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## FLORIDA VOLUNTEERS IN THE WAR WITH SPAIN, 1898 \*

*by* WILLIAM SCHELLINGS

FOR MANY YEARS the Spanish American War has been referred to as a "Splendid Little War." John Hay first used the term to describe the war in a letter to his friend Theodore Roosevelt and Teddy, without doubt, fully agreed. Recently Professor Frank Freidel used the same words to title a book concerning that war. Perhaps many of the participants in the Second World War, or the Korean conflict, would also agree that the war with Spain was a comparatively splendid affair as wars go. Imagine a war in which there was no draft, and that was fought largely by regular army troops while nearly 200,000 volunteers remained in camp! A war in which the enlisted men elected the company officers after all the ritual and excitement of a local political campaign certainly offers a picture far from that presented in the 1940's or the 1950's. One more thing that makes this war in 1898 attractive to later soldiers is simply the fact that there were very few battle casualties.

But to do the men of 1898 justice the vast majority of them did not weigh these factors before deciding to enlist. They went to the recruiting office and signed up in a spirit far removed from that of recent years. Whereas in the past few years men have accepted military service as a fact of modern life, as a necessity and a duty, as part of an effort required to preserve our way of life, men in 1898 volunteered as though for a crusade and one in which they strongly believed. The volunteers shared the sentiment of the general public in every way. They did not see a prospect of a dirty campaign in a tropical island, nor did they contemplate the possibility of a miserable death in a field hospital far from home. They did see an opportunity, even a duty, to aid an oppressed people to gain independence and, they

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\* The material for this paper has been drawn largely from William Schellings, "The Role of Florida in the Spanish American War, 1898." (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Florida, 1958). In addition to the above, a convenient summary of the history of the First Florida is available in "Florida in the Spanish American War, 1898-1899," a typescript in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

thought, democracy. They were repulsed by a Spanish ruling class that was pictured in the popular literature of the day as a cruel, barbarous, bloodthirsty clique. Added attractions of the war were seen as a chance to wear a military costume complete with glistening boots and shining swords, an opportunity to win martial glory and everlasting fame and possibly the heart of a fair one left behind.

Needless to say, these eager volunteers were due to be disillusioned. There were blue flannel uniforms, rifles of Civil War vintage that emitted clouds of black smoke with every shot, and worst of all, no enemy to face, no gallant charges to make, no glory to be won. Save for a few fortunate regiments, and even fewer individuals on detached service, the volunteers faced no enemy save Florida mosquitoes and fought no battles save those against unbelievable amounts of sand and torrential rains. For that is what nearly 80,000 volunteers met as they spent the weary months of the war in Florida those long years ago. Fate must have seemed to be particularly ironic to the Florida volunteers, as they did not even have the faint satisfaction of being far from home. Except for the few who were attached to a separate unit of engineers, and a few others in a regiment of "immunes," no Florida volunteer managed to reach Cuba. Their dreams of participating in a glorious victory over the Spanish tyrants vanished in the summer heat of camps in Tampa, Fernandina, and in Huntsville, Alabama.

These Floridians had fully shared in the national enthusiasm for the war. Organized before the war in the companies of the Florida National Guard, they had recruited their ranks to full strength, and had drilled and marched for long weeks before President McKinley had called for volunteers. They had looked forward to the battle, and, like Teddy Roosevelt, had feared only that the war might be over before they had a chance to get to Cuba.

The optimism that underlay that fear was shared by the highest officials in the War Department, although it may be difficult to understand the basis for that feeling. Secretary of War Russell Alger had predicted that the Army would be able to throw 40,000 soldiers into Cuba within ten days. Army officers had gone even further, saying that an army of 100,000 would be sent in the same time. A sad awakening was to take

place. On April 11 the President sent a message to Congress asking for authority to use the Army and Navy in the Cuban crisis. By April 20 Congress managed to agree on the wording of a joint resolution conferring the desired authority, and the President thereupon signed it. On April 25 Congress passed a declaration of war against Spain, and made it retroactive to April 21.

