

Biography of George Steunenberg

1st Lt. George Steunenberg of the 1st Idaho Volunteer Infantry wrote about the following trip from Hawaii to Manila during the Spanish American War in 1898-1899. This letter was contributed by Daniel L. Burch.

Young George Steunenberg Charles (Pete) and George Steunenberg,
Brothers of Governor Frank Steunenberg
(The 4th Governor of Idaho)

Courtesy of Idaho Meanderings: Steunenberg, Trial of the Century, Labor, Legal, Political History Blogspot

General Information

Courtesy of Library of Congress
The New York Times
Sunday, June 13, 1915.

George Steunenberg was considered an well outspoken individualist with an opinionated nature towards the U.S.military and/or government authories. However, he was the most free-spirited of the Steunenberg Brothers. He had written and published several volumes of poetry, including *Memories of Hawaii and Other Verse Written in Irresponsible Moments* (1935) and *Songs of a Soldier* (1914). (*Book Review in the New York Times*). He was a gifted writer.

George Steunenberg served in the Spanish American War. In the beginning of that conflict, he was made the 1st Lieutenant, of the 1st Idaho Infantry. Nevertheless, he was investigated by the Bureau of Investigations (now known as the FBI) as the height of threat for a world war in 1914. He drew a great deal of attention to himself with critical statements to the political leaders of that era or grouse against the war efforts. Many of his poetry tends to drift into the political realm, and drew reprimand from his superiors. One government agent assumed that Steunenberg was German, even though the Steunenberg family were originally from Holland.

George Steunenberg by nature was a rebel of his era. He basically 'gave'em hell'. Here's an example of such work in one printed in the *Harvey's Weekly*:

The Firing Squad

I WONDER how long we'll continue
to be a health resort for spies.
And other industrious gentlemen
that the papers criticise!
The place for an agent of Kaiser Bill
is six feet under the sod---
I want to hear some corporal yell,
"Fall in, the firing squad!"

Do we get cold feet at the thought of blood?
Have we lost our oldtime grit?
If we haven't the guts to kill a man
we'd better lie down and quit.
Do you think you can tame these animals
by the method of "spare the rod" ?
Forget it! Come on with
the corporal in command of a firing squad!

If we riddled a few incendiaries

the industry would decline;
If we plugged a couple of profiteers
the rest would stand in line;
And a lot of these devilish anarchists
would get in and carry the hod
If a few of their leaders went over the range
to the tune of a firing squad.

"Arrested," "interned" or "out on bail"---
it's ever the same old song.
And we lay the paper aside to remark,
"how long, oh God, how long!"
We've seen enough devilment this past year
to arouse the wrath of God!
Then what is it we are waiting for?
Come on with the firing squad!

-- George Steunenberg, Capt. U.S.A.,
in *The Army and Navy Journal*.

The following account (below) was about the life on board the transporter called "Morgan City" that George Steunenberg wrote about in the *Idaho Daily Statesman* of Boise City, Idaho in September 1898. George Steunenberg was an ex-Navy at the time of the Spanish American conflict. He decided to return to the east coast to re-enlist into the Navy in April 1898. Along the way, he visited with his eldest brother, Frank Steunenberg, who at the time was the governor of Idaho. Before he left the state he'd become the 1st Lieutenant to the 1st Idaho Volunteer Infantry for Company A in Caldwell, Idaho under the commanding officer, Major Daniel Figgins.

Apparently George Steunenberg was charged with insubordinate for an incident in which he referred to Major Daniel Figgins, also of the 1st Idaho Infantry, a coward. He then was given a furlough and sent home. After arriving in San Francisco in February 1899, George Steunenberg was granted commission as Captain to the Company E of the 1st Idaho Volunteer Infantry, and then returned to the Philippines to resume his position. However, upon his arrival in Manila, the entire command of 1st Idaho Volunteer Infantry were boarding their transporter for the United States.

Nonetheless, George Steunenberg remained in the U.S. Army until his retirement.

The Account

First Land in Thirteen Days and it's on Fire Some of the Dramatic and Many Amusing Experiences of Volunteers On Board Morgan City.

At Sea - July 28, 1898 - The Third Expedition is three weeks out of Honolulu and have not sighted a sail. On our second day in Honolulu we were enjoying a banquet ashore when we were suddenly ordered to embark for Manila immediately. Five transports put to sea the next morning with fine weather and smooth sea. There was no sea-sickness but in a few days we discovered that our ships were poorly fitted out for transporting troops in the tropics. As the weather grew warmer the men longed for a bath, but the little shower baths proved inadequate. Then there was no salt water soap to be had for washing clothes, and as a result the men became infected with myriads of "soldiers' friends" [lice] from which there was no relief. However, they accepted the situation philosophically, even cheerfully, and one man in particular created an immense amount of amusement. He would

select two big graybacks designated as 'Miles' and 'Blanco,' put an army at the back of each, and then enjoy a bird's eye view of the battle, for they would actually attack each other with all the hatred of Yankees and Spaniards.

