



William Jennings Bryan, the Soldier

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Photographs / Images: Bryan and Major General Fitzhugh Lee; Company M, Third Nebraska Volunteer Infantry, in training at Pablo Beach, Florida, 1898



Colonel William Jennings Bryan and Major General Fitzhugh Lee,
presumably in front of Colonel Bryan's tent.

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, THE SOLDIER

BY J. R. JOHNSON

IT seems a bit ironical that William Jennings Bryan, a man so devoted to ways of peace, should be laid to rest in a military cemetery. Few people, perhaps, have ever given it a thought. Yet, when the Great Commoner died in 1925 he was buried among the military heroes in Arlington. That honor came to him because back in 1898 he had done a five-month's stint as colonel of a regiment of Nebraska volunteers in the Spanish-American War.

It was on July 13, 1898, that Bryan was inducted into the army as colonel of the Third Nebraska Volunteer Infantry.¹ Only two years previously the "Boy Orator of the Platte" had emerged from the Democratic National Convention as the party's choice for the presidency. His ringing "Cross of Gold" speech had electrified the delegates and turned the Chicago convention hall into a bedlam. The whirlwind campaign that followed had carried Bryan into the far corners of the nation. Even though the voting favored McKinley, thousands gathered to hear Bryan's magic voice. His defeat did not still his oratory. He continued to bring his "message" to America via chautauqua and other lecture platforms. He could bide his time, for he was only thirty-six.

Most people are familiar with the main thread of Bryan's life and labor. They know him as a politician, publisher, lecturer, diplomat, religious leader, and champion of "causes." It is not so well known that he had a brief military career.

Shortly after the outbreak of war two infantry regiments and a troop of cavalry of the Nebraska National Guard were mustered into the army. These more than filled the

¹ *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), July 14, 1898.

state's quota under the President's call. Bryan had wired his erstwhile political enemy offering his services in any capacity desired.² Since he had come out boldly for intervention in the Cuban affair he could hardly do otherwise. While on an eastern tour he had declared: "The time for intervention has arrived. Humanity demands that we shall act, and act speedily."³ McKinley gave him no assignment so he proceeded on his own account. Bryan explains his action as follows:

I suppose the President's failure to assign me to duty was due to my lack of military experience. Thinking that a second call for volunteers might be necessary and feeling that I could go in upon an equal footing where all the volunteers were recruits, I undertook to raise a regiment and have had no difficulty in securing the necessary companies.⁴

If Bryan had any notion of going in on "equal footing," that idea was soon dissipated. Even though he was utterly devoid of military knowledge it apparently required only slight persuasion to get him to accept the top post as a gift from his good friend, Silas A. Holcomb, Populist governor of Nebraska. The necessary urging, if any, came from another friend, Victor Vifquain, who was made lieutenant-colonel. As to a second call for volunteers, his surmise was correct. Many others thought the same and much activity followed on the part of various individuals and organizations. A regiment of artillery was partially organized by former university cadets but was passed by in favor of the Bryan regiment when the call came through.⁵

Reports vary concerning the initial steps taken in organizing the Third Nebraska. Vifquain wrote in "Public Pulse" of the *Omaha World-Herald*, in reply to a *Lincoln State Journal* editorial, as follows:

I was authorized by Governor Holcomb to recruit Company A . . . I commenced May 19, 1898 . . . and that very day I enlisted men enough for the company. Mr. W. J. Bryan was the first recruit I enlisted. A few days afterwards I got the men together for the election of officers. Mr. Bryan

² *Ibid.*, May 29, 1898.

³ *Lincoln Evening News*, April 13, 1898.

⁴ *Nebraska State Journal*, May 29, 1898.