That made it necessary to actually fight the war and, preferably, win it. It was suddenly realized that before an army of 40,000, or 100,000 men could be sent to Cuba, such an army would have to be created. The regular army consisted of some 28,000 men scattered the country over in Indian posts. Of these only 16,000 could be considered as combat troops. Even Congress realized this and on April 22 it approved a bill authorizing the President to call for volunteers. McKinley issued such a call the next day asking for 125,000 men. Each state was assigned a quota, theoretically in such a way that it could permit its National Guardsmen to volunteer en masse, though not as units. It was thought that the Guard regiments were already equipped, trained, and ready for service. In some cases, as in that of the Florida regiment, this was largely true, but in others, such as the Second Georgia, which arrived in camp wearing uniforms of Confederate gray, it was not.

Adjutant General H. C. Corbin sent telegrams to the governors of the various states notifying each of the number and type of troops that state was to supply. On April 23 Governor Bloxham of Florida received his notice, informing him that Florida's quota was to be one regiment of infantry. This telegram gave the Governor a serious political headache. One regiment of infantry could be translated into meaning no more than twelve companies, and Florida's Guard was organized into twenty such companies. Each and every one not only wanted to serve but expected, nay, demanded that it be chosen for service. Not unnaturally, as each company was organized in and made up of men from a particular locality, each had its own distinctive name and local pride, and no one of them was willing to even consider giving up its claim. Each, too, had its own local political connections.

For a while the Governor delayed announcing which companies would be used. While he was trying to secure a larger quota for the state, he sent State Inspector General J. B. Ander-

son to Tampa to select a site for a state camp. State Adjutant General Patrick Houston was sent on a tour of the state, visiting each company to determine its state of readiness. Despite this show of activity, the delay in issuing a call for specific companies aroused quite a bit of protest. The *Times-Union and Citizen* of Jacksonville demanded several times that the Governor make up his mind and end the uncertainty. Finally, on May 4 a temporary solution was found. The Governor ordered all twenty companies to report to the state camp at Tampa, there to undergo inspection.

While the state troops were first waiting, and then gathering at Tampa, other Floridians were acting on their own. Several individuals attempted to emulate Theodore Roosevelt. J. H. Norton of Jacksonville, identified by the *Times-Union and Citizen* as an "incapacitated insurance man," sent out a call for 1,000 men to enlist in a regiment to be commanded by himself and to be offered to the federal government. In Ocala a Colonel T. D. Lancaster announced that he was taking applications for membership in a brigade of Florida and Georgia cowboys he wanted to offer to the Army. In Pensacola Mr. J. Hazzard declared he was going to raise another regiment of cowboys, this time limited to Florida men, and that he was going to oversee their training as "Rough Riders."

Other Floridians wanted to participate in the war without having to join the Army. Several men in Tampa announced that they planned to engage in privateering, and asked for volunteers. While this, as with the other schemes, came to naught, the efforts to share in the war effort in a direct fashion was indicative of the feelings of many people. Others seeking to do their bit in the wartime emergency, though not in quite so direct a manner, were more successful. Up and down the length of Florida the men of the coastal towns made their own preparations for war. Fearful that the Army might not be able to afford a proper defense, these men set to work organizing "Home Guard Units." Several well-known political figures took leading parts in this effort. In St. Augustine Senator Gaillard headed one company of local men. In Jacksonville ex-Governor Fleming was elected a captain of another unit. R. P. Reese commanded the Pensacola company. H. F. Bowen was chosen 'Chairman' of the Orlando unit. B. E. Hambleton led 200 Miami men. In all,

with a total of more than a dozen companies formed, the state requested that the Federal Government supply 2,000 rifles with which to arm the home guard troops. While these men saw no real service, they did drill, march, and practice shooting for all they were worth. Their service, while it turned out to be unnecessary, was another indication of the height of the war fever that swept the country. The men deserve praise for their service even though when the sun was too hot they were able to postpone drill, or perhaps seek shelter in a nearby taproom. But that was perhaps another sign of intelligence on their part, and should not be held against them.

The first Floridians to see actual service in the federal forces were the members of the Florida naval militia. This organization proffered its services early in April, 1898, before the outbreak of hostilities. On April 17 the Jacksonville unit was accepted by the Navy, and was ordered to send men to establish a signal station at the mouth of the St. Johns River. The Tampa men were next, and established similar stations on Egmont Key, Sanibel Island, and the Dry Tortugas. The Pensacola unit also was called into service, and set up another station on Santa Rosa Island. In addition, sixty men of the Florida naval militia were assigned to various auxiliary ships in the Navy. Out of the total strength of two hundred men and twenty-four officers, ninety-three men and six officers went into active duty service.

