

The Siege at Cuba

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The Spanish-American War (April–August 1898) began on April 21, 1898, when the United States decided to fight Spain for control of the Spanish colony of Cuba. Rebels on the island of Cuba had been fighting the Spanish army since February 1895 for freedom from Spain and the right to govern themselves. The Spanish tactic of relocating civilians into crowded concentration camps to prevent them from helping the rebels was killing hundreds of thousands of innocent Cubans through disease and starvation. And the Cuban Liberating Army’s tactic of burning sugarcane fields and mills was destroying the island’s economy, in which American businesses had invested \$50 million. America eventually decided it had to intervene to protect its financial interests and the welfare of the Cuban people.

War strategy

Before the war began, the United States had planned to coordinate its military strategy with the Cuban Liberating Army. On April 9, 1898, U.S. war secretary Russell A. Alger (1836–1907) and U.S. Army general Nelson A. Miles (1839–



1925) sent Lieutenant Andrew S. Rowan on a mission to find Cuban general **Calixto García** (1839–1898; see entry in Primary Sources section). With assistance from rebels in Jamaica and on Cuba, Rowan found García in Bayamo, Cuba, on May 1, 1898. That same day, Commodore **George Dewey** (1837–1917; see entry in Biographies section) defeated a Spanish squadron in a naval battle at Manila Bay in the Philippines, giving the United States its first big victory.

After meeting with Rowan, García sent him back to Washington, D.C., with Cuban officers, maps, and military data. In a memorandum to Secretary Alger, García welcomed coordination with the U.S. Army. In a letter to Cuban general **Máximo Gómez y Báez** (1836–1905; see entry in Biographies section) on May 11, García said he had asked the United States to land troops on the northern coast of the island, along with arms and ammunition. That strategy would allow both armies to conduct joint operations designed to capture the city of Holguín in the province of Oriente in the eastern half of the island. From there, Cuba and the United States could make plans for defeating Spain in its strongholds in the west.

During the month of May, the United States assembled an army in Florida and other locations for its assault on Spain. When the war began, the U.S. Army had only 28,000 regular soldiers, compared to Spain's 180,000 military personnel in Cuba. Newly enlisted troops and volunteers would have to make up the difference needed for victory; as it turned out, more than one million men answered U.S. president **William McKinley's** (1843–1901; served 1897–1901; see entry in Biographies section) request for volunteers.

While the army prepared to do battle, two U.S. naval squadrons, led by Admiral William T. Sampson (1840–1902) and Commodore Winfield S. Schley (1839–1909), set out to form a blockade in Cuba. Spanish admiral **Pascual Cervera y Topete** (1839–1909; see entry in Biographies section) and his six-vessel fleet had sailed from the Cape Verde Islands south of Spain on April 29 for an unknown destination. This gave rise to fears that Cervera might be headed to bombard cities on America's eastern coast. The U.S. Navy eased tensions somewhat by sending vessels to defend major eastern ports, such as Portland, Maine, and by forming a squadron of fast vessels to patrol the East Coast.



Hobson the Hero

On May 19, 1898, a six-vessel Spanish fleet led by Admiral Pascual Cervera y Topete (1839–1909) sailed into harbor at Santiago de Cuba near the southeastern edge of the island. Richmond P. Hobson, a U.S. naval constructor, devised a plan to trap Cervera's fleet there. Hobson proposed to take six other men on the U.S.S. *Merrimac* and sink it in the narrowest part of the harbor, leaving Cervera no room for escape. The men planned to escape the sinking ship in a dinghy—a small boat—to be rescued by the warship *New York*.

Hobson wished to attempt the feat during daylight to navigate to the right position in the harbor. Admiral William T. Sampson (1840–1902), who commanded the U.S. Navy in Cuba, insisted that Hobson go at night to make detection more difficult. Shortly after midnight on June 3, Hobson and his crew began steaming through the harbor in the *Merrimac*. The men had cords tied to them so that by pulling on the cords at the right moment, Hobson could signal when to drop the anchors, flood the hull, and detonate the torpedoes that would sink the boat. As the crew approached its destination, it shut off

the *Merrimac's* engines so the ship would glide into place.

Moments later, gunfire erupted from a small Spanish boat and from nearby forts, attacking the *Merrimac* under the light of the moon. Hobson tugged on cords amid the hostile fire and shouted instructions to bring the boat down. The surprise attack, however, prevented things from going as planned, and the *Merrimac* floated past the narrow part of the harbor before sinking where it would be ineffective as a blockade.

When daylight arrived, Cervera picked up Hobson and his men, who had survived and spent the night in their dinghy. Cervera applauded the crew's bravery and offered to exchange them for Spanish prisoners-of-war being held by the United States. Perhaps because the Americans had valuable information about harbor mines that had exploded during the event, Spain did not complete the exchange until after the U.S. Navy defeated Cervera's squadron on July 3. After being released, Hobson said Cervera called his feat "one of the most daring acts in naval history," according to Harvey Rosenfeld in *Diary of a Dirty Little War*.

Unbeknownst to the United States, Cervera's fleet was not in good working order, so the fifty-nine-year-old sailor wished to avoid the U.S. Navy. Steaming around the Caribbean Sea for a couple of weeks, Cervera avoided Sampson and Schley and slipped into port at Santiago de



U.S. troops landing at Daiquirí, June 22, 1898.
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Cuba on the southeast coast of the island on May 19. After Sampson and Schley set up a blockade to keep Cervera there, the U.S. Army decided to land troops near Santiago for their initial assault on the island. The change of plans disrupted coordination with General Gómez, who was expecting the United States to land somewhere on the other side of the island. This confusion set the stage for an American military effort that used and abused the Cuban Liberating Army.

Las Guásimas

On June 7, 1898, General Miles ordered General **William R. Shafter** (1835–1906; see entry in Biographies section) to board American transport vessels with troops enlisted in the Fifth Army Corps in Tampa, Florida. The V Corps, as the army called Shafter's men, broke camp and headed for the Tampa port. Regiments there fought with each other to get

on the limited number of available transports—thirty-two vessels that could carry only sixteen thousand passengers plus horses, wagons, ambulances, and artillery. Fist fights and gun threats between fellow soldiers suggested the futility of trying to make peace in Cuba with war.

The V Corps sailed for Cuba one week later. A smaller U.S. expedition was then battling Spain at Guantánamo on the southeastern tip of the island. An American victory in that battle made landing there a safe bet. Upon conferring with García and Sampson, however, Shafter decided to land near Daiquirí twelve miles southeast of the stronghold at Santiago. Disembarking near Daiquirí would shorten the tough march to Santiago and also make it easier for García's forces to guard their American allies.



On June 22, the U.S. Navy bombed suspected Spanish defenses near the planned landing point. When Cuban rebels signaled that the Spanish had retreated, the V Corps began to disembark and assemble on the shore. The troops made their landing free of enemy fire thanks to protection from U.S. vessels at sea and Cuban rebels on land. Exploration revealed that the Spanish forces had burned and deserted not only Daiquirí but also the port city of Siboney, further up the coast, where more U.S. troops landed on June 23.

During the second day of landing, the V Corps discovered that Spain had retreated toward Santiago to an area called Las Guásimas. General Joseph Wheeler (1836–1906), a Confederate (Southern) general during the American Civil War (1861–65), commanded the U.S. cavalry division—troops who typically served on horses but fought in Cuba on foot because space restrictions had forced them to leave most of their horses in Tampa. Wheeler ordered an attack on Las Guásimas for June 24.

U.S. general Joseph Wheeler commanded the U.S. cavalry division. ©Medford Historical Collection/CORBIS. Reproduced by permission.