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The Battle of San Juan Hill

After the Guasimas fight on June 24, the army was advanced along the single trail which leads from Siboney on the coast to Santiago. Two streams of excellent water run parallel with this trail for short distances, and some eight miles from the coast crossed it in two places. Our outposts were stationed at the first of these fords, the Cuban outposts a mile and a half farther on at the ford nearer Santiago, where the stream made a sharp turn at a place called El Poso. Another mile and a half of trail extended from El Poso to the trenches of San Juan. The reader should remember El Poso, as it marked an important starting-point against San Juan on the eventful first of July.

For six days the army was encamped on either side of the trail for three miles back from the outposts. The regimental camps touched each other, and all day long the pack-trains carrying the day's rations passed up and down between them. The trail was a sunken wagon road, where it was possible, in a few places, for two wagons to pass at one time, but the greater distances were so narrow that there was but just room for a wagon, or a loaded mule-train, to make its way. The banks of the trail were three or four feet high, and when it rained it was converted into a huge gutter, with sides of mud, and with a liquid mud a foot deep between them.

The camps were pitched along the trail as near the parallel stream as possible, and in the occasional places where there was rich, high grass. At night the men slept in dog tents, open at the front and back, and during the day spent their time under the shade of trees along the trail, or on the banks of the stream. Sentries were placed at every few feet along these streams to guard them from any possible pollution. For six days the army rested in this way, for as an army moves and acts only on its belly, and as the belly of this army was three miles long, it could advance but slowly.

This week of rest, after the cramped life of the troop-ship, was not ungrateful, although the rations were scarce and there was no tobacco, which was as necessary to the health of the men as their food.

During this week of waiting, the chief excitement was to walk out a mile and a half beyond the outposts to the hill of El Poso, and look across the basin that lay in the great valley which leads to Santiago. The left of the valley was the hills which hide the sea. The right of the valley was the hills in which nestle the village of El Caney. Below El Poso, in the basin, the dense green forest stretched a mile and a half to the hills of San Juan. These hills looked so quiet and sunny and well kept that they reminded one of a New England orchard. There was a blue bungalow on a hill to the right, a red bungalow higher up on the right, and in the centre the block-house of San Juan, which looked like a Chinese pagoda. Three-quarters of a mile behind them, with a dip between, were the long white walls of the hospital and barracks of Santiago, wearing thirteen Red Cross flags, and, as was pointed out to the foreign attachés later, two six-inch guns a hundred yards in advance of the Red Cross flags.

It was so quiet, so fair, and so prosperous looking that it breathed of peace. It seemed as though one might, without accident, walk in and take dinner at the Venus Restaurant, or loll on the benches in the Plaza, or rock in one of the great bent-wood chairs around the patio of the Don Carlos Club.

But, on the 27th of June, a long, yellow pit opened in the hill-side of San Juan, and in it we could see straw sombreros rising and bobbing up and down, and under the shade of the block-house, blue-coated Spaniards strolling leisurely about or riding forth on little white ponies to scamper over the hills. Officers of every regiment, *attachés* of foreign countries, correspondents, and staff officers daily reported the fact that the rifle-pits were growing in length and in number, and that in plain sight from the hill of El Poso the enemy was entrenching himself at San Juan, and at the little village of El Caney to the right, where he was marching through the streets. But no artillery was sent to El Poso hill to drop a shell among the busy men at work among the trenches, or to interrupt the street parades in El Caney. For four days before the American soldiers captured the same rifle-pits at El Caney and San Juan, with a loss of two thousand men, they watched these men diligently preparing for their coming, and wondered why there was no order to embarrass or to end these preparations.

On the afternoon of June 30, Captain Mills rode up to the tent of Colonel Wood, and told him that on account of illness, General Wheeler and General Young had relinquished their commands, and that General Sumner would take charge of the Cavalry Division; that he, Colonel Wood, would take command of General Young's brigade, and Colonel Carroll, of General Sumner's brigade.

"You will break camp and move forward at four o'clock," he said. It was then three o'clock, and apparently the order to move forward at four had been given to each regiment at nearly the same time, for they all struck their tents and stepped down into the trail together. It was as though fifteen regiments were encamped along the sidewalks of Fifth Avenue and were all ordered at the same moment to move into it and march downtown. If Fifth Avenue were ten feet wide, one can imagine the confusion.