Meanwhile at Tampa vain efforts were being made to persuade the men in some of the twenty companies of state troops to agree to disband their companies and join others. This would have brought all units to full strength, that is, all of the twelve that would be accepted by the Army. Not one company would agree to disband, and every one demanded that it be one of the twelve. The Governor continued to delay until the Federal medical officers arrived to make their examination of the men. The examination was completed by May 22, and the Governor could delay no longer. On May 23 he announced the names of the twelve companies that would form the new First Florida Volunteer Infantry.

The fortunate twelve were: the Ocala Rifles, the Leesburg Rifles, Orlando's Shine Guards, Palatka's Gem City Guards, the Jacksonville Light Infantry and the Jacksonville Rifles, the St. Augustine Rifles, Pensacola's Escambia Rifles, the Chipley Light

Infantry, the Gadsden Guards, the Bradford County Guards, and Live Oak's Suwanee Rifles. The other eight companies were ordered to return home and await an expected second call for troops. Several, however, were so disheartened that they threatened to disband entirely and the Tampa Rifles did just that. Some of the individuals thus released joined other units, with several enlisting in the regular army.

The troops forming the new First Florida were directed to hold elections for company officers. The Governor appointed regimental and battalion commanders. William F. Williams was named colonel, but only after a spirited newspaper discussion of his merits as compared to those of Thomas F. Woodruff. The latter, a former West Pointer, withdrew from the race, and Williams received the support of nearly all concerned. With that matter settled the regiment marched out of the state camp at Ft. Brooke, and occupied a new camp at Palmetto Beach, a short distance away. Here, on May 23, the forty-eight officers and 956 enlisted men were sworn into Federal service.<sup>1</sup>

The presence of the Florida boys in Tampa did nothing to lessen the increasing numbers of visitors in the city. Governor Bloxham headed a long list of dignitaries who made their presence known, and friends, families, and sweethearts arrived in large numbers. Home town newspapers, each with its own correspondent in the ranks, publicized the activities of the troops, and urged people to go and visit them. The *Times-Union and Citizen* was typical. Praising the valor of the men, calling them "our darling boys," it urged parents and friends to take advantage of special excursion rates being offered by the Plant System.

The dispatches published in the various papers were rather revealing. Apparently the Florida men complained and grumbled about the heat and the sand just as much as did men from other, cooler climes. It was also obvious that the men thought they were occupying the "best camp" in the city, an attitude that was to undergo sharp revision, and that they were adjusting to army life

1. The records of the War Department contain conflicting statements of the numbers attributed to the First Florida. Those adopted here, have been checked most thoroughly, and adopted only after careful comparison of all records concerned. Those interested might compare the numbers given in *Correspondence Relating to the War with Spain*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1902), with those in *Reports of the War Department for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1899*, Vol. I, Part 2.

rather easily, even to the constant marching and drilling. They seemed to enjoy themselves, and as one correspondent put it, "If the boys of Company I face the cannon as unflinchingly as they face the camera, they will all be heroes."

Serious complaints were few and far between until after General Shafter departed with the Cuban expedition on June 14. Left behind in Tampa, the Florida soldiers, gradually becoming aware that the war might really be over before they even left Tampa, were less happy about army life. For some time, however, everything went along smoothly enough. The different companies advertised in their newspapers for additional recruits, and little by little built up to full strength. The men wrote home frequently and excerpts from the letters were published in the newspapers. It was clear that the Florida men were convinced that their regiment was far superior to others, and that they resented being left in Tampa. Some men were detached from the First Florida, and formed part of a battalion of engineers under Major Sackett of St. Augustine. The rest of the unit remained where they were, very much disgruntled by the turn of events.

Even the arrival on June 30 of a set of regimental colors did little to cheer them up. A delegation of men from Jacksonville arrived to present the colors to the outfit at a ceremony held on June 30. The colors had been purchased with the proceeds of a drive for funds conducted by the *Times-Union and Citizen*, and were presented by the editor-in-chief, George W. Wilson, aided by ex-Governor Mitchell. In speeches made on the happy occasion the men were praised highly, being held up as examples of the finest American manhood.

