CHAPTER 5

Death, Manhood, and Service in the Spanish American War

We have taken up “The White Man’s Burden.” We have done with “Childish Days.” We go to face new problems in lands beyond the seas. In the first rank stands the Regular, but behind him is the Volunteer, the bulwark of “Old Glory” in time of sorest need.¹

—Dedication by the Illinois National Guard

When the U.S. Congress declared war on Spain on April 25, 1898, National Guardsmen eagerly seized the opportunity to demonstrate to themselves, their supporters, their communities, the nation, and most of all the professional Army that they were well-trained soldiers ready and willing to do their duty.² After President McKinley’s decision to accept some 200,000 volunteers via the existing National Guard regiments, guardsmen rushed to prove the seriousness of their claims to the titles and history of the citizen-soldier. That the record achieved by the National Guards while in federal service was uneven at best—some state regiments or companies received high praise, others nothing but the most serious condemnation for their gaps in training, supply, and discipline—was ultimately less important for the National Guards than the experience of national service itself. The lessons guardsmen learned during the war, from the day-to-day realities of camp living to the politics of command and the complexities of logistics, served to forge a stronger identity for the National Guard as the nation’s reserve army, distinct from the burdens of state policing and the joys of
public spectacle that previously constituted their most public face. The opportunity for large numbers of guardsmen from many different states to gather and undergo shared privation and tribulations, hardship and glory led them to conclude that the wartime experience was the vital turning point for the National Guards as an institution, as well as for themselves as individuals.

The Illinois regiments in the United States Volunteers experienced the full range of the opportunities and challenges facing National Guards in 1898. Two Illinois companies actually saw combat, and briefly at that, in Puerto Rico. After the two days of major combat had passed, eight out of eleven regiments from Illinois served in Cuba and Puerto Rico for varying lengths of time. Illinois volunteers endured the terrible conditions in the large southern training camps early in the war, thousands suffered from illness and hundreds died, some mutinied, and more served to honor and distinction during garrison duty in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

One of the more impressive successes for the National Guards in general, and for the ING in particular, was the highly praised performance of the African American Eighth Illinois United States Volunteers (USV). When Governor John M. Tanner persuaded President McKinley and the U.S. Army to recognize and commission the African American officers of the Eighth Illinois Infantry on the same terms as the rest of the regiments of the ING, he put the honor and manliness of the entire ING on the line. The War Department rose to the challenge and ordered the Eighth to Cuba in August 1898. In time their colonel was made governor of the province of San Luis and commander of the post, eventually becoming the senior officer of the Twenty-Third Kansas USV and Ninth “Immunes” USV as well. The members of the Eighth met and mastered the challenges of their assignment and left Cuba after nine months of duty, with the praise of the inspector general of the U.S. Army, among others, ringing in their ears. The Eighth’s achievement was all the more notable in that observers at home and abroad described it as a path-breaking experiment. The Eighth Illinois United States Volunteers was one of the first regiments in the history of the U.S. Army to be commanded entirely by African American men. Their colonel, John Marshall, was among the first African American colonels ever in federal service. African American men had struggled since the close of the Civil War to retain and build on the symbolic and practical importance of soldiering for the Union. The Spanish American War gave African American men their first real chance to do so in the public eye. They did so via the National Guard. As a result of all these circumstances, the war and the Eighth’s role in it was of especial importance.
not only to the African American community in Illinois, but to the broader National Guard movement as well.

Illinois sent nine infantry regiments and one cavalry regiment into the United States Volunteers. When the members of these regiments looked back on their war experiences, they read them as significant benchmarks in the life of the companies and regiments to which they belonged. Where they had been untested boys, they were now men; where their organization had been dismissed as youthful play-acting, they now had combat scars to prove their seriousness. Illinois guardsmen pointed proudly to their war service to downplay the messy business of police work during strikes, and to celebrate their role as citizen-soldiers and honorable men, voluntarily taking up the serious and honorable business of training in peace for war. Many guardsmen even drew somewhat strained analogies to the experience of Civil War veterans, so eager were they to prove their own manhood on the field of battle. With service in the Spanish American War behind them, Illinois guardsmen were able to solidify the National Guards' position as the nation's reserve by taking leading roles in the national association lobbying for stronger and newer militia legislation. This association and its members were also able to lay the groundwork for the centralization and intensified training of the state militias that would prove essential for their service in World War I.  

When they returned home from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and bases scattered across the southern United States, veterans of the United States Volunteers told stories of manly valor and heroism, of dedication and purpose, of desperate illness and logistical confusion, of ultimate triumph and dramatic patriotism. These stories reflected the ways in which these patriotic and professionally minded members of the National Guards wished to understand and share their experiences. These men generally understood their wartime service as a rite of passage, one that marked a distinction between youth and manhood for the institution of the National Guards as it moved the soldiers themselves from boy to man. In doing so, they deliberately echoed one of the most common popular understandings of the role the Civil War played for its veterans. They also seized on the popular language about the war that cast the United States in the role of the manly savior of a passively beautiful and helpless female Cuba. Had the war been only short and easy, their attempts might have fallen utterly flat, and as it was they were largely hyperbolic. Nevertheless confusion, privation, sickness, and death stalked the early days of the United States Volunteer Armies of 1898. The chaos and resulting morbidity of the early days of mobilization lent solemnity, grief, and righteous anger to the tale of federal service.
that otherwise might have suffered from the same jingoism that propelled men to volunteer by the hundreds of thousands in the spring of 1898. From these experiences, ambitious and committed guardsmen were able to craft and tell stories that ignored their reputation as strike police and instead constructed a persuasive history of a trial by fire that tempered and strengthened the institution and its members, proving beyond question their manhood and their citizenship, and secured their place as the reserve army of the United States.

