

## War Hero Followed Family Legacy

It was June 24, 1898, a hot tropical day in Cuba, when a group of Indian Territory boys took part in one of the first battles of the Spanish American War. The U.S. had entered into the war in aid of Cubans who were fighting for their independence from Spain. President William McKinley had sought to create an all-volunteer cavalry unit to send to Cuba. The plan was for this unit to be filled with men from the western territories – Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Indian Territory.

In Muskogee, federal judge John R. Thomas, Sr. was in charge of recruiting two troops. He took an active interest in this role and under his guidance saw Troop L and Troop M embark from Muskogee to a training camp in San Antonio, Texas. His own son, Lieutenant John R. Thomas, Jr., was among these troops.

Once in San Antonio, the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry – its official name – quickly became known as Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders. Roosevelt had resigned his position as assistant Secretary of the Navy to serve as lieutenant colonel in this regiment.

At the Battle of Las Guasimas, 500 Americans faced a force of 2,000 Spaniards. Skeptics had questioned how these famed Rough Riders would perform under battle conditions. Also at the battle was the Tenth Cavalry, an all-black unit known as the Buffalo Soldiers who had at various times served I.T. forts. The regular cavalry also had a unit present at Las Guasimas.

These three regiments advanced blindly through the thick, steaming Cuban jungle toward the Spanish-held position. The Rough Riders were the first to engage the enemy. Surprised to find themselves closer to the Spanish position than they realized they took a volley of enemy fire. The first regulars hurried into the battle and were quickly joined by the Tenth Cavalry, advancing on a run.



When his captain was shot, Lieutenant Thomas stepped into his place and fought for an hour before he

was wounded himself. He fell to the ground and then rolled until he reached the gun of a fallen comrade. He continued firing as long as his ammunition held out. Then becoming delirious from heat, thirst and loss of blood, Thomas was carried three miles by stretcher to the field hospital.

To the credit of their uniform and their flag, the American forces did not give an inch. The Spanish troops were routed and the Rough Riders and Buffalo Soldiers had proven themselves a fighting force to be reckoned with. They had gained the admiration and respect of the soldiers in the First U.S. Regular Cavalry.

It was the end of the fight for John Thomas, however. His wound proved severe enough to get him shipped home on the *Olivette* for recuperation. When Roosevelt had first met the young lieutenant he said, "I shouldn't like to be in that fellow's



shoes. He has eleven ancestors who were such brilliant fighters that I shouldn't like to live up to their records. But I think he'll do it."

John's family had been represented in every war the United States had ever fought and this youngest Thomas had continued the tradition. He was so steeped in the tradition of service to country that he continued in the military after he recovered from his wound. John's mother had died when he was a boy, but he never forgot her words to him shortly before her death. "I leave you my flag," she said to her only son. "If ever it needs defense, be willing to give your life for it."

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