

Faith and the Flag:
United States Military Chaplains During the Spanish-American War

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The Spanish-American War, though brief in nature, sparked the resurgence of the United States Chaplain Corps from lean years after the American Civil War. In all conflicts since the American Revolution, clergymen from a plethora of denominations guided soldiers in matters of faith. Even George Washington commented on the vital role chaplains play, “to animate the soldiery and impress them with a knowledge of the important rights we are contending for... holding forth the necessity of courage and bravery, and at the same time of perfect obedience and subordination to those in command.”¹ By the 1890s, chaplain roles were multifaceted, as these men served as schoolmasters, prison wardens, coroners, and pastors at the installations (or ships) they called home.² However, that would all change with the explosion of the *USS Maine* and the advent of the Spanish-American War in early 1898. For the first time, chaplains would go into combat as official noncombatants, making the deployed chaplains trailblazers in many regards.³ The campaign would last only four months, catapulting many chaplains to prominence, including William T. Anderson, Henry Brown, John P. Chidwick, and Harry W. Jones. Like a hinge, the war with Spain would swing the Chaplain Corps into a new era, one that would look markedly different than its past.

From the beginning of the war, chaplains distinguished themselves through humility and tireless service. One individual, Father John P. Chidwick, was no stranger to hard work in

¹ George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., December 15, 1775, in *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. University of Virginia Administrative Board, vol. 2, *16 September 1775–31 December 1775* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008), 555.

² Earl F. Stover, *Up from Handymen: the United States Army Chaplaincy, 1865 – 1920*, (Waipu: Barakaldo Books, 2021), 53.

³ Alan K. Lamm, *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue, 1884 – 1901: The Buffalo Soldier Chaplains*, (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 151.

difficult circumstances. A Catholic priest, he was one of the first in his denomination to be appointed to a chaplain position in the United States Navy. By 1898, he was stationed aboard the *USS Maine*, a formidable battlecruiser tasked with surveilling Spanish activities in Cuba, as war clouds loomed in the distance.⁴ At its full strength, the *Maine* boasted four ten-inch guns, six six-inch guns, and a complement of 800 men, according to the February 16, 1898, edition of the *New York Times*.⁵ The fateful day, February 15, had begun peacefully, but that evening, the Cuban sky was set alight as an apparent explosion ripped through the *Maine*'s hull. Commander Charles Sigsbee, the *Maine*'s captain, recorded the scene:

To me, in my position (well aft and within the superstructure), [the explosion] was a bursting, rending, and crashing sound...largely metallic in character...There was a trembling and lurching of the vessel, a list to port, and a movement of subsidence. The electric lights...in the cabin...went out. Then there was intense blackness and smoke. The situation could not be mistaken: the *Maine* was blown up and sinking.⁶

As the *Maine* entered her death throes, Chidwick rose from his bed and ran to the cries of the wounded: "help me, save me!"⁷ "On that dread night in 1898 when the *Maine* was destroyed, Chaplain Chidwick was everywhere present. He had a word of cheer to the injured which soothed their pain. Without thought of himself he helped the helpless and he ministered to the

⁴ Clifford M. Drury, *The History of the Chaplain Corps, United States Navy*, vol. 1, 1778-1939, (Washington, DC: United States Government, 1948), 131-132.

⁵ "The *Maine* Blown Up: Terrible Explosion on Board the United States Battleship in Havana Harbor. Many Persons Killed and Wounded. All The Boats of the Spanish Cruiser *Alfonso XII*. Assisting In the Work of Relief. None of the Wounded Men Able To Give Any Explanation of the Cause of the Disaster," *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1898, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/maine-blown-up/docview/95594601/se-2>.

⁶ Charles D. Sigsbee, "*The 'Maine': An Account of Her Destruction in Havana Harbor*," (New York: The Century Company, 1899), 63-64.

