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Photographs / Images: William Grayson, First Nebraska Regiment, Company D, in firing position; Rifleman Grayson [General Harrison Gray Otis Collection, Natural History Museum, Los Angeles]; U S Army transport *Senator*; Company D at "Pleasant Valley," the Philippines; Colonel John M Stotsenburg on a native pony; Soldiers of First Nebraska, Company C, block house number 8; Company C at San Fernando, the Philippines; Soldier of First Nebraska, Company G, overcome by heat during March 25 march to Malolos, north of Manila; Lieutenant Sherman A White of Lincoln leading First Nebraska, Company E, on a seven-mile march in 2 hours and 10 minutes to catch a Manila-bound train

## PRIVATE WILLIAM W. GRAYSON'S WAR IN THE PHILIPPINES, 1899

*By Donald Chaput*

On February 4, 1899, Private William W. Grayson of the Nebraska Volunteer Infantry Regiment fired at several Filipino soldiers advancing toward his position. This volley of shots has been called the "first" in a bitter, drawn-out war between the Philippine Revolutionary Government and United States forces that lasted through 1902. In spite of his unusual role in "starting" a war, the remainder of Grayson's life was filled with neither notoriety nor fame.

Grayson was born in England in 1876 to William and Sarah Grayson. The family immigrated to Nebraska, and in the 1890s lived in Beatrice and Omaha. Young William was employed as an hostler.<sup>1</sup>

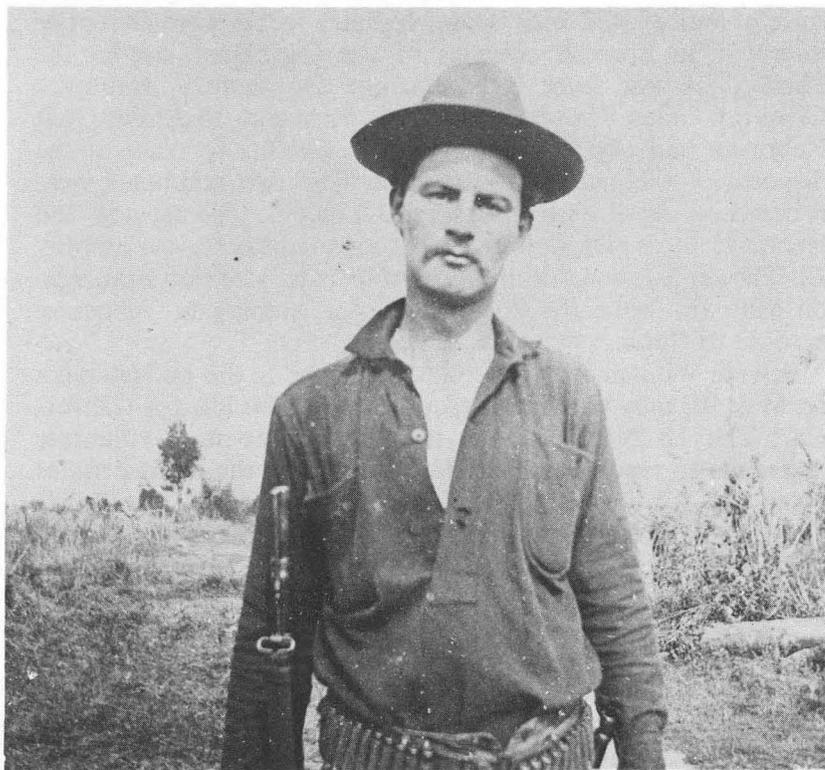
In April, 1898, following the USS *Maine* incident in Havana harbor, President William McKinley and Congress agreed that a state of war existed with Spain. Military forces were alerted to intervene in Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and in the Pacific. As war fever raced through the country, Nebraska Governor Silas Holcomb notified President McKinley that Nebraska had two National Guard regiments to place at the disposal of the federal government. The two regiments were ordered on April 23 to mobilize at Lincoln. The 1st and 2nd Nebraska regiments were mustered into federal service on May 12. The 1st Nebraska Volunteer Infantry left for San Francisco on May 16, while the 2nd headed for training in Tennessee enroute to Cuba.<sup>2</sup>

Private William W. Grayson had enlisted in the 1st Nebraska on May 10, only two days before the regiment left for California.<sup>3</sup> The 1st Nebraska was the first of the state volunteer regiments to reach San Francisco. Forces of the United States Navy and Army were to subdue Spanish forces in the Philippines, while other units were ordered to eliminate Spain's rule in the Caribbean.