Shortly after that, however, a sour note was heard. The *Pensacola Daily Journal*, on July 2, criticised the First Florida as being below standard in military tactics and as lacking in discipline. The paper hastened to add that the regiment was made up of the "very cream of Florida." Other papers also noted the lack of discipline, but this should be discounted. It is certain that the men of the First Florida, though they may not have been as completely disciplined as regular army troops, did not share in the headlines as much as did several other regiments. Seldom was the name of the regiment mentioned in dispatches about the disorders in Tampa, however, it is equally certain that the men in the First



Florida were by July highly dissatisfied with army life in general and with the camp in Tampa in particular. The colonel, Williams, had resigned to return to civilian life on June 24, and had been replaced by Major Charles P. Lovell. The enlisted men were not able to resign as easily, much as some of them may have wanted to do so.

Probably one of the most serious causes of the discontent was the fact that the camp had become actually unpleasant. Tampa had received more than its customary amount of rain in June, and even more in July. Many of the camps became water-logged and that of the First Florida was particularly bad. Immediately behind it was a large corral, normally holding several hundred horses and mules, and the rains washed a good deal of the surface soil down into the tent area. This naturally tended to make the area disagreeable to walk around in, and extremely unpleasant and even offensive to the nostrils. Despite the availability of several other areas that were more dry the regiment remained in that location until July 21, when it was ordered to entrain for a new camp at Fernandina.

The east coast town had long been trying to secure a camp, and it eagerly awaited the arrival of the troops. In addition to the First Florida, several other regiments were to be sent there, but Fernandina was especially anxious to greet the soldiers of the Florida unit. The town believed that it had made more than adequate arrangements for the troops, but it was quickly disillusioned. The soldiers disagreed. From the first day until the day on which they departed, the complaints about the camp were long, loud, and frequent. The weather was clear, the ground dry, and the townspeople cordial. Nevertheless the complaints continued. The heat, the fact that beach was one mile away from the camp, the food, all were apparently worse than ever before experienced. More serious were the charges registered about the camp itself. According to a dispatch published in the *Ocala Banner*, the camp was located on ground that had not been cleared of scrub, and the men had to labor long and hard to remove the undergrowth. A man in the Third Pennsylvania wrote that they had had to clear away a "tropical jungle," and that even then they were camped in a swamp.

The Florida men grumbled as loudly, and secured their revenge just before departing. On August 21 they staged a parade

through the town. Every other man carried either a grub hoe, an ax, or a shovel, and others carried banners reading "The First Florida Land and Improvement Company." In the center of town the parade halted, and the soldiers gave testimony of another sore point. An order was read aloud directing the town to erect a monument to those men who had joined up to "fight for their country after the war was over." Apparently recruits were still arriving, yet the war had ended on August 12 with the signing of an armistice.

With the war over, the volunteer troops had nothing to look forward to except occupation duty. Consequently their discontent increased rapidly, since they had not enlisted for anything but the prospect of sharing in an actual campaign. For many the prospect was made far worse by the tales of the ravages of tropical fevers among the troops in Cuba. This was not sufficient to discourage all the volunteers, and some even now volunteered for duty in special regiments of so-called "immunes," men supposed to be immune to tropical diseases. But among the majority of the men the situation was not one to be enjoyed. At first the major sign of unrest could be seen in the rising complaints against the camp at Fernandina. Demands were heard that the troops be removed to a different area. It was declared that the Fernandina grounds were swampy, and that they were the breeding ground for swarms of mosquitoes that made life unbearable for the men. One Florida man has left this description of the pests: "Some had hammers and chisels with which to cut down the hammocks. . . . When finally exhaustion brought sleep, (the men) soon woke up thinking that the bugle was blowing, only to find that it was the buzzing of myriads of mosquitoes."

