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MC200: Folder 19: Rockwell, Joseph J. to [Fowler], May June 22, 1898

This transcription from the original letter contains language contemporaneous of the time and is being presented as part of a historical record.

6:30 PM Port Tampa 6/22/98.

My Dear May,

Your letter of the 12th was received in due season, and I have been promising myself everyday the pleasure of answering it, but somehow the days have slipped away and now at last I have made up my mind that I will give myself the pleasure of a call via Uncle Sam's mail. Herb is sitting just opposite to me and I showed him the handwriting on the envelope of your letter and told him I was going to answer that now. I asked him if he gave you all the news but he says he didn't give a great deal so perhaps I may be able to slip in something that he forgot. Herb looks well and happy, brown and sturdy and vigorous. He has just made the remark to me of the boys that he has "five of the Spaniards spotted and will come back with their scalps in his belt." That sounds pretty warlike, don't it?

Of course he told you that we have our orders to "go ahead," he couldn't very well miss that and that we expect to be in the transports in less than a week. I suppose that we are to go to Cuba to reinforce Shafter in fact we all feel sure of it but it is possible that we may go to Puerto Rico in the expedition which the papers say Genl. Miles is going in command of. But as I told Mother we don't care where we go we only want to go somewhere; anywhere that is that we belong, and that you know – is where we are needed most and where the shots fly thickest.

Don't you think that is our post? Does that sound a little like brag-adocio [braggadocio]? It isn't intended so. I understand that we are going to have an issue of hammocks if so this will be fine as a hammock makes a most comfortable bed, keeps a fellow out of the dirt and wet and as they say the kind we got weigh only 13 ozs. ropes and all we can easily carry them. Herb and I don't sleep together here as we did at Springfield. He sleeps in a tent with Lee while I sleep further down the line with "the squad" that is to say my bunch, my slaves, my underlings.

We had some more good news today – the payroll is being made up. Isn't that fine? We should be paid now in a very few days and our only fear now is that they will delay it just long enough to knock us out of a chance to get to Tampa and "blow" in some of our "stuff," Do you object to slang? You see I have it all laid out what when I get my pay I am going to town and pray that I am one of the millionaires who came down here for their health every winter. There is a hotel down at Tampa, the Auditorium of this section, and I am going there and raise the roof. I will have a coon at my elbow all the time and I will just make him dance you bet. Now you can see for yourself how it will be after sixty days of campaigning and going to get ones "grub" – with a tin plate in one hand a tin cup in the other and sitting down on the grass or the sand or wherever one happens to be; after this, to go where one can get a hot bath, and a "coon" to brush ones clothes instead of brushing them oneself and a clean pair of boots; and then to sit down on a real chair to a table with a nice white cloth on it and real china -ware and in short all the accessories, you know, you can see what a beautiful dream this makes.

Ah, well, these are rather curious things for a soldier to think and write about aren't they? And particularly a soldier who has before him the stern prospect of an almost immediate encounter with the enemy. A soldier whose thoughts should all be for his cause his duty and his country's welfare and glory. But was there ever a man soldier or no soldier whose thoughts were always on the purer, holier, and higher things of life? I think not. I think that most men's thoughts are usually on the lower things of life and its only in the unusual moments that his mind is filled with thoughts of things that are not for self, or for self's sake. But these unusual moments are the leaven of the loaf, the mortar that cements and holds in place the commoner material of which we build the imposing edifice of Life. And even as the mortar and the bricks mount in regular succession, building the pyramid of Progress, so mens commoner thoughts as well as his better ones may develop and grow and purify and instead of building with bricks we will use the purest marble. And these things shall come to pass in the days when men forget self and learn to serve their fellow-man. Thus shall the world be bettered. But this world of ours is a good world, after all, isn't it? If it be true as the proverb hath it that every rose has its thorn it is also true that where you find the thorns you are sure to find the roses. So you think do you that all "the best" have gone to the front? You are wrong. Many a brave man and true, many a loyal American has been left behind through no fault of his, and many a graceless scoundrel many a cowardly scamp is on the muster- rolls! I used to agree with the saying that there were two classes whom St. Peter did not question when they knocked for admission at the golden gate, namely mothers and soldiers. As to the first I still agree but as to the soldiers I change my mind. I have found that being a soldier and even a brave soldier does not change the man. The quiet student burning the midnight oil at his studies. The loving mother patiently bravely [illegible] plainly bearing the bitter burdens of life, the earnest philosopher striving to show the true and the false to teach the one deliverance the other are as brave and noble soldiers in the true sense of the word, as he who stands with rifle loaded and bayonet fixed and waits the charge of the enemy. -

Herb and I are drilling the recruits who came in yesterday. Poor chaps, I feel rather sorry for them, as they have got to go through a good deal before they learn just "where they are at." Moreover, they are coming right down into this climate without preparation while we have been hardened to it. You ought to see the difference between the color of their hands and faces and ours. About the same difference there is between Ivory Soap and American Family. Perhaps you don't know what that is but your mother can tell you. I see Mr. Rupert Porter once in awhile – saw him today but don't have much acquaintance with him. Ed Wilson and Jay Smith are both on deck and are also drilling the "raw-ones." Jay was a little sick the other day and had to go to the hospital but is OK now. Well, I have used up my own and another mans [illegible] writing this and am now using Herb's which is also half gone so I guess I had better quit. Perhaps when I write again it will be from Havana, who knows? Give my kindest regards to your Mother and family and believe me ever sincerely

Your loyal friend,
J.J. Rockwell

"There goes tattoo"