Grayson and other recruits of the 1st Nebraska were super-



*Private William Grayson, 1st Nebraska Regiment, Company D, in firing position. . . . (Below) Rifleman Grayson. Photos are from General Harrison Gray Otis Collection, Natural History Museum, Los Angeles. Otis, owner-editor-publisher of the Los Angeles Times, was appointed to command a brigade in the Philippines by President McKinley, a Civil War acquaintance.*



ficially trained at Camp Merritt, a sandy, cold site near modern Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. A convoy of four ships, including the Army transport *Senator*, left San Francisco on June 15.<sup>4</sup> On board were the 1st Nebraska, 1st Colorado, 10th Pennsylvania, Utah Artillery, and the 18th and 23rd Regular Army Infantry Regiments. After a few days in Hawaii, the convoy sailed for the Philippines and arrived on July 17.<sup>5</sup>

The troops were too late to witness the opening engagement, in which Commodore George Dewey's fleet smashed the Spanish ships in Manila harbor on May 1. However, Dewey welcomed the troops to bolster his position, then becoming militarily and diplomatically sensitive. The Spanish Army held Manila, Dewey held the harbor, and General Emilio Aguinaldo's Philippine Revolutionary Army was outside Manila, ready to strike at the Spaniards.

The newly arrived regiments were landed a few miles south of Manila, where they camped and prepared to attack the Spanish troops. A general advance was begun on the morning of August 13 under the overall command of General Wesley Merritt.<sup>6</sup> No amount of rationalizing about discipline, training, or conduct of American forces will explain the rapid collapse of the Spanish Army. By 1 o'clock in the afternoon, the Spaniards had surrendered. After firing a few perfunctory shots, they gave up to the Americans with honor rather than face Aguinaldo's revolutionists, who were in no mood for the niceties of chivalry. The Americans lost five killed and 43 wounded in the capture of Manila, an indication of the light resistance.<sup>7</sup>

The 1st Nebraska, a part of the assault, suffered no casualties and fired no shots. The regiment was then assigned to garrison duty in Manila until early December, when it was shifted to the suburb of Santa Mesa east of the city. In this period the regiment received a new commander, Colonel John Stotsenburg. Intensive training now took place, as the United States forces recognized the possibility of a military confrontation with the Philippine Revolutionary Army, their one-time ally.<sup>8</sup>

After the capture of Manila, US Army forces on the islands were reorganized, and General Elwell Otis became the military governor. Two divisions were created, and the 1st Nebraska became part of the 2nd Brigade, 2nd Division commanded by General Arthur MacArthur.<sup>9</sup>

The war with Spain ended with the Treaty of Paris in



*1st Nebraska aboard US Army transport Senator . . . (Below) 1st Nebraska, Company D, at "Pleasant Valley," the Philippines.*



December, 1898. In January, 1899, hostility and bitterness between the Americans and Aguinaldo grew. The reasons for the impasse are not obscure or difficult to pinpoint. Commodore Dewey and later General Elwell S. Otis had insisted that Filipino troops not enter Manila. They had no intention of sharing the glory of Spain's collapse with the Filipinos. Furthermore, the Treaty of Paris was signed without consulting the Philippine Revolutionary Government.<sup>10</sup>

On December 21, 1898, McKinley issued his "Benevolent Assimilation" proclamation. Although a watered-down version was made available by Otis, the complete text mistakenly came to the attention of General Aguinaldo. The United States announced its intent to stay in the Philippines, to "extend sovereignty by force."<sup>11</sup>

This position was unpalatable to the Filipinos. They had been in revolt against Spain for years, and the United States Navy had arranged the transportation of Aguinaldo from Hong Kong to the Philippines in order that he could participate in the Spanish collapse. Now one foreign master was being replaced by another. Aguinaldo issued a manifesto on January 8, 1899: "My government is ready to open hostilities if the American troops attempt to take forcible possession of such portion of the territory as comes under its jurisdiction."<sup>12</sup>

General Otis' orders were to take control of the Philippines—by force if necessary. Aguinaldo's revolutionary government had pledged freedom to the Filipinos and could not agree to treaty provisions in which it had not been a party. With such opposed views hostilities were inevitable.

