

The Spanish-American War & the Presidio

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Presidio of San Francisco
Golden Gate National Recreation Area



The 51st Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment marches through the Presidio's Lombard Street Gate in 1898, bound for Manila.

Preparing for War!

The marks of the brief war with Spain and the longer conflict with the Filipinos are evident throughout the Presidio.

On April 21, 1898, the United States declared war against Spain. The causes of the conflict were many, but the immediate ones were America's support of Cuba's ongoing struggle against Spanish rule and the mysterious explosion of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana Harbor. This was the first overseas war fought by the United States, involving campaigns in both Cuba and the Philippine Islands.

The Spanish fleet guarding the Philippines was defeated by the U.S. Navy under the command of Commodore George Dewey on May 1, 1898. Unaware of Dewey's success, President McKinley authorized the assembling of troops in order to mount a campaign against the capital of Manila. The military base best suited as the staging point for troops bound for the Philippines was the Presidio of San Francisco. The majority of these soldiers were volunteers, originating from all over the United States, gathering and training at the Presidio before the long sea voyage to the Philippines and their part in, as Secretary of State John Hay put it, the "splendid little war."

The Presidio's Role

The Presidio was a natural staging point because of its proximity to the finest harbor on the west coast, and possessed enough land to house and train large numbers of troops for service in the Philippines. The first soldiers left the Presidio in May 1898, and consisted of the 1st California Infantry and the 2nd Oregon Infantry Regiments. Soon soldiers from Washington, Montana, Iowa, Wyoming, Kansas, Tennessee, and Utah would be stationed at the Presidio in addition to the

regular garrison. From the beginning of the war to 1900, some 80,000 men had passed through the post on their way to the Philippines. At the turn of the century, San Francisco offered many attractions, but army life at the Presidio was cramped and sickness often flared up in the temporary tent camps. This situation prompted the military to improve troop facilities and this helped change the face of the Presidio over the ensuing years.

Fighting in the Philippines



Tent camps were established on the Presidio to handle the thousands of soldiers preparing for transport to the Philippines, 1898.

Most Presidio troops got to the islands too late to fight the Spanish in the brief war. However Philippine rebels had been waging guerrilla warfare against Spanish colonialism long before the U.S. became involved. Their exiled leader, Emilio Aquinaldo, quickly made contact with the attacking force already on its way to the Philippines, in the belief that the United States would help the "Insurrectos" gain independence from Spain. But expansionists in the U.S. government had other plans. After the signing of the Treaty of Paris, on December 10, 1898, which ended the war against Spain, the United States opted to give Cuba its independence but keep the Philippines, to the dismay of the Philippine nationalists.

The Philippine Fight for Independence

The United States' drive to extend influence across the Pacific instigated a Philippine-American War. Fighting broke out on Feb. 4, 1899, and eventually far exceeded that against Spain. At the outbreak, the U.S. had only a small amount of troops in the Philippines compared to Aquinaldo's 40,000 fighters. American troop strength increased until 1901 when it numbered 75,000. Nearly all of the troops sent to fight in the Philippines spent time at the Presidio. On March 23, 1901, Colonel Frederick Funston, commander of the 20th Kansas Infantry Regiment which had

been stationed at the Presidio, captured the nationalist leader Aquinaldo. Funston's daring actions in the Philippines earned the Medal of Honor and a promotion to Brigadier General. The fighting diminished after Aquinaldo's capture, but Theodore Roosevelt did not officially end the war until July 4, 1902.

The United State's Role in World Politics

The Spanish-American War and its aftermath delayed Philippine independence until after World War II, but established a relationship that fostered a substantial Filipino population within U.S. borders. The United States emerged as an influential world power with its new overseas possessions (the Philippines, Guam, Hawaii,

and Puerto Rico), and started on a path that would affect its role in international affairs for the future century.