General Chaffee was at General Lawton's head-quarters, and they stood apart whispering together about the march they were to take to El Caney. Just over their heads the balloon was ascending for the first time and its great glistening bulk hung just above the tree tops, and the men in different regiments, picking their way along the trail, gazed up at it open-mouthed. The headquarters camp was crowded. After a week of inaction the army, at a moment's notice, was moving forward, and every one had ridden in haste to learn why.

There were *attachés*, in strange uniforms, self-important Cuban generals, officers from the flagship *New York*, and an army of photographers. At the side of the camp, double lines of soldiers passed slowly along the two paths of the muddy road, while, between them, aides dashed up and down, splashing them with dirty water, and shouting, "You will come up at once, sir." "You will not attempt to enter the trail yet, sir." "General Sumner's compliments, and why are you not in your place?"

Twelve thousand men, with their eyes fixed on a balloon, and treading on each other's heels in three inches of mud, move slowly, and after three hours, it seemed as though every man in the United States was under arms and stumbling and slipping down that trail. The lines passed until the moon rose. They seemed endless, interminable; there were cavalry mounted and dismounted, artillery with cracking whips and cursing drivers, Rough Riders in brown, and regulars, both black and white, in blue. Midnight came, and they were still stumbling and slipping forward.

General Sumner's headquarters tent was pitched to the right of El Poso hill. Below us lay the basin a mile and a half in length, and a mile and a half wide, from which a white mist was rising. Near us, drowned under the mist, seven thousand men were sleeping, and, farther to the right, General Chaffee's five thousand were lying under the bushes along the trails to El Caney, waiting to march on it and eat it up before breakfast.

The place hardly needs a map to explain it. The trails were like a pitchfork, with its prongs touching the hills of San Juan. The long handle of the pitchfork was the trail over which we had just come, the joining of the handle and the prongs were El Poso. El Caney lay halfway along the right prong, the left one was the trail down which, in the morning, the troops were to be hurled upon San Juan. It was as yet an utterly undiscovered country. Three miles away, across the basin of mist, we could see the street lamps of Santiago shining over the San Juan hills. Above us, the tropical moon hung white and clear in the dark purple sky, pierced with millions of white stars. As we turned in, there was just a little something in the air which made saying "good-night" a gentle farce, for no one went to sleep immediately, but lay looking up at the stars, and after a long silence, and much restless turning on the blanket which we shared together, the second lieutenant said: "So, if anything happens to me, to-morrow, you'll see she gets them, won't you?" Before the moon rose again, every sixth man who had slept in the mist that night was either killed or wounded; but the second lieutenant was sitting on the edge of a Spanish rifle-pit, dirty, sweaty, and weak for food, but victorious, and the unknown she did not get them.

El Caney had not yet thrown off her blanket of mist before Capron's battery opened on it from a ridge two miles in the rear. The plan for the day was that El Caney should fall in an hour. The plan for the day is interesting chiefly because it is so different from what happened. According to the plan the army was to advance in two divisions along the two trails. Incidentally, General Lawton's division was to pick up El Caney, and when El Caney was eliminated, his division was to continue forward and join hands on the right with the divisions of General Sumner and General Kent. The army was then to rest for that night in the woods, half a mile from San Juan.

On the following morning it was to attack San Juan on the two flanks, under cover of artillery. The objection to this plan, which did not apparently suggest itself to General Shafter, was that an army of twelve thousand men, sleeping within five hundred yards of the enemy's rifle-pits, might not unreasonably be expected to pass a bad night. As we discovered the next day, not only the five hundred yards, but the whole basin was covered by the fire from the rifle-pits. Even by daylight, when it was possible to seek some slight shelter, the army could not remain in the woods, but according to the plan it was expected to bivouac for the night in those woods, and in the morning to maneuver and deploy and march through them to the two flanks of San Juan. How the enemy was to be hypnotized while this was going forward it is difficult to understand.

According to this programme, Capron's battery opened on El Caney and Grimes's battery opened on the pagoda-like block-house of San Juan. The range from El Poso was exactly 2,400 yards, and the firing, as was discovered later, was not very effective. The battery used black powder, and, as a result, after each explosion the curtain of smoke hung over the gun for fully a minute before the gunners could see the San Juan trenches, which was chiefly important because for a full minute it gave a mark to the enemy. The hill on which the battery stood was like a sugar-loaf. Behind it was the farm-house of El Poso, the only building in sight within a radius of a mile, and in it were Cuban soldiers and other non-combatants. The Rough Riders had been ordered to halt in the yard of the farm-house and the artillery horses were drawn up in it, under

the lee of the hill. The First and Tenth dismounted Cavalry were encamped a hundred yards from the battery along the ridge. They might as sensibly have been ordered to paint the rings in a target while a company was firing at the bull's-eye. To our first twenty shots the enemy made no reply; when they did it was impossible, owing to their using smokeless powder, to locate their guns. Their third shell fell in among the Cubans in the block-house and among the Rough Riders and the men of the First and Tenth Cavalry, killing some and wounding many. These casualties were utterly unnecessary and were due to the stupidity of whoever placed the men within fifty yards of guns in action.