In the coming weeks there were dozens of incidents, as the two armed camps faced each other. Armed Filipinos, furious that they had been prohibited from entering Manila, constantly irritated the Americans, who found it increasingly difficult to hold their tempers and their fire.<sup>13</sup>

The United States position towards the Filipinos was not consistent. In May of 1898, when Aguinaldo's help was needed, he was described in the American press as "young, handsome, patriotic, and brave."<sup>14</sup> General Otis, however, testified before Congress, that Aguinaldo's Army was a band of robbers, "created for the purpose of plunder." Regarding Aguinaldo, Otis said: "In duplicity he has few equals."<sup>15</sup>

On February 4, 1899, the Nebraska Regiment was spread out



*Colonel John M. Stotsenburg in the Philippines on a native pony.*

east of Manila facing the village of San Juan del Monte. Around eight in the evening Private William Grayson and two other men of a Company D patrol advanced beyond the village of San Juan to see if Filipino soldiers were present. The Nebraskans had felt that the Filipinos were gradually moving into territory assigned to the Americans.<sup>16</sup>

At 8:45 a Filipino lieutenant and three soldiers advanced. Grayson's command to "halt" received no response. He repeated the order, to which the Filipino officer responded "halto!" The perplexed Private Grayson opened fire, killing the lieutenant and a soldier. He later explained: "I thought the best thing to do was to shoot him."<sup>17</sup>

Soon other Filipinos came up and returned the fire, and Grayson and his patrol dropped back, picked up six other men of the 1st Nebraska, and for the remainder of the night stayed behind the municipal water plant, exchanging fire with the Filipinos.<sup>18</sup>

By early morning firing was widespread, and the Filipinos tried unsuccessfully to cross the Pasig River to flank the Americans. General Arthur MacArthur, without investigating the incident, called for an all-out advance, and units of the

Nebraska, Utah, and Tennessee regiments attacked. The local Filipino commander, Captain Fernando Grey, notified Aguinaldo's headquarters by telegram that he had had no intention of provoking hostilities. General Otis, asked to investigate the Grayson incident, declined, stating that "the firing, having begun, must go on to the grim end."<sup>19</sup>

The war was on, whether it is called the Philippine Insurrection, the Philippine-American War, or the War for Liberation. Two days later on February 6, the Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris, ending the Spanish-American War and making the Philippines an American Territory. Spain received \$20,000,000 upon ceding the islands.

A headline which captures the spirit of the era appeared in the American newspaper *Freedom* (Manila) on February 9, 1899: "After Months Of Weary Waiting After Everything That Could Honorably Be Done For Peace Was Done, The Match Was Lighted To The Tinder-Box And The Battle Of The War Has Resulted."

In a miscalculation of Filipino resilience and adaptability, the United States launched what it thought would be an effective show of force. In a series of battles in the next few months, the Filipino Army was defeated. Aguinaldo shifted to guerrilla warfare but was captured in March, 1901, after which he advised his followers to submit. Clashes between Filipinos and Americans continued, however, until April, 1902.

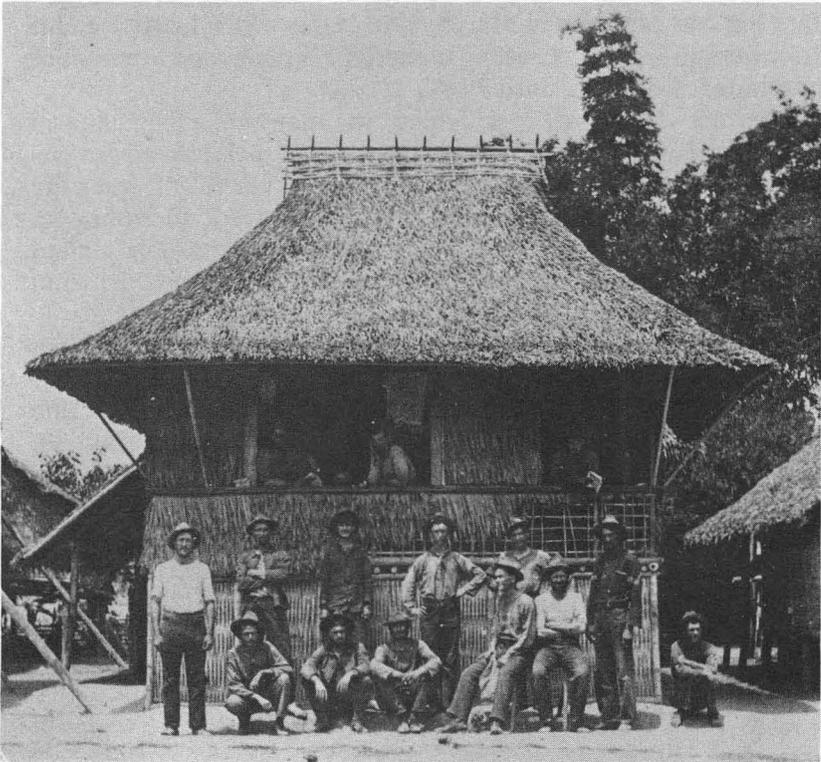
The 1st Nebraska performed in many engagements in February-June of 1899, suffering in all 64 deaths and several hundred wounded. However, as the pressures of guerrilla warfare built up, the United States removed all volunteer regiments and replaced them with regular units of the United States Army. The 1st Nebraska sailed from Manila for San Francisco on July 1, 1899.<sup>20</sup>