Impact of the Spanish American War on the Presidio

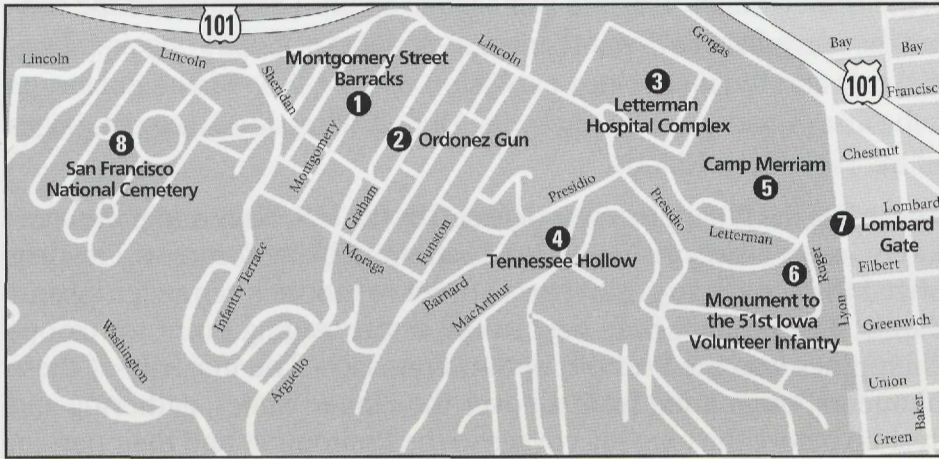
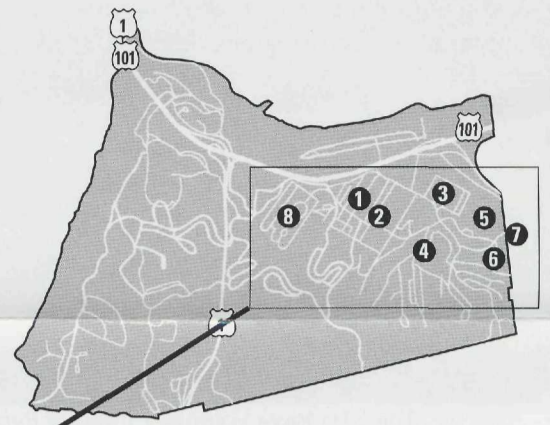
The mark of the brief war with Spain and the longer conflict with the Philippines is evident throughout the Presidio. The arrival of large numbers of troops spurred its transition from a frontier military outpost to a modern army base.

Buildings erected because of needed post expansion and modification, like the Montgomery Street Barracks and the Letterman Hospital complex, are now an important part of the historic scene.

Sites on the Presidio related to the Spanish-American War

1. Montgomery Street Barracks

These five brick barracks, located along Montgomery Street, were constructed between 1895 and 1897 and represent post expansion and the Army's desire for more permanent quarters at the Presidio on the eve of overseas involvement. On the first floor of each barracks were a kitchen and mess hall that catered to the two companies of 109 men stationed there. With the burden of caring for the large numbers of sick troops from the damp and sandy Camp Merritt, the Army General Field Hospital temporarily took over some of these barracks in 1898.



5. Camp Merriam

This camp was named after Brigadier General Henry C. Merriam, the commanding general of the Department of California in 1898. Located on the eastern border of the Presidio close to the Lombard Gate entrance (now the site of the Letterman Digital Arts Center), this camp housed the first volunteers shipped to the Philippines. The living conditions at Camp Merriam were considered by the troops to be far superior to those at Camp Merritt, which was located just south of the Arguello Boulevard Gate.

2. Ordonez Gun

This artillery piece was developed by Spanish Captain Salvador Diaz Ordonez in 1880, and was used to defend Spanish harbors, military installations and overseas possessions. This particular weapon was supposedly damaged at Subic Bay in the Philippines by shellfire from the U.S.S. Charleston in September of 1899. But some historians believe an explosion of a shell inside the gun damaged the barrel instead of a direct hit. Publisher William Randolph Hearst brought the gun to San Francisco, and the Army acquired it in 1973 to exhibit at the Presidio.

6. Monument to the 51st Iowa Volunteer Infantry

A stone monument at the corner of Rucker Street and Sherman Road marks the camp site of the 51st Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which trained at Camp Merriam prior to service in the Philippines from 1898-1899. On either side of Rucker Street are infantry barracks built between 1903-1909 to provide better quarters for troops on their way to the possessions that the United States acquired because of its expansion into the Pacific.

3. Letterman Hospital Complex

This site had its beginnings when the tent hospital at Camp Merritt, a temporary encampment just south of the Presidio, was overwhelmed with large numbers of troops sickened by unhealthy living conditions. The hospital moved onto the Presidio grounds when Camp Merritt closed in the summer of 1898. The permanent U.S. Army General Field Hospital was established at this location because of its proximity to transient troops and its accessibility to the docks for unloading patients from ships. The first stage of the hospital complex was completed in June 1899 and was praised as a model modern hospital.

7. Lombard Gate

Two sandstone pillars, ornamented with army insignia and flanked by cannon captured during the Spanish-American War mark the Presidio's main entrance at Lombard Street. The gate was constructed in 1896 as a part of a program to permanently mark the boundaries in stone and improve the post's appearance to the people of San Francisco. Most troops en route to the Philippines passed through this gate to meet their awaiting ships.

4. Tennessee Hollow

This was the site of the tent encampment of the 1st Tennessee and 1st Utah Volunteer Infantry Regiments in May 1898. Once called Camp Miller, it split into two separate camps, Merriam on the eastern border of the post, and Tennessee Hollow, geographically separated by a low ridge. Tennessee Hollow, in the valley east of Officers' Row along Funston Avenue, was an open ravine at that time.

8. San Francisco National Cemetery

In 1884 the War Department designated the former post cemetery and surrounding land as the first National Cemetery on the West Coast. It gradually accumulated more land, because of the inclusion of burials from abandoned forts around the western U.S. and the casualties of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American conflict, until reaching its current size of 28 acres. Major Generals Frederick Funston, who captured Aguinaldo, and William R. Shafter, commander of U.S. Army forces in Cuba during the war, are buried in the San Francisco National Cemetery on the Presidio.

