the police.

Trouble first became evident in brawls taking place in some of the taverns, with servicemen clashing with the civilians. These were numerous enough in themselves, but might have been handled had there not appeared an ugly racial tinge in some of the fights. Key West had protested against the sending of a Negro regiment, but its warnings had been ignored, and undoubtedly some resentment remained. Trouble soon boiled over when some Negro troopers marched to the city jail in order to free one of their fellows on April 17. The policemen were brushed aside, and the jail door broken down. From then on the situation grew worse.¹⁴

Several fights in the streets degenerated into riots in which several lives were lost and many people injured. The police were helpless. Newspapers throughout the state took note of the situation, and most of them condemned the city rather than the troopers. It was reported that the people of Key West were living under a virtual reign of terror, and the Tampa *Times* declared

that Key West and its people were at fault for abusing the colored soldiers. It pointed out that Negro soldiers in Tampa did not cause any trouble, a statement that was not quite true. Finally, Key West made an appeal to the military authorities, and Army and Navy both took steps to restore order. Large patrols were sent out every night to keep the peace. Civilian workmen were threatened with discharge if involved in further trouble, and temporarily the soldiers were confined to quarters.¹⁵

With order restored, the city was once again able to relax and enjoy the unprecedented prosperity. All the signs pointed to a long period of boom business. Even though it was clear by July that the war would soon be over, both the Army and the Navy had declared that the construction then under way would be completed. That meant that jobs would be available for any who wanted them, and that the merchants and contractors would continue to have as much business as they could handle. The work, particularly that on the docks and the dredging of the channel, also promised greatly improved harbor facilities for future use.¹⁶

Key West, however, received a stunning blow on August 16, just four days after the end of the war. The ships in the harbor began taking aboard all shore personnel of the Navy, together with many of the civilian workers, and left port, headed toward Hampton Roads. One company of Marines was left behind as a guard, and even that was removed shortly after. Six days later the Army followed suit, and by August 22 the only uniforms to be seen in Key West were those of the Marines and of a small guard detachment of the soldiers. Work on the construction projects was at a standstill, and most of the non-native labor had also left. The only reason given for the move was the announcement by a young naval surgeon that three cases of yellow fever had been discovered in the Marine detachment.¹⁷

Key West knew yellow fever only too well, having had epidemics sweep the city in 1892 and again in 1897. The disease was probably the most dreaded scourge of the tropics, and Florida, following a severe epidemic in Jacksonville, had created a State Board of Health to combat the contagion. Dr. Joseph Y. Porter was the State Health Officer, and was one of the few doctors in the state who was confident that the disease could be at least controlled. Since the cause of yellow fever was still unknown in 1898, all measures were aimed at preventing the entry of the infection from other areas. The means of doing this was the imposition of a quarantine each year against ships arriving from tropical ports. Dr. Porter was also constantly alert, watching for any indi-

cation that the fever had appeared, and hoping that he could isolate the original victims and prevent the spread.

In 1898 there were several rumors of the appearance of yellow fever in Florida. Aware that with many thousands of soldiers camped in Florida the danger was greater than ever, Dr. Porter was more than ever on the alert. In July his attention was called to the discovery in Key West of a number of cases of a fever whose symptoms somewhat resembled those of yellow fever. He personally examined each patient and assured himself that they had nothing more severe than dengue, a non-fatal fever with a duration of about ten days. With that he paid no more attention to it.

It was this dengue fever that had stricken the Marines. The naval surgeon, described as being fresh out of school, promptly diagnosed it as yellow fever. The Secretary of the Navy was so notified, and the order to evacuate Key West followed. Dr. Porter protested in vain. He was joined by Dr. William Murray of the Marine Hospital Service, and by Dr. A. H. Glennan of the Public Health Service. All agreed that the fever was dengue and not yellow fever, and all protested against the action of the Navy. Their fear was simply that panic might ensue, and that Key West would be needlessly subjected to a quarantine on the part of all cities and states of the Gulf area.

As far as Key West was concerned, there was no panic, but the city was promptly quarantined by states and cities from Louisiana to Tampa. For a period of several weeks Key West was isolated, and as a result business came to a halt. The merchants who had stocked up in anticipation of continued boom business were most severely hurt, especially when the goods in question were perishable.

The Navy continued to reject the protests of Dr. Porter and his associates, and persisted in its diagnosis of yellow fever. Within a few weeks, however, Dr. Porter was vindicated. The three Marines gave the dengue fever to a number of others, but all recovered within the ten day period without ill effects. In Key West itself some 6,000 people became victims of the fever, but again all recovered. There was no fatality connected with the illness, and this alone was enough to wring a reluctant admission from the Navy that perhaps they had been wrong. On September 12 the ships and men began returning to Key West. Again the Army followed suit, and the city once more resumed a more normal life, even though some time was to pass before Mississippi and several other places consented to lift the quarantines. With

the possible exception of the merchants who had suffered the greatest losses, Key West was glad to forgive and forget as soon as the work on the base and the fortifications was once again in progress.

