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# VOICES OF THE PAST

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THE MEMOIR OF JOHN D. LAWALL

PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION

1899

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*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.*

Early in June, 1900, Company "I" received orders to move to Novoliches for the purpose of garrisoning that place, which had never before been occupied by our troops. After a hard march of fourteen miles, in the tropical sun loaded down with a blanket roll containing our clothing and personal effects, besides our regular equipment, we reached Novaliches in the forenoon of June 8<sup>th</sup>.

The story of my Company's hardships at this place forms one of the blackest pages in the history of the 27<sup>th</sup>. Cursed with some of the vilest company officers who ever disgraced a regiment, forced to eat food unfit for a dog and to work continually in the boiling sun, our eight months' stay in this pest-hole was marked by a drear record of sickness and suffering.

Before leaving Montalban we turned in our canvas cots, with the promise that we would be issued new ones, but none ever came, so just as the rainy season was starting in, we moved into tumble-down shacks and slept on the uneven floors with the rain pouring sown upon us through the leaky roofs. Besides, we found the mosquitoes so bad that until we became accustomed to them, sleep was impossible. Many a time I have seen our poor lads get up in the middle of the night and kindle mudges<sup>i</sup> under their shacks in the endeavor to smoke out these insects.

We were but a short distance from Manila, twelve miles, and could have had fresh beef every day for the asking, but either our officers did not care or were unwilling to bother their heads about it. Our commissary officer drew his entire meat ration for five months in bacon, and such bacon it was! Before cooking it, it was necessary to scrape off the green mold. For fifty days we had no fresh meat nor soft bread, but lived on green bacon, hardtack, dried-apple sauce, half-cooked and unsweetened, rice boiled and seasoned with salt, and black coffee. We were served half-rotten bacon in fried, boiled, stewed and soup form, and our Chinese cooks used to make up a delectable preparation which I shall call "gravy" for want of a better name. It consisted of bacon grease, a few canned tomatoes, flour and water mixed together, and there were always a number of charred particles floating in it where it had been burned.

On the diet we were forced to cut all the bamboo for the new barracks which were in the first stages of construction, and reveille was sounded at five o'clock every morning. One by one the men began to get sick and were invalided home to the States; and of the number who remained it was an unusual sight to see half a dozen every day shaking with the chills or burning down with fever.

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On the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, Lieut. Brewer, our commissary and officer quarter master, left Novaliches with an orderly for Manila. He had with him on thousand pesos, the surplus remaining after paying the natives for their work on the barracks. These two men were never seen again. The Philipinos who live along the manila road say that they heard firing, that the private put up a hard fight but was killed outright, that the lieutenant was taken alive, hacked by bolos, buried alive up to his neck for three days, then dug up and killed. He was the grandson of Justice Brewer of the Supreme Court and probably received his commission through a "pull." It was thought at the time that his death was instigated by an ex-insurgent captain whom he had kicked in the course of a quarrel which they had. This insurgent was one of ten prisoners whom I helped guard into Manila and who had recently been released from Bilibid prison.

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On the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> of August an incident occurred at San Mateo which illustrates the insurgent's mode of warfare. In the pitchy darkness fifty of them completely surrounded an outpost about a mile from camp. By throwing stones they located the sentry, and before the rest of the guard could be alarmed a volley from fifty rifles was poured into the guard tent killing on and wounding another of its sleeping occupants. Before a relief force could arrive to punish their cowardly work, the insurgents were miles away.

As to the inconveniences we suffered during the rainy season, let me quote a passage from my diary.

"On the afternoon of September 7<sup>th</sup> the Tuliajan River was passable at the ford opposite our barracks. At three in the afternoon it was but waist deep. From 3:00 P.M. September 7<sup>th</sup> to 2:00 A.M. September 8<sup>th</sup> the water rose about twenty-five feet, flooding our kitchen and our bakery, driving us from our barracks and carrying away many articles including subsistence stores. For three hours we stood in the pouring rain, under a mango tree, waiting for the water to go down. At five in the morning we were able to return to our barracks, the flood having subsided."

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On the night of September 17, 1900, the First Sergeant had made his round as usual, the lights had been put out at 8:30 or 9:00 o'clock, and all of us soon fell asleep. One by one the hours slipped away. Over there a lad from the South in his dreams reveled once more in "co'n pone" and bacon, watermelons and sweet potatoes. Many doubtless dreamed of home that night but one dreamed who never dreamed again. At three o'clock the Chinese head

cook stretched himself, looked at his Spanish watch and closed his eyes for another hour. Four o'clock, he had been awakened fifteen minutes before by the guard, he dressed and struck a match to kindle a fire for "mess."