The agitation against the camp at Fernandina was finally successful. Orders were received to entrain for a new camp at Huntsville, Alabama, and on August 23, one month after their arrival in Fernandina, the First Florida departed, much to their joy, and much to the disgruntlement of the townspeople. At their new camp in Alabama, however, the men quickly discovered that life in one army camp was very much like life in any other. The heat was still oppressive, the prospect for active service was dim, and the men still discontented. The regiment soon divided into two groups. The largest of the two consisted of those who desired to be discharged from service. The smaller was made up

of those who wished to remain in service. One correspondent wrote that fully eighty percent of the men wanted a discharge. A few men deserted. A charge was aired that officers were threatening a court martial for anyone who petitioned for a discharge. Adjutant H. W. Fowler expressed the feelings of the officers, on the other hand, when he wrote to the *Palatka Advertiser*: "Three-quarters of the men have seen more, eaten better food, worn better clothes, received more money for their services, and been treated with more consideration since they enlisted than ever before in their lives or ever will be in the future." If Fowler wrote truthfully, then either the Florida volunteers had been in sad shape prior to enlistment, or Army rations have been severely maligned. In any case, his letter certainly exposed the existence of a vast gulf between officers and men and, as the editor of the *Ocala Banner* commented, it was fairly sure that Fowler would not be a successful candidate for political office in the Palatka area.

An interesting contrast in opinions about the caliber of the men of the First Florida appeared when the *Huntsville Tribune* published an article about the regiment. It declared that Huntsville was glad to have them in town, and that the "First Florida was an honor to Florida. The men were gentlemen, and were accepted by the best Huntsville society. It is the most popular regiment that has ever been here." One might compare that estimate with the opinion of Adjutant Fowler, and then wonder just what the "best society" of Huntsville was like.

There was little time left for any further dispute. On October 8 the 1st and 2nd Battalions were ordered mustered out of service. The 3rd Battalion was to remain in the Army, and an opportunity was offered to the men to transfer to or out of the 3rd, depending on whether the individual desired to go home, or to remain in service. The two battalions departed from Huntsville on the 8th, and arrived in Tallahassee on October 11. There, on October 16, they were granted a thirty day furlough. Upon their return to Tallahassee, the troops checked in their equipment, and on December 3 were mustered out of the Army.

The 3rd Battalion remained at Huntsville until January 27, 1899, at which time it was also discharged from further duty. With that, the First Florida Volunteer Infantry passed out of existence. During its lifespan, it had suffered a number of casual-

ties, as follows: 1 officer and 27 enlisted men died from disease, 2 enlisted men were murdered, 19 enlisted men deserted. The strength of the regiment had risen to a total of 48 officers and 1,135 enlisted men at the time of their discharge. Of all the eager volunteers who had been so anxious to see action against the enemy, the only ones who even managed to reach Cuba were those few who had been detached from the regiment for service elsewhere. As a unit, the regiment got no farther away from home than Alabama.

There was, however, a different group of Floridians who did manage to serve in Cuba. This was Company C of the Third United States Volunteer Infantry, one of the famed regiments of "immunes." Company C was made up of five officers and ninety-eight enlisted men, all from Florida. They were mustered into service on June 17, 1898, served in Guantanamo, Cuba, and were discharged on May 2, 1899. If nothing else they demonstrated conclusively that they were not really "immune." One man, Hugh Blount, died in Cuba, a victim of an unspecified fever. Blount, however, was not the only Floridian who is known to have died in service while in Cuba. Another, Private William Jones, had joined the Ninth Illinois when he was discharged from the First Florida, and died in Havana, a victim of spinal meningitis.

One last group of Floridians remains to be mentioned, Florida did not have any military unit for Negroes, but Alabama did. The Third Alabama Volunteer Infantry was formed in July, 1898, and recruiting officers toured Florida for recruits. Their efforts were rewarded by the enlistment of at least one group of seventy-five Negroes from the Pensacola area. The *Daily Journal* of that city gave them quite a bit of publicity, and when they left to join the regiment, the newspaper joined in urging that the colored population of Pensacola escort the recruits to the railroad station. As the editor said, "These gallant men meet with hearty approval." It might be noted, though, that when he urged the Negroes to see their friends off, he was careful to phrase it in such a way that it could not be understood as an invitation for anyone to take a day off from work.

Doubtless there were other Floridians who served in the armed forces, and who did so with great credit to themselves and to the state, but their names and records are hidden in the files

of whatever regiment they served in, whether it was a regular army unit, or one of the unofficial groups formed by the Cuban-Americans. But even without counting them, it is evident that the state supplied almost exactly the number of men to the army that corresponded to the ratio of the state population to the national population. In this, as in nearly all other respects, the story of the Florida volunteers was very much like that of any other group of volunteers; they were a credit to the state and to the nation in their eagerness to serve, and there can be no doubt of their willingness to take part in actual combat. Despite that it was probably just as well for all concerned that the war was one that could be termed a "Splendid Little War."