A quarter of an hour after the firing began from El Poso one of General Shafter's aides directed General Sumner to advance with his division down the Santiago trail, and to halt at the edge of the woods.

"What am I to do then?" asked General Sumner.

"You are to await further orders," the aide answered.

As a matter of fact and history this was probably the last order General Sumner received from General Shafter, until the troops of his division had taken the San Juan hills, as it became impossible to get word to General Shafter, the trail leading to his head-quarters tent, three miles in the rear, being blocked by the soldiers of the First and Tenth dismounted Cavalry, and later, by Lawton's division. General Sumner led the Sixth, Third, and Ninth Cavalry and the Rough Riders down the trail, with instructions for the First and Tenth to follow. The trail, virgin as yet from the foot of an American soldier, was as wide as its narrowest part, which was some ten feet across. At places it was as wide as Broadway, but only for such short distances that it was necessary for the men to advance in column, in double file. A maze of underbrush and trees on either side was all but impenetrable, and when the officers and men had once assembled into the basin, they could only guess as to what lay before them, or on either flank. At the end of a mile the country became more open, and General Sumner saw the Spaniards entrenched a half-mile away on the sloping hills. A stream, called the San Juan River, ran across the trail at this point, and another stream crossed it again two hundred yards farther on. The troops were halted at this first stream, some crossing it, and others deploying in single file to the right. Some were on the banks of the stream, others at the edge of the woods in the bushes. Others lay in the high grass which was so high that it stopped the wind, and so hot that it almost choked and suffocated those who lay in it.

The enemy saw the advance and began firing with pitiless accuracy into the jammed and crowded trail and along the whole border of the woods. There was not a single yard of ground for a mile to the rear which was not inside the zone of fire. Our men were ordered not to return the fire but to lie still and wait for further orders. Some of them could see the rifle-pits of the enemy quite clearly and the men in them, but many saw nothing but the bushes under which they lay, and the high grass which seemed to burn when they pressed against it. It was during this period of waiting that the greater number of our men were killed. For one hour they lay on their rifles staring at the waving green stuff around them, while the bullets drove past incessantly, with savage insistence, cutting the grass again and again in hundreds of fresh places.

Men in line sprang from the ground and sank back again with a groan, or rolled to one side clinging silently to an arm or shoulder. Behind the lines hospital stewards passed continually, drawing the wounded back to the streams, where they laid them in long rows, their feet touching the water's edge and their bodies supported by the muddy bank. Up and down the lines, and through the fords of the streams, mounted aides drove their horses at a gallop, as conspicuous a target as the steeple on a church, and one after another paid the price of his

position and fell from his horse wounded or dead. Captain Mills fell as he was giving an order, shot through the forehead behind both eyes; Captain O'Neill, of the Rough Riders, as he said, "There is no Spanish bullet made that can kill me." Steel, Swift, Henry, each of them was shot out of his saddle.

Hidden in the trees above the streams, and above the trail, sharp-shooters and guerillas added a fresh terror to the wounded. There was no hiding from them. Their bullets came from every side. Their invisible smoke helped to keep their hiding-places secret, and in the incessant shriek of shrapnel and the spit of the Mausers, it was difficult to locate the reports of their rifles. They spared neither the wounded nor recognized the Red Cross; they killed the surgeons and the stewards carrying the litters, and killed the wounded men on the litters. A guerilla in a tree above us shot one of the Rough Riders in the breast while I was helping him carry Captain Morton Henry to the dressing-station, the ball passing down through him, and a second shot, from the same tree, barely missed Henry as he lay on the ground where we had dropped him. He was already twice wounded and so covered with blood that no one could have mistaken his condition.

The surgeons at work along the stream dressed the wounds with one eye cast aloft at the trees. It was not the Mauser bullets they feared, though they passed continuously, but too high to do their patients further harm, but the bullets of the sharp-shooters which struck fairly in among them, splashing in the water and scattering the pebbles. The sounds of the two bullets were as different as is the sharp pop of a soda-water bottle from the buzzing of an angry wasp.