Preparing and Mobilizing for War

In a paper delivered before the officers’ convention of the National Guard of Missouri in 1897, Brigadier General Milton Moore, National Guard of Missouri, observed that in “any future conflict in which the United States may become involved the National Guard will form part of the ‘first line.’ This statement requires no argument. Volunteers entirely untrained, un-uniformed, and unarmed could not be gotten ready for the field in less than six months.” He pointed out that under “modern conditions a campaign might well be decided in that length of time. Any enemy that may confront us will be one with a large force of trained soldiers and its movements will be rapid.” To him, the consequences of these observations seemed clear. “Our government will be compelled to meet it with the best trained troops at its command which will be the regulars and National Guard.”

General Moore was stating the obvious. In 1897, in comparison to European armies, the 28,000 regular soldiers of the United States “did not represent an army in any operational sense of the word,” and General Moore’s assessment of the military readiness of the United States was widely shared. In the late nineteenth century, professional military strategists and unofficial military watchers alike recognized that if the United States should enter into war, any war, with any opponent, the only partially trained reserve available to the United States existed in the body of the state militias.

Events in 1898 proved General Moore’s words prophetic. The United States went to war with Spain over events in Cuba, and the president and Congress called the state National Guards into service as the best-trained reserve troops at their command. The leadership of the state National Guards, ING leaders among them, seized this opportunity to prove that they had indeed created the body of well-trained reserve troops they had been claiming all along. The war also gave the ING, and the rest of the state troops, the opportunity to demonstrate that the citizen-soldier could still function well in a modern war, and to prove the
critics in the regular Army wrong. ING members also embraced wartime service because it provided them with the occasion to put their ideals of responsible citizenship into action, to show that citizen-soldiers would indeed take the plunge, leave their businesses and farms and employers, and come when the nation called; and to show that well-trained citizens would become soldiers at need. Nearly all Illinois guardsmen valued this opportunity to demonstrate their active citizenship to a skeptical world, and African American ING members were extremely dogged as they sought to use their peacetime training and wartime service to reaffirm their own citizenship. Finally, ING members saw in their service proof not only of their organization’s utility and value, and of their citizenship, but also of their own manhood—at last the equal of the generation that fought the Civil War.

Illinois guardsmen had been seeking just such an opportunity for years. In the winter of 1892, for example, when tensions with Chile seemed close to breaking out into open conflict, many guardsmen eagerly sought the war: “Hurrah for the war! Let’s wade right in and punch the impudence out of Chile!” screamed the newspaper leaders. General Fitzsimons and his officers in the First Brigade boasted that the state could provide 4,000 well-drilled and well-equipped men on forty-eight hours’ notice. According to one reporter, the members of the still-independent Ninth Battalion, all African American, were “fairly wild with enthusiasm. They want to go down to Chile at once.”

All of the men were eager to go into action to prove wrong the charge that “boys who enlisted in the National Guard did it for the social advantages it offered and that they [were] neither fit nor anxious to go into actual service.” On the contrary, said Fitzsimons, they did it “for the love of things military, and not for things social.” What all Illinois militiamen, and militiamen across the country, so desperately needed was a chance to prove their claims.

On February 15, 1898, the U.S.S. Maine—in Cuba as part of the McKinley administration’s policy of attempting to encourage the Spanish government to find some way of negotiating peace with the Cuban revolutionaries—exploded and sank in Havana harbor, taking with it 266 American sailors. The most sensational American papers immediately blamed the disaster on a Spanish mine or torpedo. From all over the United States, popular expectations of war with Spain burst forth directly after the tragedy of the Maine, undoubtedly primed by the preceding three years’ worth of press coverage of atrocities on the island that heavily favored the Cuban revolutionaries over the Spanish Army. In Illinois, Governor John Tanner sent a message to the General Assembly on February 17, 1898, requesting that before they ended their session the state legislature authorize him to offer the president “what-
ever moral and material support may be necessary in this emergency to
maintain the honor of the American flag and prevent or punish any
attempt at hostile invasion of our common country.” Both houses of
the General Assembly granted the authority without delay. As Jasper
Reece, adjutant general of Illinois, wrote in his biennial report to the
Governor for 1897–98, “[t]he thunders of a nation’s resentment filled
the air, while millions demanded that full punishment should be meted
out to those guilty of this wholesale murder.” These sentiments and
preparations were not isolated or unique to Illinois or to members of
state militias or state legislatures. Newspapers were filled with stories
detailing the preparations of the Army and Navy, supplemented by
careful comparisons of the Spanish and the American military estab-
ishments. However, all the indignation and the preparations were
tempered by the sentiment expressed in Governor Tanner’s request to
the General Assembly. Tanner asked to be able to help the president to
“prevent or punish an attempt at hostile invasions of our common
country.” In no minds but those of the most rabid expansionists was
Cuba a common country of the United States. All in all, public senti-
ment may be summed up in the words of Chicago’s Daily Inter-Ocean:
“Spain can’t whip us on this side of the Atlantic, that’s sure: we shall
not fight on the other side.”

With the generally perceived public hesitation to openly attack Spain
without clear provocation in mind, as well as other considerations of
domestic politics and foreign interests, the McKinley administration
proposed a course seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis precipitat-
ed by the Maine tragedy. Nevertheless, war was welcomed and even
sought by a rough coalition of expansionists and supporters of Cuban
independence during weeks of frenzied press speculation and accusations
and wild rumor mongering. The one issue holding the public in check
seemed to be the wait for the publication of the reports of the Spanish
and American boards investigating the sinking of the Maine. Once the
American report was made public, with its—unstated but implicit—
conclusion that the Maine sank as the result of the detonation of an
underwater mine, public demands for war reached a fever pitch, and
conflict was only weeks away.

National Guard officers across the country welcomed the opportuni-
ties presented by the war and the unpreparedness of the U.S. Army to
fight it. The total strength of the regular army in 1898 was set at 30,000
men and officers, but the army rarely had more than 28,000 total mem-
bers. Until 1897, the regular army had been scattered across the nation
in more than two hundred small posts, and none had more than a single
regiment in residence. This small frontier constabulary was not in a
strong position to take on the much larger, if hard-pressed, army of Spain. It was obvious to most officers in the National Guards that their organization was the only body capable of providing the men that the nation now required.