## APPENDIX

LIST OF THE CASUALTIES SUFFERED IN 1898 BY THE FIRST FLORIDA VOLUNTEER INFANTRY, INCLUDING DESERTERS. Listed by companies, with date and place of death.

- Co. A, Ocala Rifles, Capt. Robert E. Davidson, commanding.  
 Died: Alfred Brown, August 22, at Fernandina.  
 Deserted: Sam Agnew, August 8; Holmes Coon, August 8; George Hinson, August 7; all at Huntsville.
- Co. B, Leesburg Rifles, Capt. George E. Lovell, commanding.  
 Died: John L. Stone, Fernandina, August 28.  
 Deserted: George Otto, August 11, Fernandina; James D. Havens, Huntsville, November 18; George L. Denham, Huntsville, November 25.
- Co. C, Shine Guards, Capt. John Bradshaw, commanding.  
 Died: John A. Anderson, August 15, Ft. McPherson, Ga.  
 Deserted: Wm. DeCantillon, Huntsville, August 28; Eugene Lee, Huntsville, October 8; Hugh Dumsuer, dropped from rolls July 18, as deserter from the Navy.
- Co. D, Gem City Guards, Capt. Wm. Husson, commanding.  
 Died: John M. Crews, Fernandina, September 12; Don DuMaurier, Fernandina, August 6; Vollie T. Sullivan, Huntsville, September 16.  
 Deserted: None.
- Co. E, Jacksonville Light Infantry, Capt. John Maxwell, command.  
 Died: Frank E. Willard, Huntsville, September 29.  
 Deserted: None.

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- Co. F, Jacksonville Rifles, Capt. James Wilson, commanding.  
Died: Hugh Etheridge, Huntsville, September 22.  
Deserted: None.
- Co. G, St. Augustine Rifles, Capt. Frank Howett, commanding.  
Died: Edwin J. Owen, Tampa, July 12;  
Harold Neligan, Huntsville, December 11;  
George Beverly, Huntsville, December 11;  
Alvin Willis, Fernandina, August 19;  
Albert Button, Ft. McPherson, Ga., September 1.  
Deserted: Albert Ferrell, Huntsville, September 25;  
Garron Lee, Tampa, June 3;  
William J. Lewis, Huntsville, September 18.
- Co. H, Escambia Rifles, Capt. Bushness, commanding.  
Died: None.  
Deserted: Wm. L. Alsbrook, Fernandina, July 30.
- Co. I, Chipley Light Infantry, Capt. Richard Cary, commanding.  
Died : Wm. J. Walton, Ft. Barrancas, September 29;  
Thomas McLaughlin, Ft. Thomas, Ky., September 11;  
Philip Landmesser, Fernandina, August 15;  
Allie Harris, Fernandina, August 19;  
Yon A. Anderson, Ft. McPherson, August 15.  
Deserted: James Dawson, Tampa, June 7;  
Charles W. Hill, Tampa, July 21.
- Co. K, Gadsden Guards, Capt. Samuel Williamson, commanding.  
Died : Charles B. Kirkpatrick, Huntsville, Sept. 14;  
Eugene Stokes, Ft. Thomas, Ky., July 25;  
Thomas Munroe, Quincy, August 28;  
Robert Chester, Fernandina, no date given;  
Marion Duboise, Fernandina, August 17.  
Deserted: None.
- Co. L, Suwanee Rifles, Capt. Willie Tedder, commanding.  
Died: None.  
Deserted : H. D. Puckett, Fernandina, August 4.
- Co. M, Braford County Guards, Capt. Eugene Matthews, commanding.  
Died: John S. Tanner, Huntsville, October 23;  
John Wilkes, Fernandina, August 10;  
Isaac Wilson, Alachua, October 22.  
Deserted : Albert E. Lipwood, Huntsville, September 2.

The information in the above list has been taken from the typescript in the Library of Florida History, University of Florida, entitled, "Florida in the Spanish American War, 1898."