Cuzco Well - 1898

BLUF: The Battle of Cuzco Well was a portion of the larger fight for Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, during the Spanish–American War, on 14 June 1898. The conflict involved elements of the First Marine Battalion (Reinforced) and Cuban rebels as they fought to take the only freshwater source on the point from the Spanish. Marine Sergeant John Quick and Private John Fitzgerald received the Medal of Honor for their actions during the engagement. The Marine Corps success at Cuzco Well was one piece of the overall victory against the Spanish at Guantánamo Bay.

MAIN CHARACTERS: George F. Elliott (USMC), John Fitzgerald (USMC), Robert Huntington (USMC), Alfredo LaBorde (Cuban Army), Bowman H. McCalla (USN), and John Quick (USMC),

SETTING THE STAGE: Cuba had been in rebellion against Spain since 1895. Soon after the uprising began, two insurgent leaders, José Martí and General Máximo Gómez, had landed at the beach of Cajobabo, between Guantánamo Bay and Cape Maisí. After three years of fighting throughout the island, however, the rebels had only been victorious in the provinces of Oriente and Camagüey.

Following the explosion of the battleship *USS Maine* in Havana harbor in February 1898, the U.S. declared war on Spain to support the Cuban insurgents. Havana harbor was blockaded, and by the end of May, the Spanish fleet was bottled up in Santiago Bay, 40 miles west of Guantánamo Bay by the U.S. Navy. In the U.S., an expeditionary force was rapidly being readied for action in Cuba, creating an alliance with the Cuban insurgents. Guantánamo Bay was of commercial importance to the U.S. because of the sugar port of Caimanera on the western shore of the inner bay. So, it became an immediate target for the U.S. forces.

Despite the insurgents' nominal offensive position in Guantánamo Bay's vicinity, Spanish regulars and Cuban partisans held Guantánamo City, the port of Caimanera, and the railroad connecting the two cities. They also controlled the sugar mills and other outlying strong points. The Guantánamo garrison consisted of some 5,000 men under the command of Spanish General Felix Pareja. A Spanish blockhouse stood on the hill overlooking the village on Fisherman's Point near the bay entrance. A fort on Cayo del Toro commanded the relatively narrow channel leading from outer to inner bay. The Spanish gunboat *Sandoval* was based at Caimanera on the inner bay, and a string of blockhouses defended the railroad to Guantánamo City.

The First Battalion Marines landed at Guantánamo unopposed on 10 June with five of its six companies. Commander George Reiter, the *USS Panther* captain, had refused to authorize the ship's personnel for unloading duties, thus leaving the artillery company aboard. Reiter also refused to permit the unloading of the remainder of the Marines' small arms ammunition, claiming that it was needed for the ship's ballast. LtCol. Robert Huntington sought assistance from Commander Bowman McCalla, who ordered Reiter to release the Marines' ammunition at once. Fully armed, the Marines burned village huts and the remains of the blockhouse with all their contents to avoid the possibility of yellow fever. The Spanish had fled in such a hurry that clothing, money, jewelry, and weapons had been left behind. The battalion raised the American flag, the first U.S. military unit on Cuban soil, and sent out detachments for outpost duty.

THE STORY: Around 0800 hours of 14 June 1898, Marine Companies "C" and "D" and approximately fifty Cubans moved through the hills to seize Cuzco Well. The region around the well consisted of four Spanish infantry companies and two companies of loyalist guerrilla forces totaling some 500 men. By capturing and destroying the only nearby freshwater source, it was hoped that the defending Spanish forces would be forced to leave the area.

The *USS Dolphin* moved east along the shore, ready to furnish naval gunfire support if needed. The Spanish soon discovered the Marines' movement, and their main body near the well was alerted. The Marines and Cuban rebels

occupied the hill, which overlooked the enemy's position, but were immediately subjected to heavy long-range rifle fire. Capt George Elliott signaled the *Dolphin* to shell the Spanish position. Because the message sender was not clearly visible, the message was misinterpreted, and the vessel began dropping shells on a small detachment of Marines who were en route to join the fight.

Sgt. John Quick solved the problem by redirecting the fire of the *USS Dolphin*. Using a large blue and white polka-dotted bandana he acquired from a Cuban guerrilla, Quick scrambled to the top of the hill where he was plainly silhouetted against the sky-blue horizon. With the flag attached to a long crooked stick, he calmly turned his back to the enemy and began wig-wagging his flag. As a detachment Marine onboard a Navy ship, Quick knew the naval signal technique needed to redirect the *Dolphin's* fire. He was immediately subjected to furious enemy rifle fire. While enemy bullets cut through the bushes and screamed overhead, he continued to signal the Dolphin calmly. Letter by letter, the message to the ship was spelled out in the dot-dash code. When Quick finished the message, the ship answered. He then picked up his Lee-Winchester rifle and resumed his place on the firing line. War Correspondent Stephen Crane later described the scene in his war story "Marines Signaling Under Fire at Guantanamo." The *Dolphin* shifted her fire, and by 1400 hours, the Spaniards had begun to retreat. For his actions, Sgt. John Quick was awarded the Medal of Honor. Marine Pvt. John Fitzgerald also received the Medal of Honor for his efforts that day.

AFTERMATH: By 1530 hours, the Spaniards had abandoned the battlefield, and all firing had ceased. Most of the Spanish had escaped, but a lieutenant and 17 enlisted men were captured. The Spanish forces suffered 210 casualties, with 60 killed and 150 wounded. Two Marines and two Cuban rebels had been wounded, along with two Cuban insurgents killed. The Marines' most serious casualties were from heat exhaustion, which disabled one officer and 22 men. The Spanish headquarters building was burned, and the freshwater well at Cuzco was destroyed. This ended its immediate usefulness, including to the Marines, whose officers would not let them drink from it before its destruction, fearing that the Spanish poisoned the water. Water was eventually brought up from the *USS Dolphin* after a wait of two hours.

The threat posed by American forces at Guantánamo Bay, plus the stranglehold on land communications by 1,000 Cuban insurgents, effectively pinned down an army of 7,000 Spaniards, which might have changed Santiago's fighting outcome. Less than a week after Santiago's surrender, Guantánamo Bay's base was used to launch the invasion of Puerto Rico to the east. On 12 August, the Spanish-American War ended with the signing of the peace protocol and an armistice. The new U.S. Naval Base was not formally leased to the U.S. by Cuba until 1903.

QUESTIONS

1. What role did the Spanish-American War play in American imperialist policies?
2. How did the Battle of Cuzco Well make John Quick an iconic figure in Marine Corps lore?
3. Why did the Spanish-American War cement the Marine Corps' importance to protecting U.S. interests?

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