⁵ *Ibid.*, May 7, 24, 1898; *Rushville Recorder*, May 6, 1898.

was elected Captain but he declined. . . . Subsequently Mr. Bryan was appointed Colonel of the regiment, and proceeded to Fort Omaha for its organization. Mr. Bryan and myself had a talk about this colonelcy . . . I told him that a man of his position could not very well afford to become a private and gave him reasons therefor. He told me, 'But I know nothing about military matters.' I then told him that I would help him; that if he who had received 6,500,000 votes for commander-in-chief of the army and navy of the United States could afford to become a colonel, I could afford to come down a peg or two and become a lieutenant-colonel.⁶

A press report says Bryan was not elected captain of Company A, that his name was placed in nomination but he made a speech declining to have his name used. This is substantiated by Charles F. Schwarz, who was elected captain, and by several others. The remaining offices in the company were secured by men with university military training. It would have been embarrassing to Bryan to have met defeat in a company election.⁷

It was, indeed, fortunate for Bryan—and the regiment—that Vifquain was made second in command. Here was a man of varied and distinguished military experience. Educated in the military academy of Belgium, he had emigrated to America before the Civil War and settled in Saline County, Nebraska. He enlisted as a private in the Fifty-Third New York Infantry in June, 1861. A year later he was made an adjutant and transferred to the Ninety-Seventh Illinois Infantry. He advanced rapidly, becoming in turn a major, lieutenant-colonel and colonel. In March, 1865, he was made a brevet brigadier general by President Lincoln.⁸ He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor—the only Nebraskan to be so cited during the Civil War—for heroism at Fort Blakely, Alabama.⁹ He was a member of the Nebraska Constitutional Convention of 1871. Later, he served as United States consul in Colon and Baranquilla

⁶ *Omaha World-Herald*, September 29, 1899.

⁷ *Nebraska State Journal*, May 24, 25, 1898; Interview, Captain Charles F. Schwarz, January 4, 1933.

⁸ J. C. Coovert, *Historical Sketch and Scenes of Camp Life of the Third Regiment Nebraska Volunteer Infantry* (Vicksburg, Miss., 1898), not paged.

⁹ Federal Writers Project, *A Military History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1939), pp. 85-87.

and as consul-general in Panama.¹⁰ Such was the man who accepted second place in the Third Nebraska—a man of broad experience and of unquestioned ability, well liked by the men of the regiment.¹¹ Governor Holcomb was roundly criticized for appointing Bryan colonel. General and former Governor John M. Thayer, who had commanded the First Nebraska in the Civil War, ridiculed the idea of putting an untrained man in charge just because he was a prominent politician.¹²

More than thirty independent companies were organized over the state by zealous patriots and all clamored to be included in Bryan's regiment.¹³ He handled this delicate situation tactfully by recognizing each congressional district and avoiding towns that had companies in the First and Second regiments, except Omaha and Lincoln.¹⁴ By July 13 about 2,000 men had assembled at Fort Omaha.¹⁵ On that date Bryan, for the first time in his new uniform, was sworn in, the ceremony attracting much attention.¹⁶

The Colonel found it difficult to separate himself from civilian life. Visitors were constantly interrupting him. An editorial convention was meeting in Omaha and delegates from several states called to "shake hands with Colonel Bryan."¹⁷ Republican papers seemed to enjoy throwing barbs at him. A Lincoln paper commented:

Military life is having an excellent effect upon Mr. Bryan in assisting him to thoroughly command his will. He made an address to his troops the other evening and not a word did

¹⁰ Coover, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Interviews, Sergeant Fred C. Scarborough and Private Burt Polsky, August 2, 1933; *Omaha World-Herald*, July 16, 1898, April 12, 1899; Interview, Major C. F. Scharman, October 17, 1932.

¹² *Nebraska State Journal*, May 25, 1898.

¹³ Coover, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Report of the Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1897-1898*, p. 16; William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Philadelphia, 1925), p. 272.

¹⁵ *Report of the Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1897-1898*, pp. 7-12.

¹⁶ *Lincoln Evening News*, July 14, 1898; *Nebraska State Journal*, July 14, 1898; *Omaha World-Herald*, July 14, 1898.