On April 25, 1898, Secretary of War Russell A. Alger notified governors around the country of the number and type of regiments that each state would be responsible for raising. Graham Cosmas argues that the “powerful” National Guard lobby—possibly the Interstate National Guard Association (INGA), but most likely the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS)—was instrumental in arranging for the format of the volunteer army in such a way that almost all the existing National Guard regiments across the country would be accepted into federal service intact, up through the regimental officers. It must be noted that at least some governors did not choose to deploy their existing state troops and instead chose to raise new regiments specifically for the war with Spain. Nonetheless, the number of Illinois units requested by Alger matched the number of National Guard regiments that Illinois maintained. Alger cabled that it was “the wish of the President that the regiments of the National Guard or State Militia shall be used as far as their numbers will permit, for the reason that they are armed, equipped and drilled.” Alger’s telegram informed Governor Tanner that Illinois would be responsible for providing seven infantry regiments and one cavalry regiment.

It rapidly developed that all their best intentions and hopes aside, the claims of the National Guard officers about the war readiness of the National Guards were unequal to the emergency. Alger’s assumption, fostered by National Guard officers in Illinois and across the nation, that the militias were “armed, equipped and drilled,” was overly optimistic at best, profoundly misleading at worst. Weapons were all too often the outdated single-shot Springfield rifle, for which no state had an adequate supply of munitions or complete “kits”—bayonet, cartridge boxes and belts, cleaning supplies, and so forth. Artillery companies made do, for the most part, with muzzle-loading weapons rather than modern steel breech-loading pieces. National Guards across the country were uniformed in the sense that uniforms had been purchased at various times by the states or the units themselves and at some moment handed out to their members, but by 1898 those uniforms often turned out to be worn out, improperly cared for, and incomplete. Few states had included overcoats as part of their uniform requirements, and none issued knapsacks as standard equipment. State purchases rarely included boots of sufficient quality to survive much serious use, and at any rate, few, if any, had resoled their entire guards recently. Certainly, Illinois had not. Tents, camp
equipment, and transport wagons were discovered be in an equal state of
undersupply and poor repair. Few state guards had ever made provisions
for mess kits or other individual cooking supplies or trained their men in
the use of such implements. (Illinois was typical in this case; many, if not
most, companies messed together at camp on food often prepared for
them by hired professional cooks—a development not yet standard in
the regular Army.22) On top of all their material inadequacies, few
National Guard companies or regiments were recruited to their full
strength when the Maine sank, with the result that the units that actu-
ally served were often half or more filled with new, entirely untrained
men. Enthusiasm for the war was incredibly high, and after President
McKinley issued his call for 125,000 state volunteers on April 23 for
$13.00-a-month pay, more than a million men presented themselves to
the various militia recruitment officers around the country.23 Between
old members who failed the physical exam for federal enlistment and
members freshly accepted to complete regimental rosters, probably half
or more of the men in the National Guards/United States Volunteers
were little more than raw recruits. Illinois was no exception.

The War Department initially mustered into federal service each reg-

iment as soon as it was ready—meaning uniformed and equipped—to
take the field. For this reason, Alger urged state adjutant generals around
the country to work on supplying their regiments one by one. All seven
of the ING infantry regiments and the cavalry regiment arrived in
Springfield by noon on April 27, two days after Governor Tanner
received Secretary Alger’s orders. Even as he ordered the various
colonels to bring their regiments to Springfield, Illinois Adjutant
General Jasper N. Reece telephoned “wholesale grocers, bakers and
butchers, urging them to increase their working forces so that subsis-
tence stores of all kinds could be at the State Fair Grounds by noon
Wednesday.”24 Over the next four weeks, until the last of the eight regi-
ments responding to the first call for troops were mustered into federal
service, Reece and his staff worked feverishly to equip the ING regi-
ments for the war and supply them while in camp. Reece “telegraphed
every supply house in the country from Boston to Omaha, and purchased
everything on hand in lots from a dozen hats to two hundred leggings
and three hundred blouses, and upwards, that could be found . . . [and]
took options so far as [could be gotten], to be delivered in ten days, per-

haps sufficient to supply the seven regiments.”25 And by “sending agents
to Chicago and St. Louis, [Reece and the ING] picked up enough hats,
leggings, shoes, ponchos, and blankets, to not only relieve the most
pressing needs of the troops, but to fit them out fairly well for practical
field service.”26 Reece also struggled to get enough blankets for the troops
“in the raw and inclement weather,” and “although the limited number of blankets in the [open retail] market [had] nearly all been purchased by agents of the Government,” he was successful in acquiring several thousand. The problem Reece faced over blankets—competition with the War Department for supplies—appeared in almost every category of supply and equipage that Reece struggled to secure for the ING. “It must be remembered that the United States, and every State in the union, were buying clothing and equipments for their troops; that the amount of these articles that were on hand had been purchased at the first intimation of war, and that now it was conceded to be almost an accommodation on the part of the manufacturer to listen to proposals of any kind.”

Illinois Troops Enter Federal Service

On May 7, 1898, the Third and the Fifth ING—the first two Illinois regiments with minimum-strength organizations and completely outfitted with uniforms, weapons, and camp equipage—were mustered into federal service after all their members passed the physical examination. They were followed relatively quickly by the Sixth (May 11), Battery A (May 12), the First (May 13), the Second (May 16), the Seventh (May 18), the Fourth (May 20), and finally the First Cavalry on May 21. The Fifth and the Third not only had the honor of taking the federal oath ahead of all their ING colleagues; on May 13 they were also the first regiments to leave Illinois for Camp Thomas in Chickamauga, Georgia. Thereafter, the various regiments were sent to one or another of the several training camps in the South, including Chickamauga, Camp Alger outside Washington, D.C., Camp Cuba Libre outside Jacksonville, Florida, and the main embarkation point in Tampa, Florida.

