

# The 103-Year *Quest* for the Medal of Honor

*Compiled by Staff of the Theodore Roosevelt Association and the Boone and Crockett Club*

In January of 2001, the century-long quest to secure the Medal of Honor for Theodore Roosevelt ended last year when President Clinton finally presented the nation's highest military award posthumously to Theodore Roosevelt. Tweed Roosevelt received the Medal on behalf of the Roosevelt family in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. TR was awarded the Medal of Honor for his bravery on July 1, 1898, in the battle to capture San Juan Heights from the Spanish in Cuba. Tweed Roosevelt, a great-grandson of TR, was chosen to receive the Medal for the family because of his leadership in the efforts to bring about the award.

Back in 1898, TR resigned as U.S. Assistant Secretary of the Navy to organize the First Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, known as the "Rough Riders." After leading his troops in two dramatic charges against entrenched Spanish positions, TR was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor by the entire chain of command in Cuba. Although highly unusual, the War Department rejected the recommendation. Some say TR didn't get it because of the bias the War Department had against volunteers. Others say it was because he openly opposed the Secretary of War's decision not to allow the return of a number of American servicemen who had been afflicted with yellow fever.

TR's opportunity for Medal of Honor ended when he became President in 1901. Then in 1996, Congress repealed the statute of limitations on military decorations, primarily to allow the decoration of African-Americans for their bravery in World War II and the Korean War, but it effectively opened the door for considering any military case from the past.

A bill to award Theodore Roosevelt the Medal of Honor was introduced in 1996, and again in 1997. Despite broad bipartisan support in the House, the Senior Army Decorations Board opposed it and recommended that the Medal of Honor again be denied to TR. Nevertheless, both Houses of Congress passed the bill in October, 1998. There was much celebration by TR's supporters at that time, but as it turned out, the quest for the Medal was far from over.

## THE FIGHT FOR THE MEDAL GOES ON

Several members of Congress, in an effort to placate the Army, requested that the President seek the advice of the Secretary of the Army on the matter before signing. At the President's request, the Army convened a special panel to review the matter.

During the next two years, numerous scholars and historians brought in by the Army Panel argued about TR's war record. Some claimed TR had been as foolhardy as he had been brave and daring, and took pride in the heavy casualties. Others referenced historical sources, including original letters written in 1898 by a Rough Rider to his parents in Texas describing TR's heroism in Cuba. Some noted that over 20 other American soldiers had been awarded the Medal of Honor—then the nation's only major combat decoration—for bravery in the heavy fighting near Santiago on July 1, 1898. How could TR's extraordinary valor in leading two charges, while exposed to enemy fire on horseback, be any less noteworthy? Many distinguished politicians and authors wrote letters in support of awarding the Medal of Honor to TR.

It took almost two years for the Army to make its decision. In the end, in a supposedly close vote, the Army panel voted in favor of the award. The positive recommendation slowly worked its way through the military hierarchy, reaching the President in the



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**ABOVE:** U.S. President Bill Clinton presents Tweed Roosevelt (L), great grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, with a posthumous Medal of Honor for Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt January 16, 2001, in the Roosevelt Room of the White House.

**OPPOSITE:** From left to right, General Joseph Wheeler, Chaplain Brown, Colonel Leonard Wood, and Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt in June 1898.

summer of 2000. Yet the President failed to act. Congressman Rick Lazio of New York, who was one of the early and enthusiastic supporters of the award to TR, attacked President Clinton for not acting immediately to honor TR. Lazio, who was opposing Mrs. Clinton in the New York Senate race at the time, was ignored.

Most observers thought it likely that the Medal would not be awarded until after the election. For TR's supporters, waiting for the next administration to make the award would be a substantial setback—although the enabling legislation would remain on the books, a new Secretary of the Army and a new Secretary of Defense would have to approve the award of the Medal to TR.

In a last-ditch effort to move the President into action, Tweed Roosevelt wrote a letter to the President, which was hand-delivered by Senator Conrad (Senator Conrad's state of North Dakota regards TR as a "favorite son" because of his days as a rancher in the Badlands). Upon reading the letter, President Clinton agreed to award the Medal before he left office.