¹⁷ *Omaha World-Herald*, July 14, 16, 1898.

he say about the output of silver or the relation of coinage to seigniorage.¹⁸

A rigid physical examination at Fort Omaha resulted in the rejection of nearly 700 men, leaving 1,282 pronounced fit for service.¹⁹ The Trans-Mississippi Exposition was in progress in Omaha, and July 16 was set aside as Military Day. The regiment made a long march after which it was put through maneuvers for the benefit of the Governor and his staff and some 15,000 spectators. It was extremely warm, and the men, unused to such strenuous exercise, found it a trying ordeal. Many fainted before the review ended. An elaborate fireworks display in the evening included a 16' x 35' colored portrait of Colonel Bryan in full uniform.²⁰

The Third Nebraska, because of its highly publicized colonel, undoubtedly received more attention than any volunteer unit with the possible exception of the Wood-Roosevelt "Rough Riders." This was unfortunate since the members were raw recruits without military experience. McKinley, however, could hardly refuse with good grace this offer by the recent Democratic standard bearer even though it put Nebraska more than 600 over its quota.²¹

Less than a week after the rendezvous at Fort Omaha the Third Nebraska was on its way to Jacksonville, Florida.²² News of the move south spread rapidly and warm receptions were given all along the way. One pungent account quipped:

The Third Regiment is having a very hard time of it running the doughnut and cake and ice cream trocha that the people of the south seem to have thrown across its march to Jacksonville. It is a good thing that it has with it some nice pleasing orator like Mr. Bryan to attract the attention of the audience with a well-worded little speech on the silver question while it quietly gets rid of the enfilading fire of biscuits and warm coffee.²³

Nashville turned out in force. Three hundred gallons

¹⁸ *Lincoln Evening News*, July 16, 1898.

¹⁹ *Omaha World-Herald*, July 15, 1898; Coovert, *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Nebraska State Journal*, July 17, 1898; *Lincoln Evening News*, July 16, 1898; *Omaha World-Herald*, July 16-18, 1898.

²¹ *McCook Republican*, June 17, 1898.

²² *Report of the Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1897-1898*, pp. 7-12; *Lincoln Evening News*, July 19, 1898.

²³ *Lincoln Evening News-Call*, July 21, 1898.

of coffee and 1,342 pies were consumed in short order. Eighteen hundred lunch boxes were given the men to take with them. Colonel Bryan was praised as a splendid looking soldier "handsome as Apollo himself."²⁴ Jacksonville was reached July 22 and the regiment soon settled down at Camp Cuba Libre, located four miles northeast of the city and seven miles from the Atlantic. This camp was described as "one of the most healthful in Florida" but sickness quickly made its appearance. Diarrhoea and measles came early and within three weeks typhoid invaded the regiment. More than fifty cases developed during August and several came down with malaria.²⁵ Bryan's report of September 8 listed ninety in the hospital and fifty-seven sick in quarters. In addition to these, eighty-one sick men had been sent home.²⁶

The regiment was moved to Pablo Beach, ten miles east of Jacksonville, September 10. Some improvement in health followed, though a report of September 16 revealed that twenty-five per cent were incapacitated for duty.²⁷ A second move was made October 5 to Fairfield, Florida, and on October 23 the Third was transferred to Savannah, Georgia.²⁸ Governor Holcomb visited the regiment in August and Secretary of War Russell A. Alger and his staff made a tour of the Jacksonville camps in late September.²⁹

Colonel Bryan displayed little aptitude for military duties. He absented himself much of the time, leaving Lieutenant-Colonel Vifquain in charge. He did, however, take a personal interest in the welfare of his men, frequently inspecting quarters or examining the quality of the food. He even found time for numerous individual cases.³⁰ "Indeed," said one writer, "so far has this particular trait

²⁴ *Omaha World-Herald*, July 25, 1898.