From the moment Illinois regiments entered the federal service, the race was on to see which would get actual front-line service. The honor and privilege of being ordered to Cuba or Puerto Rico was one that regiments schemed and fought to attain. Reece reflected popular views about the desirability of front-line service when he wrote of ING Battery B’s unsuccessful attempts to be mustered into the Volunteers: “officers and men . . . persistently pursued every honorable method within their reach or power to be included in the volunteers from this State, and that it was only as the result of the peremptory refusal on the part of the National Government to accept additional troops, that they did not go to the front with their more fortunate comrades.” Reece wrote these words even after the terrible conditions of the camps and the tremendous number of men who had fallen victim to disease were public knowledge.
Illinois regiments that made it as far as one of the large camps were desperate to take the next step. When the Fifth Illinois USV’s place in the Puerto Rico expedition was given to a regiment from another state, the third time they had lost a chance to leave Chickamauga, the officers sent the following telegram to Governor Tanner from Chickamauga Park, GA, on July 30, 1898.

We thank you in behalf of the 1,300 men we command for your prompt expression of confidence in the Fifth and denial of sensational lies of an irresponsible reporter. The regiment is the same loyal, obedient and disciplined regiment it has ever been. No orders have been disobeyed, every duty has been performed promptly and cheerfully. Colonel Culver has our loyal obedience, confidence and respect. Men and officers are disheartened and discouraged at treatment they can not understand and the responsibility for which they can not place; but they are soldiers and aside from the charge of taking about twenty dollars’ worth from hucksters by stragglers on the march, there is not even a shadow of foundation for the sensational lies sent to the press from here. We want you to use every effort to put us back in our just place in the Porto Rican expedition.\(^\text{31}\)

Colonel Culver himself wired Tanner with a personal “plea for justice” for the Fifth and their moment in the sun, and the Springfield papers followed the travails of their unit with passionate interest.\(^\text{32}\)

Tanner wrote to the War Department about the Fifth and in reply received a telegram from U.S. Adjutant General H. C. Corbin—according to most historians of the war, the real force in the War Department in managing the American military during 1898 and 1899—explaining the reasons for the Fifth’s loss.

Replying to your telegram asking that the Fifth Illinois Volunteer Infantry be sent to Porto Rico you are informed that it was no fault of the regiment, or anyone connected with it, that it was not sent. The facts are that the First, Third and Sixth regiments of Illinois volunteers were ordered to active service when it was noted by the Department that other states had none, notably your neighbor, Indiana. In view of this fact the commanding general at Chickamauga was ordered to substitute an Indiana for an Illinois regiment, and in the exercise of this discretion he selected the Fifth. This may be and doubtless is a hardship for the regiment. It had to be done, however, to give scant justice to the State of Indiana, and you will say it is but fair.\(^\text{33}\)
The only infantry volunteers from Illinois who saw service outside the United States before hostilities ended were two companies of the Sixth Illinois USV, who took part in the Puerto Rican campaign. The Sixth Illinois was part of the Fifth Army Corps that sailed for Cuba on July 5 and arrived around July 15. On July 21 at least two companies of the Sixth, I and E, were part of the expedition that sailed for Puerto Rico. The invasion force put ashore in Guánica on July 25. Early on July 26, the companies were involved in a brief skirmish with some Spanish troops, with no reported casualties on either side. On the 28th, the men from Illinois marched fifteen miles east and participated in the capture of Ponce. On August 9, General Miles, commanding the Puerto Rican expedition, who had previously arranged his troops into four columns, ordered them to break camp and begin their assault on the Spanish forces concentrated in San Juan on the northern side of the island. The two Illinois companies were part of the column sent through the interior across the mountains on a newly discovered trail that led from Guánica to Arecibo. An armistice ended the fighting on August 12, and the companies E and I stopped in Utuado, were they stayed until the 25th, when they received orders to return to Ponce and await orders to head for New York. The orders arrived on September 6.

The rest of the Illinois regiments served between July 1898 and May 1899 in a variety of postings at home and abroad. In brief, the First Illinois just missed seeing combat in Cuba and served in a garrison there from July 9 until August 29, when, burdened by illness, they were relieved by the Eighth Illinois. The Second Illinois went to Cuba in December of 1898, after spending six months at camps in Jacksonville, Florida, and Savannah, Georgia. They stayed through April 3, 1899. The Third Illinois was in Puerto Rico from July 31 through November 9. The Fourth Illinois had the distinction of having spent the longest amount of time in federal service, almost a full year, from May 20, 1898, to May 2, 1899. The Fourth Illinois arrived in Cuba in January of 1899 for garrison duty and left on April 5. The Fifth and the Seventh Illinois, along with the First Cavalry, never left the United States. The Eighth served in Cuba from August 16, 1898 to March 15, 1899. The Sixth also served briefly in Puerto Rico, July 25 through September 13, as did Battery A. (See appendix G.) The two most dramatic wartime experiences, however, belonged to the First and the Eighth. The First limped home almost decimated by disease, and in their place, the Eighth earned high praise for the behavior of their officers and men.
Tragedy for the First Regiment

The First Regiment, ING, of Chicago paid the highest price for active service in 1898. The First was sworn into federal service as the First Illinois United States Volunteers on May 13, 1898, at Camp Tanner. Three days later, the First left Springfield for Chickamauga Park, GA and arrived on May 19. For the next two weeks, the First endured firsthand the disarray created by the sudden mobilization. Thirty-five thousand volunteers had arrived in Chickamauga by May 21. The ordnance and commissary bureaus of the War Department almost collapsed under the strain of attempting to supply and feed such a large number of men. Although the War Department eventually sorted out its supply problems, it would not be until almost the end of June that logistics were running smoothly. In the meantime, the First was moved several times, unfortunately from one bad situation to another, especially from a medical point of view. The Army, in general, was unprepared to cope with large troops of men ignorant of the most basic health and sanitary precautions, and some general officers were unprepared for the number and seriousness of the infractions. From a medical perspective, Chickamauga and Tampa were two of the unhealthiest camps, and the members of the First began to fall ill even before they left for Cuba. On June 4 the First arrived in Tampa, and on June 8 relieved a regular infantry regiment stationed on Picnic Island, Port Tampa.