That match was a spark to a magazine. Pandemonium was let loose. Straight at it came a volley from five hundred guns which rent the "nipa" walls of our barracks with a crash like the tearing of a giant strip of paper. It afforded a rude awakening to our peaceful slumbers - This screaming and singing of Mousers and Remington's mingled with the fiendish yells of the Insurrectos. Many of us with difficulty restrained a desire to hug the floor and let the company, the barracks and everything else take care of itself. The sharp commands of our officers, however, recalled us to ourselves; and tumbling out of our barracks, we lined up per instruction along the bank of the river on which our quarters were located.

And now began a duel - a duel between sixty men and five hundred - a duel between Americans and Filipinos, between discipline and lack of it, between civilization and semi-barbarism, between law and order and brigandage.

The contest was a short one.

"Load! Aim! Fire! Repeated our officers, and with obedient precision we sent volley after volley into the bamboo thicket across the river. Slowly they retreated, their occasional shots finally dying away in the distance as dawn began to let light upon the scene. Men joked and laughed over the easy victory - many had joked and profaned during the skirmish. But what was that bloody form yonder, and who was groaning yonder in that ditch? Ah! Then we saw illustrated on an infinitely small scale the "price of war."

The first was the dreamer who had been dreaming of visiting in far-off Sweden those parents whom he had not seen for years. The other was a southern boy who would have to use one arm thenceforth instead of two .

After mess, a box was made of bacon crates, lined with flour sacks, and in it, dressed in his best uniform, Isadore Hanson was laid. This same box was loaded on a mule wagon, on it the wounded man was assisted to mount, and under armed escort the two rode to Manila, one to Paco Cemetery, the other to the head of the dead man, remained in the grass to mark the spot where he had fallen.

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I wrote the foregoing account of my experiences in the Philippines nearly twenty-nine years ago, as I write these lines. I wrote it to use on the lecture platform, and I did have some success, but I made little money for myself. I did raise considerable money for other- once as a benefit for a poor widow and her destitute children. This was while I was a student at Wellsberg where I returned to finish my high school course. I was somewhat dubious as to whether the widow or I needed the fifty dollars worse! Later, while acting as principal of schools, I secured appropriate slides from the Education Department at Albany,

and delivered my little talk for the benefit of various school projects. It was always well received.

I am not so sure today as I was thirty years ago of the justice of our cause in the Philippines. Like many another I wonder whether any nation or people is ever justified in imposing its yoke under the guise of a "superior civilization" upon another nation of people. I am inclined to believe that every people has an inalienable right to self-government, how ever poor and inefficient. While we were in the Philippines, the power and might of the British Empire was being used to crush the life of the Boer Republics in South Africa. We thrilled at the amazing newspaper accounts of how these little nations of less than a quarter of a million souls hurled back the British legion in engagement after engagement. Few of us say anything inconsistent in our own position as subjugators of the Filipinos, although there was certainly some analogy between the Dutch Republics seeking to maintain their independence and the Filipinos endeavoring to establish their right to self-government.

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From the physical and moral effects of those two years in the army I never recovered. The rank and file of the men who answered Secretary Root's call for volunteers to put down the Philippine Insurrection were of a very low type. To a boy of sixteen who had high ideals and ambitions, they seemed to have no ideals and no ambitions beyond gratifying their animal appetites. Pay-day meant an orgy of drunkenness, gambling, and licentiousness, I have seen the time when perhaps fully fifty per cent of the company was suffering from some form of venereal disease. The prophylactic measures later employed with the soldiers during the World War were entirely lacking. The native Filipino women, contrary to common belief in this country, averaged fully as high, morally, as the American women, but there were plenty to be found, of course, to fall for the soldiers, while an occasional trip to Manila offered opportunities to those of the soldiers who were not lucky in making local alliances. As for me, I kept my vow and let them alone. However, the constant flow of vulgar, obscene songs and Rabelaisian small talk could not fail to influence a lad of sixteen.

Physically, I was in no shape to stand the rigors of a soldier's life in active campaign. As Kipling says, "All the delights of the season tickled me one by one." I had recurrent chills and fever, I had an epidemic of boils, I had "Dobie itch" and "tropical ulcers" on my feet and legs. Finally I caught cold. I grew worse on the long cold return journey to San Francisco, and when I reached home, many of my friends thought I was dying of quick consumption. Our family doctor dosed me with cod-liver oil and whiskey. I spent the late spring and summer of 1901 with my mother, recuperating and working on my lecture, "Sixteen Months in the Philippines."

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<sup>i</sup> Probably a slang term for a smudge pot, a oil-burning device used by Soldiers to produce smoke, usually for a smokescreen.