

**GENERAL WILLIAM SHAFTER: CAREER VOLUNTEER**

By

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William Rufus Shafter was born in Galesburg, Michigan, on October 16, 1835. His three year teaching career ended with his enlistment in the

7th Michigan Infantry in August 1861, in which he was commissioned a First Lieutenant. On October 21, 1861, he participated in the battle at Ball's Bluff, Virginia, later serving in the Peninsula Campaign of 1862. During that campaign his gallantry at Fair Oaks on May 31, 1862, led to a Medal of Honor and his delayed brevet to Colonel in 1867. He was transferred to the 19th Michigan Infantry with the grade of major in September 1862. While fighting at Thompson's Station, Tennessee, on March 9, 1863, he was taken prisoner of war. He was exchanged in May and promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in June. In April 1864, he was appointed Colonel of the (Colored) 17th Infantry. He led the 17th into action at Nashville on December 15-16, 1864. He was breveted Brigadier General of Volunteers in March 1865.

After the war he chose a military career and was assigned to western posts for about thirty years. By 1897, he had risen to the grade of Brigadier General and was in command of the



Department of California.

At the start of the Spanish-American War, Shafter did not cut a likely figure for command. At 63 years of age, over three hundred pounds and suffering from gout, he was not an officer who would be predicted to perform well in the tropics. People described him as monstrously fat, a floating tent, a balloon, a lumbering bear and perhaps the most corpulent man in the army. Newsmen would write that he weighed a sixth of a ton and draw attention to his lack of a West Point education. Cartoonists liked to caricature his obesity. Despite these drawbacks, he was appointed Major General of Volunteers in May, 1898, and began the organization of the expeditionary force for Cuba in Tampa. He sailed from Tampa with the 15,000 man V Corps on June 14. Landings began at Daiquiri, 16 miles east of Santiago, on the southeast coast of Cuba on June 22. The original plan, formulated by the Navy, was that the force would help the Navy breach the entrance to the harbor to Santiago Bay and, thereby, aid in the destruction of the Spanish fleet under Admiral Cervera. The destruction of this of this fleet may have freed the US fleet to either reinforce Commodore Dewey at Manila or attack the coast of Spain. After viewing the stone bastions guarding the harbor from the cliffs, Shafter preferred a land attack on the city itself, rather than an assault on the harbor.

Moving from Daiquiri, the troops passed through Siboney and on to Las Guasimas, fighting Spanish troops which had adopted the guerrilla tactics of the Cuban insurgents. After a week of unloading supplies and reinforcements, Shafter was ready to assault Santiago by going over the San Juan Heights. At crucial times during the actions, Shafter's strength was sapped by lightheadedness due to fever, a gouty foot wrapped in burlap and exhaustion from the trip to the front. The assaults on the Heights included the epic charge of the Rough Riders on San Juan (actually Kettle) Hill on July 1. The



casualties on the Heights were high, 200 dead and 1,200 wounded. The risk of further, heavy losses increased friction between the Navy, hoping for help in attacking the fleet and Shafter, who felt that the Navy should be able to take the Spanish fleet without the need of an assault on the forts by the Army. This source of friction was eliminated on July 3 when the Spanish fleet left Santiago Harbor and was destroyed by the US fleet. After destruction of the Spanish fleet, Shafter delayed the scheduled shelling of Santiago in order to permit peace negotiations. Upon learning that yellow fever had been diagnosed among the army, Shafter urged acceptance the Spanish proposal for the surrender of the city, with the army to be evacuated to the north. President McKinley disapproved these terms and insisted on unconditional surrender. Naval and Army bombardment led to a compromise settlement in which the Spanish army surrendered with the agreement that those prisoners who wished repatriation to Spain would receive it at the expense of the US government. This effectively brought an end to the resistance in Cuba.

Poor public relations would plague Shafter, just as they would later commanders. After getting off to a bad start in Tampa, Shafter further incurred the wrath of the press by refusing permission for reporters to land with the troops at Daiquiri. Shafter was little respected by his men. One soldier in the 16th Infantry said: "*General Shafter is a fool and I believe should be shot.*" In a letter to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge on July 5, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt expressed the opinion that: "*Not since the campaign of Crassus against the Parthians has there been so criminally incompetent a General as Shafter...Shafter never came within three miles of the line, and never has come; the confusion is incredible.*"

With his campaign a success but his personal performance in question, Shafter retired from the Army in October 1899, but retained his volunteer commission until June, and was raised to Major General on the retired list in July 1899. He lived on a ranch near Bakersfield, California where he died on November 12, 1906.