Private Grayson did not serve continuously at the front with his unit. He may have been in action in February and early March, but on March 31 he was invalided to the rear, suffering from exhaustion and shoulder rheumatism. Until May 30, Grayson was in the 2nd Reserve Hospital. His infirmities were diagnosed as malaria, exhaustion, stomach upset, and overexertion. He was released from the hospital on May 31 and served as a cook during June, his last month in the island.<sup>21</sup>

The 1st Nebraska sailed from Manila on July 1 and disem-



*Soldiers of 1st Nebraska, Company C, at block house number 8. . . (Below) Company C at San Fernando, the Philippines.*





*Soldier of 1st Nebraska, Company G, overcome by heat during March 25 march to Malolos, north of Manila. . . (Below) Lieutenant Sherman A. White of Lincoln leading 1st Nebraska, Company E, on a 7-mile march, made in 2 hours and 10 minutes, to catch a Manila-bound train.*



barked at San Francisco on August 1, 1899. After mustering out, the regiment entrained from Oakland on August 25 and reached Lincoln, Nebraska, on August 30 in a "blaze of glory."<sup>22</sup> Glory, though, had only a limited appeal to the men of the 1st Nebraska. The Trans-Mississippi Exposition was on in Omaha, and the soldiers were invited, expenses paid, to attend. Most declined.<sup>23</sup>

The refrain of a World War I song, "How can you keep them down on the farm, once they've seen Parree," had an antecedent in 1899. Some 40 men of the 1st Nebraska—doctors, clerks, merchants, farmers—elected to take discharges in Manila and settle in the Philippines when the regiment was preparing to sail for America in June.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously, William Grayson's tropical experiences did not endear the islands to him. Nor were his Nebraska roots deep enough to lure him back to the Midwest. On October 10, 1899, in San Francisco, Grayson married Clara Francesca Peters. In December of 1900 in San Francisco, he was admitted to citizenship. The couple had one child, Clara Marguerite, born in 1909.<sup>25</sup>

Grayson died in the San Francisco Veterans Administration Hospital on March 20, 1941, and the evidence of his glory days are indeed slim. Until he was forced by ill health to retire in 1920, he worked either as a house painter or an undertaker. Although he preferred to live in San Francisco, he spent some years in Lomita, Doyle, San Jose, and Los Angeles, California, and Winnemucca, Nevada.

His stomach ailment, which had inconvenienced him while in the Philippines, when coupled with malaria, led to his physical deterioration. By 1914 he suffered severe stomach pains, ulcers, vomiting, and abdominal discomfort. His first pension application on grounds of disability in 1914 was rejected. He was unable to convince authorities that his malaria and stomach trouble incapacitated him or that they were caused by his Philippine service. In 1922 he was finally awarded a small monthly pension, which by the time of his death was \$60.

Grayson's medical reports over the decades are testimony to the advances in the medical science. He must have felt ashamed, embarrassed, and humiliated when he first applied for a pension in 1914, and the doctors either ignored him or recorded "normal" on his charts. Yet, after 1920 after better tests and more

thorough examinations, Grayson's reasons for complaining were confirmed.

While there may have been skepticism about the authenticity of Grayson's ailments, there was unanimity among the doctors regarding Grayson's personality. He was variously described as a quiet, well-behaved patient with a sound memory, good stream of thought, and was of kind disposition.