²⁵ Walter Reed, Victor C. Vaughan and Edward O. Shakespeare, *Report of the Origin and Spread of Typhoid Fever in U. S. Military Camps during the Spanish War of 1898* (Washington, 1900), I, 630, 631.

²⁶ *Lincoln Evening News*, August 19, 1898; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 27, September 9, 1898.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, September 18, 1898.

²⁸ Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, I, 630, 631.

²⁹ *Lincoln Evening News*, August 19, September 26, 1898.

³⁰ *Omaha World-Herald*, August 14, 1899.

in his generous nature been carried, that there are those who look upon his intimacy with the boys of the rank and file as demoralizing and injurious to proper army discipline."³¹ This "chummy" and sympathetic attitude created a problem for the officers who were trying to develop a crack regiment. On one occasion Bryan had the chaplain lead the troops in singing "Home, Sweet Home" when they were feeling "low." Such actions, it was contended, were hardly conducive to morale building.³²

Though lacking in the qualities of military leadership, Bryan was, nevertheless, highly popular with the regiment as well as with other units. One account says:

When he passes through the camp the men in other regiments give him a cheer, and that is something unusual. When he goes into town he is cheered in every street, and when the big review was held of the Seventh Army Corps in Jacksonville, August 31, Colonel Bryan received more cheering than did Major-General Lee, although the latter is an exceedingly popular commander throughout the whole corps.³³

Bryan, though in uniform, was still top man in the Democratic party and he made little effort to shed his political skin. He loved the applause showered upon him and, undoubtedly, longed for the day when he could again voice his thoughts freely.

The Colonel gave a great deal of attention to the moral and religious life of his men. Church services were held regularly and all were urged to attend. He would not tolerate a canteen in the regiment. Social life centered around the YMCA tent where entertainment was provided. Games, books, and magazines were available. Swimming, fishing, and boating were favorite sports. Athletic contests, especially baseball, were popular. Singfests were conducted and many whiled away their free time playing on musical instruments. In spite of the Colonel's admonition, the men gambled and spent their money freely in Jacksonville where

³¹ Coovert, *op. cit.*

³² Interviews cited, Schwarz, Scharman, and Polsky.

³³ *Omaha World-Herald*, September 11, 1898.

soldiers usually paid higher prices than civilians.³⁴

Three weeks following the arrival of the Third Nebraska in Jacksonville an armistice was signed with Spain. Now that the war apparently was over, most of the men were anxious to be sent home and Bryan set to work to accomplish that end. He, too, was eager to sever connections with the army so he could resume political activity. He could have resigned his commission at any time, but evidently thought he could bow out more gracefully if the regiment were demobilized. His subsequent action reveals the problem facing the politician in uniform.

Governor Holcomb, following his visit to camp, wrote Congressman W. L. Stark, representative from Nebraska's Fourth District, that he hoped the War Department would see fit to move the regiment to a northern state or muster it out. Stark replied that no units would be discharged until formal peace was signed.³⁵ Bryan met Holcomb in Washington in late September and, together with Stark, called at the War Department where his visit "occasioned as much interest among the employees as a returned Santiago hero." A conference was held with General Henry C. Corbin and Acting Secretary of War Meiklejohn. The next call was at Army Headquarters where the party met General Nelson A. Miles. The last stop was at the White House where an hour was spent with President McKinley. No request was made for mustering out the entire regiment but the Nebraskans did urge that those "disabled by disease or such as have peculiar calls upon them," numbering twenty per cent, be discharged. The President was sympathetic but made no positive promises as to the course he would pursue. Bryan and Holcomb made second calls at the War Department and on President McKinley the next day. War Department officials said that all applications for discharge would have to "pass through the regular military channels," final determination resting in the recommendations of corps

³⁴ *Ibid.*, September 4, 1898; Chaplain W. H. Underwood to the writer, January 7, 1933; Interview, Sergeant George Ludden, January 4, 1933; Corporal George R. Lunn to the writer, January 6, 1933.

