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Arizona's military history: Buckey O'Neill and the Rough Riders

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(Photo: David Veatch)

William Owen O'Neill never lacked confidence. It's how he earned his nickname. He was a relentless gambler who liked to buck the odds.

His self-assurance was well founded because Buckey O'Neill succeeded at virtually everything he tried. But that confidence would also prove to be his downfall.

Born in St. Louis in 1860, O'Neill arrived in the Arizona Territory as an adventure-seeking 19-year old. He drifted to the rowdy boomtown of Tombstone, arriving as the Earp-Clanton feud heated up. He worked as a reporter for the *Tombstone Epitaph*, gaining experience that would benefit him later on.

O'Neill landed in Prescott in 1882 and put down roots. By the time he was 30 he had served as court reporter, probate judge, superintendent of schools, tax assessor and newspaper editor and publisher. He would go on to become sheriff of Yavapai County and mayor of Prescott.

"Buckey was a rather well-educated, very talented and charismatic person," said Jay Eby, a member of the Arizona Rough Riders Historical Association. "When he ran for sheriff he had to visit mining camps, cattle ranches and sheep camps all over the territory. There was no Coconino County then, so Yavapai covered a lot of ground."

PHOTOS: BUCKEY O'NEILL AND THE ROUGH RIDERS

O'Neill had been sheriff for just three months when four armed bandits robbed a train at Canyon Diablo, east of Flagstaff, then disappeared into the vastness of the Colorado Plateau. O'Neill and his posse rushed to the scene of the holdup, picked up the trail and galloped off in pursuit across the Painted Desert. The manhunt lasted nearly three weeks and ended at the Utah state line in a blaze of gunfire. The sheriff shot a horse out from under one of the outlaws and all were captured.

In between his many jobs O'Neill prospected. He did well with onyx mines near Mayer and found copper near the South Rim of Grand Canyon. The high cost of shipping ore from the Canyon made mining impractical. Undaunted, O'Neill saw the economic potential of the area.

He built a log cabin on the rim of the Canyon and poured his energy into making the geological wonder more accessible. The Grand Canyon Railroad Co. was formed in 1897 and O'Neill became president.

"He was always a good promoter of the area, touting its opportunities and health benefits in a number of articles and pamphlets that he wrote," Eby said. "Buckey was a chamber of commerce for northern Arizona. His vision in organizing and financing the railroad to the Grand Canyon was very important."

Before track could be laid from Williams to the Canyon, other events intervened.

In 1898, tensions between the United States and Spain were escalating. Cuba's struggle for independence and Spain's brutal measures to stamp out the rebellion made for sizzling headlines in U.S. newspapers. The public sympathies were with the rebels. When rioting broke out in Havana the USS Maine was sent to protect American interests.

On Feb. 15, 1898, an explosion ripped a hole in the hull of the Maine, sinking the ship and killing 260 crew members. The U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry determined that a mine blew the ship out of the water. No blame was leveled at Spain but the implications were clear. "Remember the Maine!" became a battle cry and America was on the path to war.

Theodore Roosevelt resigned as assistant secretary of the Navy and formed the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, which would become known as the Rough Riders. Alexander Brodie, who would go on to become territorial governor, was appointed major and directed to enlist 200 Arizona men. O'Neill was the first to sign up.

"Brodie was the backbone of the unit but O'Neill was the charisma," Eby said. "O'Neill was made captain of Troop A."

The regiment, a diverse group of cowboys, miners, gamblers, athletes, Native Americans and adventurers, trained for several weeks in San Antonio and then shipped out to Tampa, the departure point for Cuba. They fought a battle at Las Guasimas shortly after landing, suffering a handful of casualties. Despite their name, the Rough Riders fought on foot.

On July 1, the Rough Riders were about to become the stuff of legend.

