

Spanish American War

As we approach Spring 2018, let us be reminded of the date April 25th. On that date, the United States of America commemorates the 120th anniversary of the start of the “little-known” Spanish-American War.

On April 25, 1898, Congress declared war against Spain, which only a day earlier, had declared war on the United States. Nearly two months earlier, the USS Maine, an armored cruiser naval ship, mysteriously exploded in the harbor of Havana Cuba killing nearly three quarters of her crew. The ship was sent there to protect US interests during the Cuban revolt against Spain. Though the cause was never determined conclusively, an investigation by the naval board determined that the explosion was caused by a mine set by the hostile forces of Spain.

Since the middle ages, Spain’s exploration and exploitation of newly discovered lands brought it great wealth. Most of north, central and south America was claimed and colonized by Spain, who was Europe’s leading power throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. It’s sphere of influence extended across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans from Africa to Japan.

By the 18th century, Spain’s great rivals, England and France had joined in colonial expansion, challenging Spain and each other in a global power struggle. The heavy cost of defending distant colonies from internal and external threats eventually became greater than the benefits the colonies brought. The American and French revolutionary ideas of freedom encouraged others in the American hemisphere, and revolution was in the air as natives demanded independence from their distant masters. With the French invasion of Spain during the Napoleonic Wars (1808-1814), Spain’s colonial influence was weakened and newly independent countries sprang into existence from Argentina in 1816 to Mexico in 1821.

Cuba and Puerto Rico, however, remained loyal to Spain, and were important key naval ports for Spain. The United States of America was also interested in them because of their proximity to the US and the trade they generated. Sugar was a great Cuban commodity and by 1894 nearly 90 percent of Cuba's exports went to the United States while the US provided Cuba with 38% of its imports. Faced with renewed revolutionary activity in Cuba in 1898, Spain sent over 220,000 troops to stop the rebellion.

In the Pacific, the Philippine Islands were strategically important to trade/conflict with Japan, but were claimed by Spain and protected by the Spanish navy. When war was declared, US Commodore George Dewey led a squadron of US naval forces into the Manilla bay and defeated the Spanish forces there.

The United States sent troops to Cuba to help the Cuban revolutionaries. With American Naval forces and military support with leaders like Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders in the Battle of San Juan Hill, Spanish opposition was easily dispatched.

The Spanish-American war was short-lived, lasting only four months and ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in December 1898 when Spain renounced all claims to Cuba, ceded Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States, and transferred sovereignty over the Philippines to the United States for \$20,000,000. <http://www.history.com/topics/spanish-american-war>.

Wisconsin soldiers played a role in the Spanish-American War. Three days after the United States declared war on Spain, the 2nd & 3rd Wisconsin Infantry units, mainly from Winnebago and Sheboygan Counties, were organized and commissioned for service in the Spanish American War. They set out for Camp Harvey in Milwaukee, and eventually left Milwaukee on May 11, 1898, to train before being sent to Puerto Rico to fight the Spanish. American sentiment ran hot against the Spanish as American blood stained the Cuban harbor and Wisconsin offered her best young men to fight the enemy.

A diary from Mary Colyer of Eagle recalls the date of April 28, 1898 "when the NN State militia marched through Eagle on their way to war". While information on the "NN State militia" was not found, it is believed that they were either members of the units headed toward Milwaukee or a loosely knit group of state militia volunteer units similar to the National Guard on their way to see the 2nd & 3rd Wisconsin Infantry units off to war.