For a time it seemed as though every second man was either killed or wounded; one came upon them lying behind the bush, under which they had crawled with some strange idea that it would protect them, or crouched under the bank of the stream, or lying on their stomachs and lapping up the water with the eagerness of thirsty dogs. As to their suffering, the wounded were magnificently silent, they neither complained nor groaned nor cursed.

"I've got a punctured tire," was their grim answer to inquiries. White men and colored men, veterans and recruits and volunteers, each lay waiting for the battle to begin or to end so that he might be carried away to safety, for the wounded were in as great danger after they were hit as though they were in the firing line, but none questioned nor complained.

I came across Lieutenant Roberts, of the Tenth Cavalry, lying under the roots of a tree beside the stream with three of his colored troopers stretched around him. He was shot through the intestines, and each of the three men with him was shot in the arm or leg. They had been overlooked or forgotten, and we stumbled upon them only by the accident of losing our way. They had no knowledge as to how the battle was going or where their comrades were or where the enemy was. At any moment, for all they knew, the Spaniards might break through the bushes about them. It was a most lonely picture, the young lieutenant, half naked, and wet with his own blood, sitting upright beside the empty stream, and his three followers crouching at his feet like three faithful watch-dogs, each wearing his red badge of courage, with his black skin tanned to a haggard gray, and with his eyes fixed patiently on the white lips of his officer. When the white soldiers with me offered to carry him back to the dressing-station, the negroes resented it stiffly. "If the Lieutenant had been able to move, we would have carried him away long ago," said the sergeant, quite overlooking the fact that his arm was shattered.

"Oh, don't bother the surgeons about me," Roberts added, cheerfully. "They must be very busy. I can wait."

As yet, with all these killed and wounded, we had accomplished nothing—except to obey orders—which was to await further orders. The observation balloon hastened the end. It came blundering down the trail, and stopped the advance of the First and Tenth Cavalry, and was sent

up directly over the heads of our men to observe what should have been observed a week before by scouts and reconnoitering parties. A balloon, two miles to the rear, and high enough in the air to be out of range of the enemy's fire may some day prove itself to be of use and value. But a balloon on the advance line, and only fifty feet above the tops of the trees, was merely an invitation to the enemy to kill everything beneath it. And the enemy responded to the invitation. A Spaniard might question if he could hit a man, or a number of men, hidden in the bushes, but had no doubt at all as to his ability to hit a mammoth glistening ball only six hundred yards distant, and so all the trenches fired at it at once, and the men of the First and Tenth, packed together directly behind it, received the full force of the bullets. The men lying directly below it received the shrapnel which was timed to hit it, and which at last, fortunately, did hit it.

This was endured for an hour, an hour of such hell of fire and heat, that the heat in itself, had there been no bullets, would have been remembered for its cruelty. Men gasped on their backs, like fishes in the bottom of a boat, their heads burning inside and out, their limbs too heavy to move. They had been rushed here and rushed there wet with sweat and wet with fording the streams, under a sun that would have made moving a fan an effort, and they lay prostrate, gasping at the hot air, with faces aflame, and their tongues sticking out, and their eyes rolling. All through this the volleys from the rifle-pits sputtered and rattled, and the bullets sang continuously like the wind through the rigging in a gale, shrapnel whined and broke, and still no order came from General Shafter.

Captain Howse, of General Sumner's staff, rode down the trail to learn what had delayed the First and Tenth, and was hailed by Colonel Derby, who was just descending from the shattered balloon.

"I saw men up there on those hills," Colonel Derby shouted; "they are firing at our troops." That was part of the information contributed by the balloon. Captain Howse's reply is lost to history.

General Kent's division, which, according to the plan, was to have been held in reserve, had been rushed up in the rear of the First and Tenth, and the Tenth had deployed in skirmish order to the right. The trail was now completely blocked by Kent's division. Lawton's division, which was to have re-enforced on the right, had not appeared, but incessant firing from the direction of El Caney showed that he and Chaffee were fighting mightily. The situation was desperate. Our troops could not retreat, as the trail for two miles behind them was wedged with men. They could not remain where they were, for they were being shot to pieces. There was only one thing they could do—go forward and take the San Juan hills by assault.