We know little of the state of affairs on the other ships, as we travel a mile apart, but one day a straw mattress that had been thrown overboard from the INDIANA came floating by, and our men declared that it was covered with graybacks that were standing up singing, 'Life on the Ocean Wave.' On another occasion we came within hailing distance of the OHIO, and a chorus of voices from her decks shouted, "Come over and help us scratch."

One morning when about a week out, the message was 'wig-wagged' from the OHIO that one of the men had committed suicide by jumping overboard. Our men sitting around the decks playing cards remarked, "D___n fool: look at all the fun he'll miss at Manila," and resumed their games. However, this was not the only death, for day after day would see different flags at half mast, until now four soldiers have been consigned to old Neptune.

As we came further south the heat became unbearable below, and at night the decks were covered with half naked men. Every evening they would line up in crowds of 50 or more while of the number played the hose on them, amid shouts of delight. Some, however, with true Idaho love for gambling, would gather about the tables on the lower deck, stripped to the waist and continued their games in spite of the sweltering heat.

On July 14th we crossed the one hundred and eightieth meridian, and underwent a novel experience. We went to bed Thursday night and woke up Saturday morning. We had no Friday: the 15th was scratched off the calendar. The men claimed two days rations; the sergeants had to leave a blank in the report books, and all kinds of confusion arose.

One moonlit night, scarcely a week afterwards, we beheld a splendid sight. An active volcano was seen rising abruptly from the sea, and was blazing away scarcely a mile away from us. All hands crowded the decks admiring the scene, but one man with no poetry in his soul was heard to remark, "It beats the devil; this is the first land in 13 days, and it's on fire."

Our troubles began about this time. First the ice gave out and our meat spoiled. The potatoes rotted and had to be thrown overboard. The water became brackish, and as a result we had no good coffee. But the men endured it all with Spartan fortitude, and when we came near another ship would sing out, "Come over and eat pie with us." One day when the rations were slimmer than usual, they were saying, "Man shall not live by bread alone, he shall have water with it." Our drinking water was sickening, and one cannot help but admire the grim humor of a soldier taking a cup of water and blowing on it to cool it.

It is remarkable that in our 30 days on the water we have sighted no craft, and had no news of the outside world. Our latest paper is just one month old today, and that is a long time when war is going on. Has peace been declared, or is the whole world involved in war? We will arrive in Manila August 1st, but will Dewey welcome us, or will we be imprisoned by Carzara? No one knows anything and morning papers would find ready sale at \$1 each.

July 24 - Have encountered the southeast monsoon, and the weather cool and rainy. Sighted the island of Luzon this morning, and have been coasting along it a few hours. Whatever ideas we had of peace being declared were dispelled this afternoon. We sighted an old ware house ashore and with the aid of glasses, discerned uniformed men on top of it waving the Spanish flag at us. Our captain immediately ran up the Stars and Stripes to the masthead, and our men sent up a fierce cheer. They implored him to turn to shore, but of course it could not be done without the general's consent.

July 30 - Been in a heavy ground swell all day and all of fun going on. At the mess table this evening the men had to drop everything and hold to the table, which gave way and capsized on them. One man had just opened a can of tomatoes, which a sudden lurch sent down the back of his neighbor's neck. Another grabbed an open cabin door and went back and forth over the deck four times before he could stop himself. The most laughable thing was a barrel of pork breaking loose and chasing a man all over the deck. He tripped and fell, and the pork went completely over him. He climbed aloft to escape but the barrel waited for him with such a ferocity that it had to be seized and lashed to a rail. There were a few sprains and bruises, but each swell brought a howl of laughter.

July 31 - Dropped anchor in Manila Bay today, amid the cheers from Dewey's fleet. We have just received news of the fall of Santiago, the destruction of Cervera's fleet, and the annexation of Hawaii, and we are correspondingly jubilant. We learn that Manila is well fortified and garrisoned by 10,000 Spanish soldiers, while there are now about 11,000 of our troops.

The weather is very rainy, but not very hot. Tonight we can hear the distant firing between the Spanish and insurgents and we realize it will be our turn soon. We will possibly land at Cavite tomorrow, and prepare to take the city. In my next I will tell you how we did it.

GEORGE STEUNENBERG
Lieutenant, Co. A, First Idaho

Extracted from page 4 in the Boise City's
Idaho Daily Statesman
Thursday Morning, September 8, 1898.

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