In Grayson's repeated requests for a pension, he never referred to his unique role in the Philippines. But he did so once after his pension had been granted. In a letter endorsed by the Veterans Administration on June 6, 1934, he wrote:

1135 Masonic Ave.  
San Francisco, Calif.

Veterans Administration: I fired the First Shot that opened the Philippine Insurrection, Feb. 4, 1899.

William W. Grayson

By this time Grayson had been a pensioner for 12 years and was not begging the attention of authorities. Neither is there anything to indicate if the letter was in response to an information request from the Veterans Administration. It could be that Grayson, who had never made a fuss about his fame, merely wanted to make his unique role in 1899 a part of the Army record.

## NOTES

1. William Grayson File, Military Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
2. J. R. Johnson, "The Saga of the First Nebraska in the Philippines," *Nebraska History*, 30 (June, 1949), 143-144.
3. Grayson File, National Archives.
4. William F. Strobridge, editor, "Now Here I am in the Army. . . in the Spanish-US American War," *Nebraska History*, 53 (Fall, 1972), 330-338.
5. *Freedom* (Manila), May 2, 1899, contains a list of regiments that left San Francisco on June 15.
6. General Merritt, a Civil War cavalryman, commanded the 5th Cavalry Regiment, which passed through Ft. Robinson, Nebraska, in 1876 and played a part in the skirmish with Yellow Hand on Warbonnet Creek.
7. Johnson, "The Saga of the First Nebraska. . .," *Nebraska History*, 143-144.
8. *Ibid.*, 151-152. J. R. Johnson, "Colonel John Miller Stotsenburg: A Man of Valor," *Nebraska History*, 50 (Winter, 1969), 339-357. Commanding officer Colonel John P. Bratt of Bennet, Nebraska, was replaced by John F. Stotsenburg, a native of Indiana, who shaped the 1st Nebraska into a fighting force. He was killed in action on April 23, 1899, near Malolos in the Philippines. Given a hero's funeral in Lincoln, he was buried in Arlington Cemetery, where graveside services were attended by President McKinley and civilian and military figures. The Nebraska State Historical Society now has in its collections badges and pendants with photos of Stotsenburg worn by members

of the First Nebraska at a September 14, 1899, reception shortly after their homecoming.

9. Telegrams and letters regarding MacArthur are scattered throughout *Correspondence Relating to the War with Spain* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902). The father of General Douglas MacArthur of World War II fame, Arthur MacArthur commanded Company K of the 13th US Infantry on the Sioux expedition which established Camp Robinson (later fort), Nebraska, in March, 1874. He signed the first post return in April, 1874, and commanded the post from April 13 to May 20, 1874.

10. Theodoro A. Agoncillo and Milagros C. Guerrero, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: R. P. Garcia Publisher, 1975), 245-247.

11. *Ibid.*, 246-250.

12. Theodore M. Kalaw, *The Philippine Revolution* (Kawilihan: Vargas Filipiniana Foundation, 1969), 161-167 prints manifesto.

13. Annual Report, War Department, 1899, quoted in Johnson, *Nebraska History*, 152.

14. *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1898

15. *Ibid.*, March 20, 1902, verbatim transcription of hearings.

16. The event did not take place at the San Juan Bridge, as most accounts state. Grayson later re-enacted the incident for photographers; General Harrison Gray Otis Photo Album, Archives, Natural History Museum, Los Angeles.

17. The best published account is in *Freedom* (Manila), February 16, 1899. The quotation is from testimony in Agoncillo and Guerrero, *History of the Filipino People*, 245-250.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Captain Grey telegram, Kalaw, *Philippine Revolution*, 163-167; Otis quotation from Agoncillo and Guerrero, *History of the Filipino People*, 245-250.

20. Johnson, "The Saga of the First Nebraska. . .," *Nebraska History*, 160-161.

21. Grayson's military service dossier contains mostly items relating to his ills in the Philippines; Military Records, National Archives, Washington, DC.

22. Johnson, "The Saga of the First Nebraska. . .," *Nebraska History*, 161.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Freedom* (Manila), June 25, 1899.

25. Most of the information concerning Grayson's career in California has been gathered from documents in his pension application file: No. 2-400-153, Veterans Administration Regional Office, Los Angeles, California.