It was as desperate as the situation itself. To charge earthworks held by men with modern rifles, and using modern artillery, until after the earthworks have been shaken by artillery, and to attack them in advance and not in the flanks, are both impossible military propositions. But this campaign had not been conducted according to military rules, and a series of military blunders had brought seven thousand American soldiers into a chute of death from which there was no escape except by taking the enemy who held it by the throat and driving him out and beating him down. So the generals of divisions and brigades stepped back and relinquished their command to the regimental officers and the enlisted men.

"We can do nothing more," they virtually said. "There is the enemy."

Colonel Roosevelt, on horseback, broke from the woods behind the line of the Ninth, and finding its men lying in his way, shouted: "If you don't wish to go forward, let my men pass." The junior officers of the Ninth, with their negroes, instantly sprang into line with the Rough Riders, and charged at the blue block-house on the right.

I speak of Roosevelt first because, with General Hawkins, who led Kent's division, notably the Sixth and Sixteenth Regulars, he was, without doubt, the most conspicuous figure in the charge. General Hawkins, with hair as white as snow, and yet far in advance of men thirty years his junior, was so noble a sight that you felt inclined to pray for his safety; on the other hand, Roosevelt, mounted high on horseback, and charging the rifle-pits at a gallop and quite alone, made you feel that you would like to cheer. He wore on his sombrero a blue polka-dot handkerchief, à la Havelock, which, as he advanced, floated out straight behind his head, like a guidon.

Afterward, the men of his regiment who followed this flag, adopted a polka-dot handkerchief as the badge of the Rough Riders. These two officers were notably conspicuous in the charge, but no one can claim that any two men, or any one man, was more brave or more daring, or showed greater courage in that slow, stubborn advance, than did any of the others. Some one asked one of the officers if he had any difficulty in making his men follow him. "No," he answered, "I had some difficulty in keeping up with them." As one of the brigade generals said: "San Juan was won by the regimental officers and men. We had as little to do as the referee at a prize-fight who calls 'time.' We called 'time' and they did the fighting."

I have seen many illustrations and pictures of this charge on the San Juan hills, but none of them seem to show it just as I remember it. In the picture-papers the men are running uphill swiftly and gallantly, in regular formation, rank after rank, with flags flying, their eyes aflame, and their hair streaming, their bayonets fixed, in long, brilliant lines, an invincible, overpowering weight of numbers. Instead of which I think the thing which impressed one the most, when our men started from cover, was that they were so few. It seemed as if some one had made an awful and terrible mistake. One's instinct was to call to them to come back. You felt that some one had blundered and that these few men were blindly following out some madman's mad order. It was not heroic then, it seemed merely absurdly pathetic. The pity of it, the folly of such a sacrifice was what held you.

They had no glittering bayonets, they were not massed in regular array. There were a few men in advance, bunched together, and creeping up a steep, sunny hill, the tops of which roared and flashed with flame. The men held their guns pressed across their chests and stepped heavily as they climbed. Behind these first few, spreading out like a fan, were single lines of men, slipping and scrambling in the smooth grass, moving forward with difficulty, as though they were wading waist high through water, moving slowly, carefully, with strenuous effort. It was much more wonderful than any swinging charge could have been. They walked to greet death at every step, many of them, as they advanced, sinking suddenly or pitching forward and disappearing in the high grass, but the others waded on, stubbornly, forming a thin blue line that kept creeping higher and higher up the hill.

It was as inevitable as the rising tide. It was a miracle of self-sacrifice, a triumph of bulldog courage, which one watched breathless with wonder. The fire of the Spanish riflemen, who still stuck bravely to their posts, doubled and trebled in fierceness, the crests of the hills crackled and burst in amazed roars, and rippled with waves of tiny flame. But the blue line crept steadily up and on, and then, near the top, the broken fragments gathered together with a sudden burst of speed, the Spaniards appeared for a moment outlined against the sky and poised for instant flight, fired a last volley, and fled before the swift-moving wave that leaped and sprang after them.

The men of the Ninth and the Rough Riders rushed to the block-house together, the men of the Sixth, of the Third, of the Tenth Cavalry, of the Sixth and Sixteenth Infantry, fell on their faces along the crest of the hills beyond, and opened upon the vanishing enemy. They drove the

yellow silk flags of the cavalry and the flag of their country into the soft earth of the trenches, and then sank down and looked back at the road they had climbed and swung their hats in the air. And from far overhead, from these few figures perched on the Spanish rifle-pits, with their flags planted among the empty cartridges of the enemy, and overlooking the walls of Santiago, came, faintly, the sound of a tired, broken cheer.