³⁵ *Omaha World-Herald*, September 6, 8, 1898.



Company M. Third Nebraska Volunteer Infantry, in training at
Pablo Beach, Florida, 1898.

commander, Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee.³⁶ Bryan got exactly nowhere.

The political bug was biting the Colonel and he could not forego the opportunity of conferring with Democratic leaders in Washington. His round of conferences must have borne heavily upon him, though, for he became ill and was confined to his bed for several days. Mrs. Bryan joined him in Washington, remaining with him through his illness. They journeyed to Culpepper, Virginia, on October 4, expecting to spend the day with relatives and then continue to Hot Springs, in the same state, for a rest. Colonel Bryan, however, received orders to rejoin his regiment and left immediately for Jacksonville, accompanied by Mrs. Bryan. Governor Holcomb returned to Nebraska but continued his efforts to have the Third mustered out. The War Department finally agreed that one of Nebraska's three regiments could be discharged but left it to the Governor to decide which one. Since the First Nebraska, serving in the Philippines, was most deserving of this consideration it would have been embarrassing to Holcomb to favor the Third. Hence, he declined to express a definite choice.³⁷

Bryan now realized that the only way for him to get back into his political togs was to resign his commission. His illness continued on his return south; two weeks following the arrival of the regiment in Savannah he was granted a fifteen day sick leave and left for home. He reached Omaha, November 8, and breakfasted with Populist Senator William V. Allen, Democratic State Chairman James C. Dahlman, Gilbert M. Hitchcock, and other prominent Nebraska Democrats. He kept out of the campaign of 1898, but after the election freely discussed the returns, contending "that despite Republican gains the election was not a sweeping Republican victory." The election, in his opinion, was not a trial of issues, as these had been forced into the

³⁶ *Lincoln Evening News*, September 21-23, 1898; *Omaha World-Herald*, September 23, 24, 1898.

³⁷ *Lincoln Evening News*, September 24, October 1, 8, 1898; *Nebraska State Journal*, October 6, 7, 10, 14, 1898; *Omaha World-Herald*, October 5, 1898.

background and would come to the front after peace was signed. The Colonel's sick leave was extended fifteen days so that it was December 4 when he arrived back in Savannah where he was met by the regiment and escorted to camp. The next day he attended a dinner given by twenty-five prominent Savannahans honoring General Lee at which he made a talk warmly advocating Cuban independence and free government for the island. The day following he and his regiment participated in a corps review during which nearly 20,000 men passed in company line before General Lee.³⁸

Rumors had been widespread for some time that Bryan was about to resign since he had failed to secure the discharge of the entire regiment. These rumors were substantiated on December 12, two days after the signing of a treaty of peace with Spain, when his telegram of resignation reached the War Department. It was accepted immediately.³⁹ A press dispatch from Washington made this cynical comment:

Within five minutes after it had been received at the war department today the resignation of the late Colonel William Jennings Bryan, Third Nebraska, was accepted by the secretary of war. The press for the past week has been quoting to an uninterested country the fact that Mr. Bryan was very likely to resign, therefore the war department was somewhat prepared for the blow. It was a matter of considerable comment in Congress, however, that Mr. Bryan should leave his regiment on the eve of its departure for Cuba.⁴⁰

Opinion varies regarding Bryan's resignation. Many in the regiment were either disappointed or disgusted with him. Others excused his action because of his state of health. It is doubtful if there were many who believed his presence necessary. Probably all knew that he was eager to be free so that he could again lead his party.⁴¹ Bryan had this to say regarding his resignation:

³⁸ *Omaha World-Herald*, October 28, November 9, 17, December 6, 8, 1898.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, December 13, 1898.

⁴⁰ *Nebraska State Journal*, December 13, 1898.

⁴¹ Polsky, Schwarz, Scharman, interviews cited; Lunn and Underwood, letters cited.

