

Homer's War

by Phillip W. Weiss

It was 1980. Homer Ludlow was a one hundred two-year-old veteran of the Spanish American War and the last living veteran of that conflict. He lived in the Washington State Home for Veterans located in Seattle, Washington. He had no known relatives and no known friends. He served three years in the Army and after his discharge worked odd jobs. He kept out of trouble, minded his own business and maintained a low profile. Yet he always remembered the battles he fought in Cuba alongside his comrades who comprised the legendary Rough Riders. The charge up San Juan Hill, the bullets flying, the artillery shells exploding, the curdling screams of soldiers being shot and killed resonated in his mind every night, causing him to awake from sleep drenched in sweat. He never talked about this with anyone. At age ninety, infirmed by advancing age, he was hospitalized at a VA hospital in Seattle which placed him in the Washington State Home for Veterans where he soon became a permanent resident. One evening, he was in his room watching television. Then one of the attendants entered his room and told him that it was time to sleep and turned off the television while Homer was watching his favorite program. Homer got angry and demanded that the television stay on so he could continue watching his favorite program. The attendant denied Homer's request and warned Homer not to make an issue over this. Homer became livid and threw a water pitcher at the attendant. The attendant

called for assistance which arrived and soon Homer was placed in soft restraints. The nurse in charge showed up who injected Homer with a powerful sedative, which the nurse was authorized to administer on a prn basis, to calm Homer and make him more manageable. Instead, the medication increased Homer's agitation which escalated to the point where Homer began screaming incoherently and became delusional, demanding to see the colonel, meaning Colonel Theodore Roosevelt with whom Homer had served in Cuba. Homer worshipped Theodore Roosevelt who he considered the greatest American who ever lived.

"I want to see the Colonel," Homer shouted, eyes flashing with anger. "He'll get me out of here!"

"There is no colonel," the attendants told him.

"Liar! The Colonel is in his tent. Bring him here at once!" Homer insisted.

The nurse in charge got on the phone and called Doctor Levine, the facility's attending physician.

"Doctor Levine, this is Nurse Fraley at the home. Mr. Ludlow is in an agitated state and is delusional. He is demanding to see Colonel Roosevelt. ... Yes, doctor ... we'll watch him until you arrive. Goodbye." Nurse Fraley hung up the phone. "The doctor will be here in a few minutes," she informed the attendants.

A few minutes later, Doctor Levine arrived. He was also the director of medical services for the facility and was in direct charge of managing the residents' medical needs. Doctor Levine became medical director after he retired from the United States Army where he attained the rank of colonel in the Army

Medical Corps. His service included tours of duty in South Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, Panama and Germany where he provided medical care for soldiers and their dependents. Doctor Levine had a reputation for being fair and compassionate without coming off as a pushover. He commanded respect and in return gave respect to those whose actions warranted it.

Doctor Levine entered Homer's room. "What's going on here, nurse?"

Doctor Levine asked.

"The patient became agitated and so I gave him an injection to sedate him,"

Nurse Fraley said. "Then I called you."

Doctor Levine approached Homer and asked, "Homer, what's going on?"

"Colonel, get me out of here!" Homer pleaded, in his delusional state believing that he was speaking with Theodore Roosevelt.

"Okay, Homer, I'll see what I can do," Doctor Levine said, trying to reassure Homer. Then he turned to Nurse Fraley and asked, "What brought all of this on?"

Nurse Fraley said, "It had something to do with the television. It was time for lights out and so we turned off the tv and apparently that set off Homer who threw a water pitcher at the attendant."

Doctor Levine shook his head from side to side, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing, and said, "Miss Fraley, do you know who you are dealing with here? Homer Ludlow is the last living veteran of the Spanish American War. He served with Colonel Theodore Roosevelt at the battle of San Juan Hill. Did you know that?"

“No, doctor, I did not know that,” Nurse Fraley said, beginning to resent being talked to as if she was a schoolgirl. “Nor did I call you for a history lesson. All I know is that the patient became combative tonight not in Cuba but in the state of Washington.”

Doctor Levine replied, “I can do without your sarcasm. Mister Ludlow has a history which should be respected and that has earned him the right to watch television after curfew, provided it does not unduly disturb the other residents, all of whom should be treated with the utmost respect. Have I made myself clear on this?”

“Very clear, doctor,” Nurse Fraley replied coldly. “I also resent your tone of voice and your patronizing attitude, both of which I could do without.”

“You can resent me all you want. I couldn’t care less,” Doctor Levine said. “But the next time you decide to sedate a patient, weigh all the facts carefully before you use the needle. As for Mister Ludlow, I am placing him under observation for the next twenty-four hours and want him weaned off the sedative, and when he is sufficiently calm, remove the restraints and, most importantly, let him watch television.” Then Doctor Levine said to Homer, “Homer, I want you to behave yourself. We’re going to remove the restraints as soon as you calm down and if you want, we’ll turn on the tv.”

Homer replied, “I’ll behave myself, alright. You don’t have to worry about that. You know me, sir. I’ll do anything you order me to do”.

“Very good, soldier,” Doctor Levine said. “You have anything else on your mind?”

“I want to report for duty, sir, but the people here won’t let me,” Homer said.

“Don’t worry about that, soldier. Everything’s under control. Now get some rest and we’ll talk later, and that’s an order.”

“Yes, sir,” Homer said and started to weep. “I’m no goldbrick, sir, and I don’t want to let the guys down.”

“You haven’t let the guys down, private,” Doctor Levine said quietly but firmly. “And you haven’t let me down either. We soldiers have to stick together.” Doctor Levine grabbed a tissue and wiped the tears away from Homer’s face.

“Thank you, colonel. You’re a good man,” Homer said. Doctor Levine replied, “Thank you too. Now get some rest.” Then Doctor Levine took Nurse Fraley aside and told her, “If I came off a bit overbearing, please forgive me. I know you have a hard job, and these patients can get easily agitated. I only ask that you keep in mind that some of these veterans like Mister Ludlow are still fighting the war, even the Spanish American War, which to him never ended and never will.”

Nurse Fraley said, “Okay, Doctor, I accept your apology and thanks for showing up. You were a great help.” Both then turned and looked at Homer who, exhausted by life, was sleeping the sleep of those for whom the bells toll. While Nurse Fraley prepared Homer Ludlow for his discharge to his final place of rest, Doctor Levine made a final entry in Homer’s medical chart, filled out certain standard hospital forms and quietly wept.

Five years later a group of people were taking a tour of Arlington National Cemetery. They stopped at a grave marked by a tombstone upon which was engraved the following: Homer Ludlow, 1878-1980, Private, 1st United States Volunteer Calvary Regiment, Spanish-American War, Awarded the Purple Heart. A man left the group, stepped forward, knelt before the grave, and prayed. After he finished praying, he stood up, turned to the group, and said, "My grandfather also served in the First United States Volunteer Calvary Regiment in the Spanish American War. He never talked about his service, never used it to call attention to himself, and never regaled us with war stories. All he did was live his life, be a good citizen and take care of his family and I am certain that Private Ludlow did the same because the men who served in that regiment were the best this country ever produced." Everyone in the group nodded their heads in agreement and some said amen.