On June 30, the First embarked for Santiago, Cuba, and arrived on July 10. Once in Cuba, the regiment spent a week in the trenches surrounding Santiago, then it moved into the San Juan Hills and began guarding Spanish prisoners on July 22. During their two months of service in Cuba, members of the First were increasingly vulnerable to the true killers of the Spanish American War, diseases—mostly malaria and dysentery, with increasing incidence of yellow fever, though all forms of illness related to bad water and unsanitary conditions were rampant. By early August, men were dying in every company, and the sick lists were growing. As Cosmas wrote, “disease wrecked the Fifth Corps at Santiago almost before General Shafter could consolidate his victory over the Spaniards.” Out of twenty thousand U.S. troops in Cuba on July 27, four thousand were in the hospitals. By August 1, the Fifth Corps was dying at the rate of fifteen men a day. Thousands of men died of yellow fever, and thousands more suffered through malaria. Malaria rarely killed the soldiers who contracted it; it only left them weak and feverish, unable to digest their food. Often found in combination with dysentery, malaria left its victims emaciated and hollow eyed as well. Most of the sufferers from malaria and related illnesses never reported sick; they just stumbled through their duties as best they could.
The First was harder hit than any Illinois regiment in Cuba, and before their service with the USV Infantry was over, eighty-seven men out of 1,300 had died of disease or injury (see appendix H). At one point, only forty-four of some 320 men of the First detailed to Siboney were able to answer at roll call. The commander of the First appealed to Governor Tanner and to the War Department to release his men from constant exposure to diseases and death. United States Adjutant General Corbin himself wrote to Governor Tanner that the “main trouble with our troops now in Cuba is that they are suffering from exhaustion and exposure incident to one of the most trying campaigns to which soldiers have ever been subjected.” The War Department offered Illinois the chance to replace the First with another regiment if one was willing to go immediately to Cuba to take the place of the First. Even then, some members of the First, like Pvt. Cary T. Ray, remained frustrated by their “missing out” on more impressive duty: “Held back on the way to Tampa, by circumstances beyond our Control, and POSSIBLY jealousy on someone’s part . . . we did NOT have the opportunity given another or two Volunteer Infantry Regiments.” And, “don’t forget this: THE FIRST ILLINOIS VOLUNTEER INFANTRY, did everything it was ALLOWED TO DO, in the Campaign.”
Triumph for the Eighth Illinois

The tragedy of the First Illinois provided the Eighth Illinois with its golden opportunity. If the declaration of war with Spain presented welcome challenges to National Guardsmen in general, it presented far greater opportunities to the African American companies of the National Guards. Laboring under the handicaps of prejudice, oppression, and disinterest, African Americans nevertheless had managed to hold volunteer companies together in almost all states for longer or shorter periods of time, and many of these companies managed to secure a place in their respective state’s militia organizations. African American men in Illinois maintained an almost steady military presence for the thirty years from 1870 to 1900, both within and outside of the state militia structure. By 1898, African Americans were supporting a four-company ING battalion located in Chicago.

When the first call for Illinois National Guard troops for service in the federal army issued in April of 1898 did not include the Ninth
Battalion, many in the African American community feared that between prejudice, racism, and the recent, highly politicized court martial of their Colonel John Buckner, the Ninth would be left out of the spoils of war. A committee headed by Captain John R. Marshall, Co A, Ninth Battalion ING, approached Governor Tanner, and was somewhat reassured when Tanner explained that the War Department had requested seven regiments from Illinois for service in the United States Volunteer Army, and as the ING had seven full regiments already, there was no place for an unattached battalion. Tanner nevertheless promised that if there should be a second call for troops from Illinois, he would allow the Ninth to recruit a full regiment, and he would call that regiment first.

The president issued a second call for more troops on May 25, and Tanner kept his word to the Ninth and summoned them to Springfield. Unofficial recruitment had been going on for some weeks, but now it began in earnest. On July 1, 1898, the new Eighth Regiment, ING arrived at Camp Tanner, outside Springfield, and commenced the final, frenzied efforts to bring the new regiment up to full strength. Goode noted in his history of the Eighth that the full regiment could have been recruited out of Chicago, but the adjutant general decided that six companies would come from Chicago, and six from various locations downstate. John Marshall was acting colonel of the Eighth Infantry, ING, but after the regiment was sworn into U.S. service, there was a period of concern about who the final staff officers would be. Marshall, born and raised in Virginia and trained as a stonemason, moved to Chicago in 1880, where he worked for many years for a large contractor. He joined the Ninth Battalion early on and believed he had been instrumental in securing their place in the USV, and he very much wanted the top job.

There were a number of other African American aspirants for the position of colonel of the new Eighth Illinois USV as well, including recently suspended John Buckner and Charles G. Young of Ohio—one of the early African American graduates of West Point. There were also white men who sought commissions with the Eighth in the hopes of going to the front sooner, and with an important commission, “but, believing that this race should have the opportunity to show the country at large whether or not its members possessed the ability to govern themselves, and in a spirit of ‘fair play’ [Governor Tanner] determined, and carried into effect [his] idea the Negroes could, and in this case should, be commanded by Negroes.” Ending all further speculation, on July 23, 1898, John R. Marshall was sworn in as a colonel in the United States Army along with his staff, all African American men.

