A distinction well-earned

Cape Medal of Honor winner risked his life a century ago

By PAUL GAUVIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

One hundred years ago today, the United States and Spain signed a peace treaty in Paris officially ending what was called a "splendid little war" largely fought in Cuba's harbors.

Lt. Col. Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt got all the publicity and eventually became president. But Benjamin Franklin Baker of Dennisport got the Medal of Honor, and he is still the only Cape Cod native to receive the nation's highest military award.

The sickly and bespectacled Roosevelt was a volunteer "Rough Rider" who charged up San Juan Hill afoot and captured the American imagination as well as the hill. Baker was a solid and committed career Navy coxswain on the gunboat Nashville who volunteered for a task no less dangerous.

On May 11, 1898, Baker and 13 other volunteers went over the side in several open boats in Cienfuegos Harbor, where they were participating in a blockade of the Spanish fleet along with battleships, including the USS Massachusetts.

The mission was to find and cut the trans-Atlantic telegraph cables that linked the Spanish commanders in Cuba with Spain.

Hail of Spanish gunfire

Armed with grappling hooks and cutting implements such as axes and saws, the volunteers rowed under the cover of barrages of shellfire from ships' batteries to within 100 feet of shore, where the cables could be seen under the harbor waters.

There, Baker and the others were met with a hail of gunfire from Spanish soldiers shooting from a lighthouse, a cable cabin and assorted bunkers along the shore.

Snagging the cables with grappling hooks while dodging bullets, the sailors and Marines managed, after considerable effort, to raise one cable the size of a man's fist.

Once the cable was partly in the boat, the crew sawed and haddled for half an hour to sever a 150-foot section. The ocean end was then taken to deeper water to thwart enemy attempts to retrieve it.

Still under fire, the crews rowed toward the beach to disable a second cable while ship's batteries increased their shelling in an attempt to drive off the Spanish riflemen.

Baker and the others, already drained from the effort, managed to split a second cable, but at a price. One Marine was killed instantly by a bullet to the head, another volunteered later died of battle injuries, and several others were injured by rifle fire.

An effort to cut a third cable was called off. While the Spanish military was still able to link with Spain on the diminished cables, the United States recognized the bravery and danger of the mission by awarding Baker and about 20 crewmen the medal of honor on July 7, 1899.

Territories ceded to U.S.

As wars go, the brief hostilities with Spain over Cuba did not rise to the level of a memorable event. The war was also fought off the coast of the Philippines, where Admiral George Dewey defeated a Spanish armada.

It was 100 years ago today that Spain ceded the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico and renounced sovereignty over Cuba in the Treaty of Paris. Baker, who later served in the Philippines, the Boxer Rebellion in China and World War I, died in May 1927 of complications following surgery, according to a Dennis town history compiled by Nancy Thacher Reid.

Lest we forget — a heroic chapter in the dramatic story of America's rise to global glory rests under a simple marker in Old Swan Lake cemetery in Dennisport where Benjamin Franklin Baker was laid to rest.

Sources include: “American History” by Richard B. Morris, a Dennis town history by Nancy Thacher Reid and an article by Warren Zimmerman in “Wilson Quarterly.”

The mission was to find and cut the trans-Atlantic telegraph cables that linked the Spanish commanders in Cuba with Spain.
Benjamin Franklin Baker, seated, far left, of Dennisport and other Medal of Honor recipients aboard the Nashville after their successful mission during the Spanish-American War. The officer at the center of the photo did not receive a medal, although he did earn a promotion.
drained from the effort, managed
to split a second cable, but at a
price. One Marine was killed
instantly by a bullet to the head,
another volunteer later died of
battle injuries, and several others
were injured by rifle fire.
An effort to cut a third cable
was called off. While the Spanish
military was still able to link with
Spain on the diminished cables,
the United States recognized the
bravery and danger of the mission
by awarding Baker and about 20
crewmen the medal of honor on
July 7, 1899.

Territories ceded to U.S.
As wars go, the brief hostilities
with Spain over Cuba did not rise
to the level of a memorable event.
The war was also fought off the
coast of the Philippines, where
Admiral George Dewey defeated a
Spanish armada.

It was 100 years ago today that
Spain ceded the Philippines,
Guam and Puerto Rico and
renounced sovereignty over Cuba
Baker, who later served in the
Philippines, the Boxer Rebellion
in China and World War I, died in
May 1927 of complications follow-
surgery, according to a Dennis
town history compiled by Nancy
Thacher Reid.
Lest we forget — a heroic chap-
ter in the dramatic story of Ameri-
can's rise to global glory rests
under a simple marker in Old
Swan Lake cemetery in Dennis-
port where Benjamin Franklin
Baker was laid to rest.

Sources include: “American
History” by Richard B. Morris,
a Dennis town history by Nancy
Thacher Reid and an article by
Warren Zimmerman in “Wilson
Quarterly.”

and cut the trans-Atlantic telegraph cables that linked the
Spanish commanders in Cuba with Spain.
A distinction well-earned
Cape Medal of Honor winner risked his life a century ago

By PAUL GAUVIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

One hundred years ago today, the United States and Spain signed a peace treaty in Paris officially ending what was called a "splendid little war" largely fought in Cuba's harbors.

Lt. Col. Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt got all the publicity and eventually became president. But Benjamin Franklin Baker of Dennisport got the Medal of Honor, and he is still the only Cape Cod native to receive the nation's highest military award.

The sickly and bespectacled Roosevelt was a volunteer "Rough Rider" who charged up San Juan Hill afoot and captured the American imagination as well as the hill. Baker was a solid and committed career Navy coxswain on the gunboat Nashville who volunteered for a task no less dangerous.

On May 11, 1898, Baker and 13 other volunteers went over the side in several open boats in Cienfuegos Harbor, where they were participating in a blockade of the Spanish fleet along with battleships, including the USS Massachusetts.

The mission was to find and cut the trans-Atlantic telegraph cables that linked the Spanish commanders in Cuba with Spain.

Hail of Spanish gunfire

Armed with grappling hooks and cutting implements such as axes and saws, the volunteers rowed under the cover of barrages of shellfire from ships' batteries to within 100 feet of shore, where the cables could be seen under the harbor waters.

There, Baker and the others were met with a hail of gunfire from Spanish soldiers shooting from a lighthouse, a cable cabin and assorted bunkers along the shore.

Snagging the cables with grappling hooks while dodging bullets, the sailors and Marines managed, after considerable effort, to raise one cable the size of a man's fist.

Once the cable was partly in the boat, the crew sawed and hacked for half an hour to sever a 150-foot section. The ocean end was then taken to deeper water to thwart enemy attempts to retrieve it.

Still under fire, the crews rowed toward the beach to disable a second cable while ship's batteries increased their shelling in an attempt to drive off the Spanish riflemen.

Baker and the others, already...