All in all, the period of the war had been filled with excitement for the city. Perhaps the most important effect of the war was the vast amount of construction of a permanent nature, much of which was of value to the port in peacetime. The amount of money spent in the city by the Army and Navy ran into many millions, to which should be added the sums spent by the individual soldiers, sailors, and workmen. One very hasty scanning of the records resulted in verifying the expenditure of over \$2,244,850 between March 1898 and July 1899.¹⁸ How much more was expended is at present unknown, but it is certain that the sum far exceeds that which has so far been verified. It can be said without fear of contradiction that Key West gained far more than it may have lost, even with the false alarm concerning the yellow fever.

Immediately after the war the city was able to benefit by means of the increased trade with Cuba, and with its new channel, its improved facilities, and the continued presence of the services, was able to enjoy a vista of uninterrupted prosperity for some time to come.

NOTES

- ¹ Richard Vernon Rickenbach, "A History of Filibustering from Florida to Cuba, 1895-1898" (Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1948), p. 13. See also Carlisle Calderon, *Report to the Spanish Legation* (Washington, 1896), and Horatio Rubens, *Cuba, the Story of Liberty* (New York, 1932), for a full story of the activities of the Cubans in Key West and elsewhere.
- ² *Chicago Times Herald*, February 19, 1898, as cited in Marcus M. Wilkerson, *Public Opinion and the Spanish American War* (Baton Rouge, 1932), pp. 128-132.
- ³ Reginald Belknap, "The Naval Base at Key West, 1898," in *Proceedings*, U. S. Naval Institute, XLI (September, 1915), pp. 1443-1473. Belknap is very bitter about the failure of the Navy to take any steps to prepare the base ahead of time. He was Commodore Remy's aide at the time.
- ⁴ National Archives, War Records Division (Old Army Section) *Record Group 98, Tampa*, p. 200. (Archives sources hereafter cited as NA-WR, for army records, and NA-NR, for naval records.)
- ⁵ Albert Manucy, "The Gibraltar of the Gulf of Mexico," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXI (April, 1943), p. 328-329. *Report of the Navy Department, 1898*, 2 vols. (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1898), I, 210-242.
- ⁶ NA-NR, *Record Group 181*, Key West File No. 1.
- ⁷ NA-WR, *Record Group 98*, File No. 2681, 2770.
- ⁸ *Times Union and Citizen* (Jacksonville), May 2, 1898. George Kennan, *Campaigning in Cuba* (New York, 1899), pp. 15-17.
- ⁹ NA-WR, *Record Group 92*, File No. 108663. *Report of the War Department, 1899*, II, Part 1, 28-29.

- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1898, I, Part 1, 398, 716-719. Albert Diddle, "Medical Events in the History of Key West," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, XV (1944), 460.
- ¹¹ *Report of the War Department*, 1898, I, Part 1, 716-719.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ^{12A} NA-WR, *Record Group 98*, File No. 1634. *Register of Contracts*, OMGO, 1896-97-98, p. 243. Item No. 91724. *Times Union and Citizen* (Jacksonville) May 25, 1898.
- ¹³ *Report of the War Department*, 1898, I, Part 1, p. 84
- ¹⁴ *Times Union and Citizen* (Jacksonville), April 26, May 2, 26, 1898. *Tampa Times*, April 18, 26, May 25, 1898.
- ¹⁵ NA-WR, *Record Group 98*, File No. 1897.
- ¹⁶ See Albert Diddle, op. cit. NA-WR, *Record Group 181*, Key West, Letter Sent Book August 16, 1898; Lancaster Box No. 2, *Report of the Navy Department*, 1898, I, 787-788. NA-WR, *Record Group 98*, File No. 4692, 4760, 4765, 4820, 4864. Dr. Porter's story is best told in the *Tenth Annual Report of the State Board of Health of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1899). The details of the story are scattered, and unfortunately the writer was unable to locate any Key West newspapers, but the following newspapers carried rather full accounts: *Times Union and Citizen* (Jacksonville), especially issues of August 19, September 3, 7, 8, 14. *New York Times*, especially on August 17, 18. *Tampa Times* during the entire period.
- ¹⁸ This figure is at best a partial account of the monies spent. Time has not yet permitted a thorough search of the records of the War and Navy Departments in the National Archives, but the figure cited includes sums the expenditure of which has been verified.

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