My reason for leaving the army was that I saw that the sentiment in favor of imperialism was widespread and that many Democrats had been led to join in the cry for expansion as it was then termed. I believed imperialism to be dangerous to the country, and so believing, I resigned my position in the army to oppose it. It required more courage to resign than it did to enlist for I knew that the unfriendly papers would criticize me for leaving the army just as they had criticized me for entering it. They stated that, having no military experience, I was not fit to take charge of a regiment and that it was unfair to the soldiers in my regiment to be under my command. When I resigned they stated that I had deserted my soldiers and that it was unfair to the soldiers for me to leave them while they were still in service.⁴²

Vifquain was now elevated to the colonelcy by Governor Holcomb, a post already filled by him except in name.⁴³ The regiment continued to improve and was highly commended when it participated in a corps review on December 17, honoring President McKinley who was visiting the camp.⁴⁴ The Third Nebraska sailed for Cuba December 30 and 31. It did garrison duty there until April 7 when it was returned to Augusta, Georgia, for mustering out. This took place May 11, 1899.⁴⁵

Bryan, on his resignation, wasted no time going into political action. He visited his old associates in Washington, and shortly thereafter made a speech in New York City. Here he declared that the issues of 1900 would be "free-silver, anti-expansion, anti-imperialism and the rights of labor." He said that a temporary army of occupation should be raised and the volunteers mustered out.⁴⁶ On his return to Lincoln, December 23, a formal reception was given him at the Oliver Theater. The place was jammed; Governor Holcomb and other prominent Nebraskans were present to pay homage. The former Colonel was in good form and spoke at some length. His opening remarks were:

I had five months of peace in the army and resigned in

⁴² Bryan and Bryan, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁴³ Scharman, interview cited.

⁴⁴ Reed, Vaughan, and Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, I, 630; *Omaha World-Herald*, December 8, 17, 1898.

⁴⁵ *Omaha World-Herald*, December 31, 1898, January 4, 15, February 24, April 7, 20, May 1, 14, 15, 1899; *House Document No. 4*, 56th Congress, 1st Session, 1899-1900, Part I, pp. 203, 204.

⁴⁶ *Omaha World-Herald*, December 17, 19, 1898.

order to take part in a fight. I am as much interested in the people of Cuba as ever, but unless I am mistaken in judgment we are called upon to meet more important problems in the United States just now than will confront our army in Cuba.⁴⁷

Henceforth the Commoner, no longer hampered by military restrictions, was on the march against the "demon" imperialism, determined to make it a political issue in the coming campaigns.

Whatever the feelings of the Third Nebraska volunteers had been toward Bryan's quitting their regiment, they apparently were not in a vindictive mood on their arrival in Omaha May 14. The *Nebraska Independent* made this comment:

The imperialistic press has devoted columns to tell what the Third Nebraska was going to do to Bryan when they came home . . . how they would fairly spit upon him and curse him. Well, the Third has come home and Bryan went down to Omaha to meet them.

The *Independent* then quoted the *State Journal* with a great deal of satisfaction:

Colonel Bryan and Adjutant Barry met the train and entered one of the coaches where they were warmly welcomed by the returning soldiers. They crowded about their former Colonel, cheering him and struggling for a chance to grasp his hand. Mr. Bryan appeared to know a number of the boys, calling them by name and referring to incidents of the days when they were soldiers together.⁴⁸

Bryan's military venture gained him much publicity, but, unlike Theodore Roosevelt's, was not turned to political advantage. His state-side duty could hardly be dramatized like T. R.'s march up San Juan Hill. His resignation on the eve of the regiment's departure for Cuba, even if excusable, was an unpopular act. The sooner his military excursion was forgotten the better as far as vote-getting was concerned. Bryan's principal weapon was the silver tongue, not the sharpened sword. Nevertheless, history covers many fronts and this episode is one chapter in the colorful career of the Great Commoner that cannot rightfully be left out of the record.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, December 24, 1898.

⁴⁸ *Nebraska Independent*, May 18, 1899.