The commissioning of Marshall was a truly significant departure from
previous practice and was recognized as such by all concerned. The adju-
tant general of Illinois wrote that the “Eighth Infantry organization is
composed of men of the Afro-American race throughout, from the
Colonel to the last name on the roster of Company M.” The newspa-
pers hailed the remarkable step, as did the governor himself. Tanner
addressed the Eighth after the regiment had joined the USV forces,
telling them, “even from the very doors of the White House have I
received letters asking and advising me not to officer this regiment with
colored men, but I promised to do so, and I have done it.” Even the
“men who raised provisional regiments in Chicago” and who were des-
erate to join the war effort conceded “that the colored troops should
have preference” when the second call for troops came. Not all
Illinoisans were quite so supportive, and the editor of the Illinois State
Journal chastised critics of the Eighth for their treasonable instincts and
their “outrageous and wholly unjustifiable attacks” on the “character and
conduct of the volunteers who have enlisted in the colored regiment
now at Camp Tanner.” Now all that the Eighth needed was a trial by
arms to prove that faith in African American officers had not been
misplaced.

When the news of the ailing First reached Illinois, it was the moment
the Eighth had been waiting for. Colonel Marshall immediately ten-
dered the services of the Eighth to replace the First, and the War
Department promptly accepted the offer. “The Secretary of War appre-
ciates very much the offer of the Eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry for
duty in Santiago, and has directed that the regiment be sent there by
steamer Yale, leaving New York next Tuesday.” So on August 9, 1898,
the Eighth regiment received orders directing them to Cuba. Mean-
while, the First was moved back from the front lines, and on
August 25 the regiment boarded a boat for home, arriving back in
Chicago on September 10, 1898. In the end, eighty-seven men of the
First Illinois Volunteer Infantry died of illness acquired while in the fed-
eral service.

One reason that the offer of the Eighth Illinois was accepted was the
popular (and quite false) notion that certain types of people, in particu-
lar African Americans, would be less susceptible to the kind of illness
rampant in Cuba because of their supposed acclimation to the sun and
heat and their general physical hardiness. As it was, the Eighth Illinois
indeed stayed quite healthy, especially in comparison to other Illinois
units that saw service in Cuba or Puerto Rico. The health of Marshall’s
command was the result of a happy confluence of events. The Eighth
Illinois never spent any time in the large southern training camps estab-
lished for the volunteer forces that became epicenters for spreading all
types of camp diseases. They arrived in Cuba after the logistics of supplying an occupying army had been worked out by the War Department, and exposure to the various tropical diseases had given army doctors time to acquire much-needed experience in treating them. Finally, Marshall demanded an extremely high standard of camp sanitation, which worked to keep his men alive during their stay in Cuba.60

The Eighth arrived at Guantánamo Bay on the morning of August 14, 1898, and the regiment disembarked in Santiago the following afternoon. On the 17th of August, the First Battalion of the Eighth Illinois USV left for San Luis to take charge of the Spanish prisoners there, and the rest of the regiment followed a few days later. Once there, Colonel John Marshall was appointed governor of the province of San Luis and commander of the post.61 Later, a detachment under Major Robert Jackson, made up of two companies, was sent to Palma Soriano, a largish town some 20 miles into the hills from San Luis, to keep the peace there between the Spanish and the Cubans. The two companies performed garrison duty in Palma Soriano until February 1899, though Major Jackson returned to the main body of the regiment after a few weeks.62

Meanwhile, in San Luis, Colonel Marshall moved the regiment into the old Spanish barracks in town and began to institute the policies of the American occupation, including sanitation and Capitalism American-style. McCard and Turnley wrote that as payday for the troops was regular and large amounts were spent among the local merchants, soon “listlessness and stagnation gave way to activity and life. The storekeepers commenced to put on their shelves delicacies and foods that would tickle only an American’s palate. American beer was soon to be had on every hand.”63 Eight members of the Eighth married Cuban women (though at least two left their wives behind when they returned to the States).64 At least two officers’ wives, Mrs. John Marshall and Mrs. Robert Jackson, joined their husbands in Cuba, along with at least one of their children.65

It was never far from the minds of the soldiers of the Eighth that they were constantly being judged as representatives of their race, and as the test case for the honor and merit of their African American officers. Dr. Curtis, first lieutenant and company surgeon, wrote home: “The statement heretofore made that colored officers could not command colored soldiers will never be made again. If it is, our only reply will be to point to the Eighth, and to examine her records as kept in the imperishable archives of the War Department . . . We realize the fact that we are making history for our race, and we are willing to make the sacrifice.”66

Thus it was all the more distressing for members of the Eighth when a disturbance caused by members of the Ninth Immunes USV, an African
American volunteer regiment raised from four southern states and commanded by white officers, was laid at their door. The Twenty-third Kansas USV, an African American battalion that also had African American officers except for its colonel and lieutenant colonel, and the Ninth Immunes were stationed at San Luis with the Eighth Illinois. The Eighth was billeted in the town of San Luis proper, and the Twenty-third Kansas and the Ninth Immunes were encamped nearby. Some enlisted personnel of the Ninth Immunes got into a shooting fight with a few Cuban policemen, and Colonel Marshall was the officer who intervened and put a stop to further conflict. The situation was “thoroughly investigated” by Major General Henry W. Lawton, who reported to Lieutenant General Henry C. Corbin that there was “no foundation whatever for [the] report” of disorder in the Eighth Illinois at San Luis.\(^67\) For his good judgment and prompt action, Colonel Marshall’s position as provisional governor was extended to make him commander of the post, or the senior officer to the colonel of the Ninth Immunes, as well. The result of this action was to have word go out that at Colonel Marshall’s post, soldiers were disorderly and undisciplined.\(^68\) Another result was a new policy that placed all United States soldiers in camp some three miles from San Luis proper.\(^69\) Nevertheless, despite having at least one senior army officer in Cuba whom Goode believed was disposed to find the Eighth always problematic, Colonel Marshall retained the confidence of his immediate superiors and kept his offices until the Eighth left Cuba.\(^70\)

The Eighth uniformly impressed all the visitors who made an effort to see them. A correspondent from a New York paper quoted by Goode witnessed a dress parade held one evening for the benefit of a visiting English officer and reported that “the men presented a splendid appearance. They have mastered the intricacies of the drill. Their even military movement is a thing of beauty.”\(^71\) On the subject of African American officers, the reporter noted, “[t]he man who thinks the Negro will not obey officers of his race has but to visit the camps of the Eighth Illinois.”\(^72\) The reporter suggested that one reason for the success of the command was that there was “no prejudice here on account of a man’s color, the Negro soldier is treated the same as other soldiers are.”\(^73\) The reporter also had praise for Colonel Marshall: “I found him an affable, pleasing military gentleman, unaffected by the grave responsibilities resting upon him and void of the arrogance assumed by the average white officer.”\(^74\)

On the occasion of their last inspection by the Inspector General in Cuba, the Eighth outdid themselves. General Breckenridge, U.S. Inspector General, and Brigadier General E. P. Ewers inspected the
Eighth on March 6, 1899. When the inspection was complete, “General Breckenridge said to our Colonel, ‘It is a shame to muster out of service such a regiment. It is as fine a volunteer regiment as was ever mustered into the service.’”