⁷ *Historical Papers and Addresses to the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of New Jersey*, 1900, (Brooklyn: Collins & Day, 1900).

dying,” said Cadet Wat Culverius, a future US admiral.⁸ Indeed, Chidwick’s efforts continued in the days following the *Maine*’s destruction. Not only did he preach the funeral service for the nearly 300 American servicemen lost, but he also assisted with recovery and burial. One reporter noted the chaplain’s efforts: “The self-sacrifice of Chaplain Chidwick deserves all praise...Since the disaster he has not rested a moment. When he is not examining bodies and helping recover others, he is consoling the wounded at the hospital.”⁹ This selfless determination won him the respect of the nation. Chidwick toured the country, lecturing, preaching, and raising public support for the American military. Personally, Chidwick opposed American imperialism, saying “God forbid that imperialism should ever find a foothold in this country...[and] forfeit a rule of our government!”¹⁰ However, the game was afoot, and American chaplains would soon find themselves caring for soldiers squaring off against Spanish forces.

More than two months into the war, Rev. Henry Brown received a letter from his friend, Col. Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, former New York politician and Assistant Navy Secretary, had volunteered as an officer in the First United States Volunteer Cavalry, and he wanted Brown to join him as regiment chaplain. Brown called the rough-and-tumble town of Prescott (in Arizona Territory) home, so he jumped at the chance to join the First Cavalry, or “Rough

⁸ “Catholic Officers in the Army and the Navy: Rev. John P. Chidwick, U. S. N., Chaplain Battleship *Maine*,” *The Catholic World, A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science*, 68, 407 (1899): 713, <https://www.proquest.com/pqlhistory/docview/125574291/89BA8C07F94E50PQ/1?accountid=12085&sourcetype=Magazines>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “The Story of the *Maine*: Father Chidwick, The Chaplain, Addresses A Brilliant Audience In Washington,” *The Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 24, 1899, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/536079427/4B233B1E9957420CPQ/15?accountid=12085&sourcetype=Newspapers>.

Riders.”¹¹ By early June, the regiment had made their way to Tampa, primed and ready for the short trip over to Cuba. In his book *Rough Riders*, Roosevelt succinctly recorded Brown’s duties: “Chaplain Brown, of Arizona, held service, as he did almost every Sunday during the campaign.”¹² Photo records exist of hundreds of soldiers gathered around Brown as he conducted services, both regular and funerary, in Cuba. However, Chaplain Brown distinguished himself as the “Rough Riders” fought back against the Spanish. He discussed his special duties during an interview: “On July 1 and 2 before Santiago, there were no rations. Luckily some of the men ‘found’ some mules, and the Colonel and other officers subscribed a fund, and sent me back to buy what I could.”¹³ Brown often did this, so often that Roosevelt commented on it: “If I did not go myself, I sent...some man who would somehow get what we wanted. Chaplain Brown developed great capacity in this line.”¹⁴ This action often occurred under heavy fire from the enemy, so it was often miraculous that Brown escaped unscathed. Thus, Brown was fondly remembered by both Col. Roosevelt and his men as a chaplain willing to “go to bat” for the regiment. When visiting churches in his later years, he would often be invited to preach, once congregants discovered his identity, as an 1898 article shows.¹⁵ Through Las Guasimas to San Juan Hill, Chaplain Brown steadied the spirits of his men, facilitating a “ministry of presence” still present in the modern Chaplain Corps.

¹¹ "Rough Riders Gentleman: The Rev. H.W. Brown, In Grace Church, Warmly Praises the Regiment of Which He is Chaplain," *New York Times*, Aug. 22, 1898, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/rough-riders-gentlemen/docview/95609051/se-2>.

¹² Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 1899, (Reprint, Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 32.

¹³ “Rough Riders Gentleman.”

¹⁴ Roosevelt, *Rough Riders*, 32.

¹⁵ “Rough Riders Gentleman.”