#### THE ROOSEVELT ROOM CEREMONY

On January 16, 2001, President Clinton awarded the Medal of Honor to Theodore Roosevelt's family in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. The President presented the Medal in front of the mantel, over which hangs a portrait of TR as a Rough Rider, in full battle gear.

As President Clinton noted in his remarks, it is a tradition that when a Democrat is in the White House, a portrait of Franklin Roosevelt hangs above the mantel; when a Republican is in office, Theodore Roosevelt occupies the hallowed spot. Clinton added, "I chose to break with tradition these last eight years because I figured if we could have even half the luck and skill leading America into the 21st century that Theodore Roosevelt did on leading America into the 20th century, our nation would do just fine." Also on the mantel of the Roosevelt Room is a special case containing the Nobel Peace Prize, which was presented to TR in 1906 for ending the Russo-Japanese War.

In accepting the Medal of Honor on behalf of his great-grandfather, Tweed Roosevelt announced that the family would give the Medal to the White House after it is taken on a national tour. Nancy Roosevelt Jackson, great-granddaughter of



TR, also attended the ceremony. She recalled that when she was a little girl, her grandmother, former First Lady Edith Roosevelt, told her that TR had always wanted the Medal of Honor and that not receiving it was one of the greatest disappointments of his life. Apparently, Edith wanted at least one of her descendants to know and remember that TR regretted to his dying day that he had not been awarded this prestigious honor.

Ironically, this was not the first Medal of Honor bestowed on a Roosevelt. Congress had awarded Theodore Roosevelt's oldest son, Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., a Medal of Honor for his bravery under fire on D-Day, when he landed on the beaches of Normandy. Tragically, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. died in 1944, in uniform, doing his duty, and never knew of the posthumous award he received.

### THE ROUGH RIDERS

The First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment was organized by Theodore Roosevelt and Leonard Wood, an army doctor who was President McKinley's physician and a close personal friend of TR. Wood had won the Medal of Honor fighting Apaches in the 1880s. TR, who was Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the McKinley administration, was a leading advocate of the liberation of

Cuba, the colony then fighting for its independence from Spain.

TR asked the War Department permission to raise a regiment after Spain declared war on the United States on April 24, 1898. Because he lacked military experience, Roosevelt suggested that Leonard Wood be given command of the volunteer regiment. Accordingly, Wood became colonel and TR was made lieutenant of the Rough Riders.

A flood of applications for service came in from men in all walks of life and areas of the country. Cowboys, Indians, New York City policemen, and athletes from Ivy League schools were accepted into the regiment. What these very different groups of men had in common was that they could ride and shoot and were in shape, and thus could be ready for war with little training. The regiment of over 1,250 men assembled in San Antonio, Texas in the spring and shipped out to Cuba—minus the horses—in June, 1898.

The Rough Riders landed in Daiquiri, Cuba on June 22, and their first engagement occurred two days later in the small Cuban village of Las Guasimas. The supreme test came a week later when TR was ordered to move his Rough Riders, who were still without horses, into position for an attack on the Spanish stronghold of Santiago. On the eve of the big battle, Colonel Wood was promoted in the field to Brigadier General and TR was made Colonel of the Rough Riders. The next

day, TR, on horseback, led the Rough Riders and fragments of other regiments, African-American "buffalo soldiers," and other units up Kettle Hill.

After that hill was captured from the Spanish, TR, now on foot, led a second charge up San Juan Heights. Accompanied by only four or five men, TR led a desperate and gallant charge up San Juan Hill, encouraging his troops to continue the assault through intense enemy fire over the open countryside. This battle was what TR later called his "crowded hour" . . . his great moment.

After the capture of San Juan Heights, overlooking Santiago, the city surrendered, and the war was virtually over. The toll from yellow fever soon became worse than the losses in battle. TR contracted malaria, which remained with him the rest of his life. TR and other officers called for American troops to be brought home quickly in order to save their lives. A letter was sent to the Army, which was leaked to the press before it reached Washington. President McKinley and the Secretary of War Russell Alger were outraged, as the letter reflected adversely on the administration.

The remaining Rough Riders finally were brought to Long Island in August. One out of three men had been killed, wounded, or stricken by disease. It was the highest casualty rate of any American unit that took part in the Spanish-American war. ■

**Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders at the top of San Juan Hill, after the battle on July 1, 1898.**

