
VOICES OF THE PAST

THE MEMOIR OF JOHN D. LAWALL

PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION

1899

The following excerpts are from the memoir of John D. LaWall, a Soldier who served with the U.S. Volunteer Infantry during the Philippine Insurrection. LaWall's type written memoirs are included with his other papers in the Spanish American War survey collection at the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA.

The transcriptions below are taken from the copies in the USAHEC collection, and are presented unedited and as unchanged as possible. As with all transcripts there is the possibility of error.

On the first night in the islands I was put in charge of an outpost. These outposts were guards, or sentries, strung out at intervals around the camp to prevent surprises from the enemy. They were made up of either three men and a corporal, or six men and two non-commissioned officers, and were divided into three reliefs giving the men two hours on post and four off when times were comparatively quiet; but when an attack was expected, orders were given for everyone to keep awake, and this was very severe duty when it was necessary to go on guard every other night. The sentries on outposts did not patrol or walk post, as it is called, but sat where they could see as much as possible and be seen as little as possible.

One of my men became nervous at the crackling and splashing caused by the harmless reptiles in the grass and under growth, and fired three shots at intervals, creating a false alarm in camp and causing our company to fall out under arms in the dead of night. As a consequence we were not popular back in camp next morning.

On a Sunday when we had been in the Islands about a month, four of us were doing guard duty inside some old abandoned trenches. During the afternoon, the officer of the day visited us, and the conversation he had with me was something like this.

“Corporal, General hall has sent us instruction to be prepared for an attack tonight. If it comes, it will fall either upon your outpost or upon the one across the river. Be on the lookout.”

“Very good, Lieutenant; we will do our best.”

It was a dreary spot and a melancholy day. From a sky long overcast the rain fell with a monotonous noise or an irritating dripping, causing the dilapidated headstone and the rude wooden cross on a Spaniard's grave just outside the trenches to look still more grim and weather-beaten.

With the advent of the Americans, native stores sprang up at every turn. Let me describe one and its “modus operandi.” It is a bamboo shack with a wide opening in the front. Over this opening, held up by a bamboo pole, is a woven door hung by rattan hinges. On a bench slightly below the still of the window are displayed dried fish, tomatoes, Chinese oranges, and perhaps radishes and bananas. Inside the structure are cans of guava jelly, sardines, handkerchiefs, betel nuts, coconut oil, tobacco, and other articles peculiar to the Filipino stores. In the window sits, as the case may be, either a withered old crone or a pretty young senorita.

Presently an American saunters up, and giving the customary salutation, perhaps “Magandang arow” for “Good morning,” inquires of the store-keeper if she “sabe jawbone” – a pidgin Spanish manner of asking for credit. Should he receive a paper and pencil by way of an affirmative answer, he will, after haggling for some time over the price, finally makes his purchase at two or three times its value, and write it down on the “papel” to be paid next pay-day.

Once on the south line the “gugus”, as the soldiers styled the insurgents, attacked a town where the Americans owed several hundred dollars “jawbone.” Whenever their firing seemed inclined to die down their leaders would incite them to renewed efforts by appeals to their patriotism? Oh, no! They would shout at the top of their voices: “American no pay jawbone!” and they would bang away harder than ever.

One of the most arduous duties of a soldier in the Philippines was marching or as he called it, “hiking.” He looked forward to a “hike” with the same feeling of wild delight as “Tommie” does toward a prospective dose of castor oil, something so unpleasant that the sooner it is over with, the better for all concerned. There were various reasons which called for the necessity of a “hike.” Perhaps it was merely to cover the distance from one station to another, or it might be to occupy a position or attack a town. Unless it was to change from one base to another, when he had to carry a heavy blanket-roll, the private carried no more than his poncho, belt, full or ammunition, haversack, canteen and rifle. If his rations were uncooked, halts were called near a stream of water at meal-time; and generally two or more soldiers clubbed together for the purpose of cooking their meals.. If two did this, both gathered sticks for the fire, then one cooked bacon while the other boiled the coffee. On these hikes the men marched in single file, or in columns or two, according to the nature of the road or trail. Not attempt was made to keep step; and the men were allowed to carry their rifles any way they pleased provided the barrels were not turned downwards.

It was the heat that made these marches such a hardship. The perspiration beaded through their khaki uniforms, giving them the appearance of having just been fished out of a brook. Sometimes this continual perspiring caused a man to double up like a jack-knife and foam at the mouth with cramps and spasms. At the time of setting out, the soldiers were as a rule full of animal spirits, voicing camp ditties, cracking jokes and chaffing one

another all along the line. Toward the end a good many of them felt snappy and short-tempered, and as with shaky knees and drooping heads they plodded onward, many a covetous look was bestowed upon the commanding officer's steed as he went prancing by.

Whenever a village was approached the natives came forward and offered lukewarm water in coconut shells. They were all very profuse in their assertions of good will, smiling all sorts of welcome, but who were at heart Insurrectos and who bona-fide partisans of the American Invasion it was hard to say. It was simply a case of "Jack-in-the-box." Enter American troops, white blouses, all "Amigos" and smiles; exit Americans, blue print trousers, sullen looks and "Viva Aguinaldo."

Of course the halt in a hike made an elegant study for an artist: soldiers grouped around in picturesque attitudes. One lying on his back smoking; another tightening up a "bunkys" canteen strap; in the midst of a small crowd a private (in army parlance) "shooting off his mouth"; a tall sergeant talking to the captain digging his sword into the loose sand. At the side of the road, in the foreground, a nipa shack with several dusky damsels dipping out water for the tired soldiers. A blue sky, bamboo groves, and palm trees here and there complete the picture.

One of the hardest hikes I ever took part in was from Montalban to San Bartolome. We received information that the "gugus" were strongly entrenched there, so about one o'clock in the morning of the 14th day of February, 1900, four companies of us left Montalban for that place. It is twelve miles from Montalban to Novaliches, where we halted for breakfast, and Barrio Bartolome is about three miles farther on. When within two miles of our destination the command "As skirmishers, double time" was given. As we were in single file it was necessary for the rear of the line to describe an immense arc while the advance guard, instead of slowing down, moved ahead at full speed, and opened fire. It was not surprising that when we of the rear guard arrived on the left of the line in front of a stone church, where the insurgents were supposed to be located, we were scarcely able to move from exhaustion. As we lay there behind the rice paddies waiting for the command to charge upon the church, a Filipion band struck up.

"Aha!" we thought, "They are playing out of defiance to us. We'll show them!"

What was our surprise and chagrin when a procession of natives in holiday attire, headed by a priest came out toward us. They had been celebrating a wedding in the church where we supposed the wily Insurrectos were entrenched, while the latter were undoubtedly "Over the Hills and Far Away." There was nothing for us to do but acknowledge ourselves out-smarted and march back to camp where we arrived at eight in the evening, tired, dirty, hungry, and footsore, having covered a distance of over thirty miles.