General Ewers said that the planning of the camp outside San Luis was among the finest in Cuba, and the medical inspector complimented the surgeons on the sanitary conditions prevalent in their wards.

Manhood and Wartime Service

After the men from Illinois were mustered out of federal service, many turned their attention toward recording the history of their wartime duty before the passage of time faded their memories. Several of the regiments or companies published one or more books or articles containing their service histories, and others produced individual memoirs of their experiences. One of the most common images that are shared by many of these memoirists and writers is their vision of Spanish American War service as marking the border between youth and adulthood, for themselves and also for the Illinois National Guard as an institution. Chaplain H. W. Bolton, in his history of the Second regiment, boasted, “[T]he old warriors of the Civil War were constrained to acknowledge that their experience could recall no examples of loftier enthusiasm, more vigorous manhood, more complete forgetfulness of self than were shown by the boys of ’98.” By exhibiting their “vigorous manhood” as they marched to war, the boys of the Second showed themselves on the cusp of adulthood even as their forgetfulness of self demonstrated their grasp of the essentials of republican citizenship. In the same vein, Chaplain John R. Skinner of the Fourth regiment wrote that the “composite of this regiment is of the young blood and sturdy manhood of central Illinois, coming from the fields of her thrifty farmers, the shops, stores, and officers of her provident towns.” These writers celebrate images of youth and manhood, united in ING guardsmen on the cusp of war, a war that would turn them into men.

Many Illinois guardsmen firmly believed that the war, especially the hardships and death, turned Illinois boys into men the equal of the Civil War generation. A somber collection of photographs published by the First Regiment of Chicago in 1899, all taken by Claron S. Wagar, a member of the regiment who died during his term of service, show increasingly rough and lean soldiers who have fully made the transformation from youthful jauntiness to hardened adult veterans during their painful term of service. The collection of images stands as mute testimony to the
hard-won experiences of wartime. John F. Kendrick, himself a victim of yellow fever while in Cuba, wrote a long memoir entitled “The Mid-Summer Picnic of ’98,” offering a “slap at those who don’t understand that a short campaign in a short war can be deadly.”

Lieutenant J. H. Parker, also of the First Infantry, offered the following praise to his fellows at a banquet in December 1898, just a few months after they returned from Cuba, calling them “men who are sweet to see again with the realizing sense that having quitted themselves like men and soldiers they are now returned to the bosoms of their families and to the enjoyment of the laurels they have so justly won.” He went on, “we were comrades, and we are bound by the dearest ties of mature manhood—ties that were formed on the field of battle where we faced together all the dangers of that awful time of sickness and suffering in the siege of Santiago.”

The dangers, the sickness, the suffering, and the death of the Spanish American War turned the youthful males of Illinois into mature men.

Extending the metaphor of growing up from the soldiers to their organization, Skinner described the “childhood and youth of [his] military organization” prior to their embarkation for southern training camps, and the service that would mark its passage into adulthood. R. S. Bunzey echoed Skinner when he referred to the “infancy” of the Illinois National Guard during the 1870s and 1880s, especially in comparison to its status after returning home from wartime service.

The historians of these Illinois companies and regiments all concluded that wartime service had ultimately made their organizations stronger. In writing of their wartime service, these guardsmen historians seized the opportunity to make the case for the respect and praise they believed their organizations had justly earned through their service to their state and their nation during wartime. Bolton included admiring press reports of the Second that echoed his sentiments. From the Chicago Evening Post, the members of Second Regiment “have shown themselves to be well-disciplined and true soldiers.”

The maturing effects of wartime service proved enduring. Writing two years after returning home, Bunzey of the Sixth Regiment noted approvingly the way “the military spirit which had enveloped and swayed our people from one end of the country to the other during the late war, had left its effects on the youths through the land and they were anxious to become connected with the State troops.” These youths wanted the connection to the mature men who had returned, and the organization they served with, because it could make men of them, too.

If white guardsmen felt their identity as men and citizens was at stake in their participation in the United States Volunteers, for African
American guardsmen the situation was far more acute. They believed that war service would not only test their manhood, it would display it for the world in a way that they hoped it could never be questioned again. W. T. Goode opens his history of the Eighth Illinois U.S. Volunteers, “Far back in the early seventies the desire for military organization first began to inspire the hearts of the leading colored men of the state of Illinois. . . . As early as 1870 this military spirit and feeling bubbled up in the hearts of the colored men in Illinois, and like the subterranean activity of a passive volcano, kept constantly bubbling, burning and boiling up until it reached the crater of their ambition. The lava of aspiration, overflowing the open apex of the mountain of ‘Success,’ crept down its steep slopes until its warmth had animated the ambition of the entire colored population of the commonwealth.”

These images dramatically capture the powerful feelings harnessed to military symbols and membership by late nineteenth-century Americans in general, and by African American men in particular. For African American men, the symbolism of military service was especially evocative because of the heritage of the African American troops who fought in the Civil War, for the Union Army and for their own freedom from the stifling confines of slavery.