However, chaplains of all creeds and colors – not just white – assisted in the war efforts. Two of the famous “Buffalo Soldier” chaplains, William T. Anderson and Allen Allensworth, were involved in various ways. When war broke out, Allensworth was already a well-known chaplain, serving with the “Buffalo Soldiers” in western campaigns against Native American tribes.¹⁶ Stationed in Utah at the time, he broke the news to the 24th Infantry – an African American unit: “Soldiers and comrades: fate has turned the war dogs loose and you have been called to the front to avenge an insult to our country...You have the opportunity to answer favorably the question, ‘Will the Negro fight?’ Therefore, I say, ‘Quit yourselves like men and fight.’”¹⁷ However, Allensworth did not follow his men to the fight. His orders from Lt. Col. Liscum on May 20, 1898, were as follows: “...Chaplain Allensworth, 24th Infantry, will proceed without delay to Louisville, KY, for the purpose of assisting in recruiting for the regiment.”¹⁸ Therefore, Allensworth shipped out to Kentucky and drummed up support. He used public parades and connections with railroad managers and pastors to travel across Kentucky, searching for “young, unmarried, Negro men.” At the end of his recruiting campaign, a local African newspaper reported that “by lectures and by private conversation, he has aroused a spirit of patriotism and secured 350 [actually 465] men for his regiment.”¹⁹ Though Allensworth would not see combat in Cuba, his efforts in recruiting would lead to American victories at El Caney, San Juan Hill, and other places where the 24th Infantry fought. While Anderson recruited, Chap. William T. Anderson, a former slave, was making history. Anderson was known as the best-

¹⁶ Lamm, *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue*, 170.

¹⁷ Charles Alexander, *Battles and Victories of Allen Sllensworth, A.M., PhD, Lieutenant-Colonel, Retired, U.S. Army*, 1914, (Reprint, San Francisco: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2014), 195.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

educated “Buffalo Soldier” chaplain, possessing doctorates in both divinity and medicine.²⁰ Proponents of his ascension to the chaplaincy included Booker T. Washington, who remarked, “Rev. W.T. Anderson, of Cleveland, Ohio, [is] a Christian minister of the highest type of character and reliability, and I cheerfully recommend him...to represent our race as a chaplain in the United States Army.”²¹ When Anderson’s unit deployed in April, he was originally left behind in command of Fort Assiniboine, due to a shortage of officers. Lamm records that “for the first time in history, an African American commanded a US military post,” giving Anderson a lasting claim to fame. The chaplain arrived in Cuba in late July, becoming the only black chaplain to serve in Cuba.²² Though hostilities had mostly blown over, disease ran rampant in the 10th Cavalry’s camp, where Anderson was stationed. Anderson opined about the causes of the sickness: “sleeping on the ground, eating native fruits and over-eating. Sickness coupled with the fact that it rained every day made the soldier’s lot a ‘hard’ one.”²³ Several contemporary sources record that Anderson utilized his medical training to save the lives of over a dozen men suffering from yellow fever, malaria, and dysentery.²⁴ By the close of the war, Anderson also conducted recruiting for garrisons tasked with maintaining order in Cuba. Therefore, both African American chaplains became heroes to local black communities and blazed the trail for equality of opportunity within the United States Chaplain Corps.

²⁰ Frank R. Levstick, “William T. Anderson: Army Officer, Doctor, Minister, and Writer,” *Negro History Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (1977): 662–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44176289>.

²¹ Lamm, *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue*, 150.

²² *Ibid.*, 151-152

²³ Levstick, “William T. Anderson.”

²⁴ Lamm, *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue*, 153-154.

Overall, chaplains serving in the Spanish-American War remained superficially unscathed from the horrors of combat. However, one chaplain gained the distinction of being the only “man of God” wounded during the campaign. At the time of this incident, Chaplain Harry Jones, a Baptist from New England, served as chaplain aboard the United States battleship *Texas*.²⁵ Jones held services weekly aboard ship, but he also served as support for the wounded during engagements with Spanish ships and batteries across Cuba. The chaplain recorded his injuries, which occurred during an exchange with a Spanish shore battery:

Just as I reached there, I noticed some smoke hovering over the western battery...I was not kept long in doubt, for just then I heard it coming toward us...It seemed to explode right over me...causing me to jump, and doubling me completely up. There were some men standing near me, and one of them said: "Well, Chaplain, that got your wind, didn't it, sir?" I was in the act of answering when blood poured from my mouth, and inside of twenty minutes I had six hemorrhages.²⁶

Though Jones' wounds appeared quite serious, he stayed on board the *Texas*, becoming a witness to the decisive Battle of Santiago de Cuba, which occurred the day after (July 3, 1898).²⁷ At 9:40 AM, “a great puff of smoke came from the forward eleven-inch gun of the *Infanta Maria Teresa*, the shell dropping short, but right in line with us. I remembered what Captain Philip often [said], that whichever side opened fire on the Sabbath was always defeated, so I felt rejoiced that the enemy had fired the first shot...The battle was raging in deadly earnest.”²⁸ However, as quickly as combat began, it ceased after a few of hours of fighting, with the destruction of the Spanish

²⁵ Drury, *The Chaplain Corps, US Navy*, 132.