They deployed along the bottom of the San Juan Heights as part of a campaign to dislodge Spanish fortifications holding the high ground. A U.S. infantry division was to launch an assault on San Juan Hill. The Rough Riders were positioned below Kettle Hill, where they faced a hail of rifle fire.

O'Neill, who believed that for the sake of morale officers shouldn't take cover, strode up and down the line calming his men. He had just exchanged words with another officer and turned away when he was struck in the mouth by a bullet and killed instantly. He was 38.

The death of their captain was a blow, but the Rough Riders rallied and stormed the steep slopes of Kettle Hill in the face of withering fire. Col. Roosevelt led the way. Less well known is the fact that they were joined by regiments of Buffalo Soldiers, the Black regulars who had fought on the frontier.

After seizing Kettle Hill, Roosevelt saw that the attack on San Juan Hill had stalled. He led his troops on another assault across open ground to reach the Spanish trenches. After seizing those heights, American guns commanded the Santiago harbor. Two days later the Spanish fleet tried to break through the U.S. Naval blockade and were destroyed. Santiago surrendered July 17, forcing an early end to the war just weeks later.

With its victory, the United States gained control over the Spanish colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. Cuba formed its own government and gained independence in 1902. And America emerged as a world power.

Prescott mourned the loss of O'Neill. The city commissioned Solon Borglum to create a statue in his honor. The bronze sculpture of a dashing rider was unveiled on Courthouse Square in 1907. The memorial honors all the Rough Riders, but is known as the Buckey O'Neill statue.

O'Neill is interred at Arlington National Cemetery. On his tomb are words he had once written: "Who would not die for a new star on the flag."

"I think that's why he volunteered," Eby said. "He wanted the people of Cuba to be free, but he also wanted to prove Arizona was good enough to be a state. He believed very strongly in that."

A final note: In 1976, a team of naval investigators concluded that the Maine explosion was caused not by a Spanish mine but by a fire that ignited its ammunition stocks.

Find the reporter at www.rogernaylor.com (<http://www.rogernaylor.com>).

Arizona's Military History

Conflict has shaped the Southwest since colonizers arrived in the late 1600s. From the earliest presidios to a modern-day Army base, fighting near and far has caused communities to thrive and fall.

Each month this year in Explore Arizona, Roger Naylor will feature a destination or episode in which military events shaped the state.

In June: Fort Verde was a key site during the Apache wars of the late 1800s.

Buckey O'Neill in Arizona

Sharlot Hall Museum, Prescott

A new exhibit at Sharlot Hall Museum presents the 150-year history of the Yavapai County Sheriff's Office. Buckey O'Neill is a central figure. The story of the 1889 Canyon Diablo train robbery is told, as well as his service with the Rough Riders. The pocket watch O'Neill carried when he was killed is on display. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturday, noon-4 p.m. Sundays. \$7, \$3 for ages 13-17.

The Arizona Rough Riders Historical Association will be at the Folk Arts Fair. Members of the re-enactment group will be in period dress and demonstrate equipment the Rough Riders used. The museum grounds will be transformed into a 19th-century Arizona village. Sheep shearing, blacksmithing and Dutch oven cooking are just a few of the activities that will be demonstrated. 10 a.m.-5 pm. Saturday-Sunday, June 6-7. \$8, free for age 17 and younger.

Details: 415 W. Gurley St. 928-445-3122, www.sharlot.org.

Grand Canyon

In 1935, Mary Colter, working as an architect for the Fred Harvey Co., fought to preserve O'Neill's cabin on the South Rim. She remodeled it into a guest cottage and incorporated it into her design for Bright Angel Lodge. The cabin, a beautiful two-room suite with peeled-log walls and high ceilings, sits near the Bright Angel Trailhead. Features include a king-size bed, fireplace, wet bar, colorful Navajo rugs and slate-tile tables. A Canyon view is framed in every window. The Buckey O'Neill Cabin rents for \$426.

Details: 888-297-2757, www.grandcanyonlodges.com.

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