Tanner’s actions on their behalf were not forgotten by the men of the Eighth, and he received much praise from them for his decision to insist the U.S. government take African American officers along with their men into the federal service. “To his Excellency, John R. Tanner, the able and fearless executive of the great State of Illinois, who believes and who has the courage of his convictions, that it is the heart, the brain, the soul, not the skin, that go to determine manhood; who acting upon this belief and upon the fundamental principle of this government that ‘taxation without representation is tyranny,’ had the manhood to appoint colored officers to command a Colored Regiment, this book is affectionately dedicated.”

Harry McCard and Henry Turnley presented the experience of the Eighth Illinois USV during the Spanish American War as the final and unanswerable argument that African American males had manhood the equal of their white comrades in arms, up to and especially including the ability to command themselves and the obedience of others. Honorable wartime service was regarded as the final proof of African American manhood, to which there was no possible rational or serious reply. The linkage of the ability to command obedience, the expectation of being treated equally and fairly under the law, and service in war expressed by McCard and Turnley in the dedication of their memorial souvenir volume about the exploits of the Eighth Illinois indicates the complexity of the ideas and feelings that surrounded military service in
general and the citizen-soldier in particular. This complex of ideas expressed by McCard and Turnley suggests that what was at stake was not manhood as the opposite of womanhood, but manhood as the opposite of childhood. Adult men voted, paid taxes, and served in the nation’s armed forces, all on an equal basis. As African American men voted and paid taxes, it seemed only just that the third of this basic litany of the responsibilities of citizenship should be open to African American men. To be allowed to serve only as enlisted personal was an obvious stigma that symbolically and practically limited the citizenship extended to African American men to that of dependents, children unfit to make decisions or command authority. To serve as officers, therefore, would symbolically extend full citizenship to a group long denied recognition as fully adult members of society.

McCard and Turnley elaborated on the challenges faced by African American men within the armed forces to achieve recognition for accomplishments as leaders as well as followers of men. Although it had been assumed since the Revolution, and proven decisively in the Civil War, that African American men made ideal private soldiers, theirs “heretofore, was to obey, not to command. They were always to be led, never to lead. Though his shoulders were broad, they were too narrow to bear the gilded shoulder straps. Though his hands were strong, they were too brawny to wield the commander’s glittering sword.” But with the commissioning of Marshall and his staff, Governor Tanner forced the U.S. Army to indulge in an unprecedented experiment. The only remaining question was whether or not the Eighth would ever have the opportunity to serve the nation outside its borders, or whether members of the regiment would be condemned to languish in camp for the duration of their service and with no opportunity to demonstrate that the faith in them had not been misplaced.

The consequences of the historic events surrounding the Eighth Illinois were profound on both the personal level and the institutional level. On a personal level, Marshall himself was able to parlay his experiences to an appointment as a deputy sheriff of Cook County. Several of the junior officers of the Eighth were so keen on their military experiences that they accepted lieutenants’ commissions in the regular army and joined the fighting in the Philippines with the African American regiments there, and several enlisted men also joined the regular army. Institutionally, the Eighth secured a permanent home in the ING that was never challenged again, and the Army itself, though slowly and with much foot dragging, began to commission African American men as officers on a more regular basis.

The efforts of the volunteers to make true soldiers of themselves were
not always applauded during the Spanish American War, but as their service lengthened, guardsmen were able to make an ever-stronger case for the importance of their prior training to the well-being of the nation’s military system. Even if their term of service was not all that they hoped for, or close to equaling the experiences of the Civil War veterans, guardsmen were firm in their conviction that they had proven their mettle as men and soldiers. The guardsmen themselves saw their story as one of coming of age, of a time when they proved themselves men and soldiers, citizens and warriors. In the words of Colonel Francis A. Riddle:

A hero, loving his kind, scorning outrage and defying despotism, stood beneath our victorious banner in the plain of Mars. Born in the new world, educated in her common schools, he grasped the standard of our blood-bought republic, and with no purpose but to set the stranger free, he had carried it with added lustre upon a mission as sacred as any in which men of high courage and exalted sentiment ever enlisted.89

From their wartime service, guardsmen were at last able to earn the institution of the National Guards the long sought official recognition for their efforts to become citizen-soldiers.

Passing the Test of War

After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the U.S. Congress, despite repeated calls to develop a new military structure for the nation, returned to antebellum traditions of maintaining a very small standing army while simultaneously ignoring calls for any serious reform of the militia system. Professional strategists, regular military officers, and unofficial observers had been complaining about the state militia system for decades, to little avail. They had developed dozens if not hundreds of schemes to improve the militia system to better meet the need for effective and efficient training. As a result, there was a variety of proposals for what the state militias could and should be floating around Washington, D.C. and various state capitals. These plans ranged from a completely federalized reserve army in training; to temporary troops to hold the line until volunteers could be raised, supplied, and trained; to a coastal defense league consisting primarily of heavy artillery battalions.90 Some in the military had also proposed altogether new federal reserve systems as alternatives to the state militias.91 But no one reform proposal gained momentum, and after 1899 these and other alternative missions and their attendant
political positions and recruitment strategies fell by the wayside, and the National Guards emerged as the nation’s active reserve army.

National Guardsmen emerged from the Spanish American War heady with triumph that they had produced the first-line reserve forces for the nation. They believed that they had demonstrated to the world that they could perform, more or less, as advertised—and certainly as well as the regular army itself. By the late 1890s, National Guardsmen, particularly in western states like Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan, had been calling for public and private support and new members for more than two decades, on the grounds that they were training the boys who would be the men who would serve the nation in need. They had managed to achieve incremental growth of state and federal militia budgets, and forge ever-closer ties to the federal army via inspectors and instructors. The money and the training had produced visible results in increasing professionalization and standardization among the National Guards. Pointing to their real achievements, dedicated National Guardsmen around the country insisted that they had indeed become a reserve army even before the war with Spain. The most potent challenge to their claim was the charge that they were little more than play soldiers, boys who knew nothing of real war. The Spanish American War offered National Guardsmen the opportunity they had been seeking to prove that they, and their institution, were indeed the reserve army they believed themselves to be.