²⁶ Harry W. Jones, *A Chaplain's Experience Ashore and Afloat: The Texas Under Fire*, (New York,: A.G. Sherwood & Co., 1901), 231-232.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁸ Harry W. Jones, *Battle of Santiago: The Annihilation of Cervera's Fleet*, (New York: Isaac Goldmann Co., 1913), 19-20.

fleet complete, and the war itself practically over. Just in time for the American independence celebration the next day, Jones shipped out to recuperate, his place in American history secure.²⁹ He would record the events of his deployment at length in two books, becoming one of the most prolific writers among the Chaplain Corps.³⁰

As the Spanish-American War ended, the chaplains deployed to their fighting made their way home, where they recounted their experiences on speaking tours and in book writing. Between assignments, Chaplains Brown and Chidwick lectured extensively, and others spoke about their war experiences as addendums to Sunday morning sermons. Additionally, Chaplain Chidwick compiled his recollections of service into *Remember The Maine! An Historical Narrative of the Battleship Maine*, assisted by Harry T. Cook. Works by other chaplains, including Chaplain Roswell R. Hoes' sermon, "God's Hand At Santiago," represented sermon topics that were typical for the context of the Spanish-American War.³¹ William T. Anderson, wearied from bouts with malaria and other tropical diseases, nevertheless assisted in editing *Under Fire With the Tenth U.S. Cavalry*, a detailed work designed to educate the public about the heroism of black soldiers.³² Allen Allensworth, on the other hand, did no major writing himself, but Charles Alexander wrote his biography, *Battles and Victories of Allen Allensworth*, in 1914. Chaplain Jones wrote prolifically, authoring *A Chaplain's Experience Ashore and Afloat* and *Battle of Santiago*, outlining his experiences in the Navy. Additional historical works that help historians in understanding chaplains' activities the Spanish-American War include *Up from*

²⁹ Jones, *Ashore and Afloat*, 248.

³⁰ Drury, *The Chaplain Corps, US Navy*, 132.

³¹ Ibid., 132-133.

³² Lamm, *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue*, 155-156.

Handymen (a look at Army chaplains from 1865-1920) by Earl F. Stover, and *The History of the Chaplain Corps, United States Navy, Volume One* by Clifford Merrill Drury. These works provide an government-endorsed account of nineteenth-century military chaplaincy and mention activities in the Spanish-American War. Overall, available contemporary accounts paint brief but vivid pictures about the lives of deployed clergymen during 1898.

The changes in Chaplain Corps affairs post-1898 were sparked by combat needs. In the 1890s, the support and endorsement structure for both Army and Navy chaplains was loose, so the Chaplain Corps shored up endorsement policies following the conflict with Spain. By 1917, when America entered the First World War, highly formalized processes ensured chaplains were immensely qualified for their positions. As in previous wars, chaplains attended to a variety of needs, including rations, mail, education, and record compiling, but chaplain duties would shift thereafter and become centralized in spiritual care.³³ Additionally, the chaplaincy was instituted as an organization, a development that chaplains of the past (including Spanish-American war veterans) welcomed. Both Army and Navy would institute this program, installing Chiefs of Chaplains upon the outbreak of war. As a result, the chaplaincy underwent a dramatic shift in only two decades, producing a distinct, unique organization that has endured into the twenty-first century.³⁴ Many of the “lessons learned” came from a brief conflict in 1898 that continues to shape the trajectory of the modern world. In 1898, the first modern war occurred, and chaplains adjusted to meet needs not previously foreseen. Thus, the Spanish-American War remains one of the most impactful (and underappreciated) roots precipitating modern military ministry.

³³ Stover, *Up from Handymen*, 202.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

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