

Leonard Wood: Advocate of Military Preparedness

Unless you have been assigned to the post or the hospital, you have probably never heard of Leonard Wood. Leonard Wood arguably had the most distinguished military-government career of someone who did not become president. Wood was a Harvard-educated physician, pursued the Apache Chief Geronimo, received the Medal of Honor, was physician to 2 U.S. presidents, served as U.S. army chief of staff, was a successful military governor, ran for president, was a colleague of Walter Reed, and was commander-in-arms for President Theodore Roosevelt.

Wood was born in 1860 to an established New England family; his father was a Union Army physician during the Civil War and was practicing on Cape Cod when he died unexpectedly in 1880. The family was left destitute, but Wood was able to continue his education when a wealthy family friend agreed to pay for him to attend Harvard Medical School, which at the time did not require any prior college. He graduated in 1883 and was selected for a prized

COL Pierce is a retired U.S. Army pediatrician who served as chief of pediatrics, director of medical education, and chief of the medical staff at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. COL Pierce also was a consultant in pediatrics to the U.S. Army Surgeon General for 7 years. He co-authored a book on Dr. Walter Reed and his research on yellow fever and edited a book on the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.



Portrait of General Leonard Wood by John Singer Sargent (1903).

internship at Boston City Hospital; however, he was dismissed for a rule violation that the program director later admitted was a mistake.

Unable to support himself in practice in Boston, Wood turned to the U.S. Army, a decision that would change his life. Assigned to Fort Huachuca in Arizona, Wood participated in the yearlong pursuit and final surrender of Geronimo; for his role he was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1898. His experiences in the wild and rugged terrain of the west triggered a legendary and lifelong pursuit of hard and stressful physical activ-

ity. Transferred to California, Wood met Louise Condit-Smith, ward of an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. When they married in November 1890 in Washington, DC, the ceremony was attended by all of the Supreme Court justices.

In 1893 while assigned to Fort McPherson outside Atlanta, Wood, whose duties were not demanding, needed a physical outlet for his unbounded energies. He enrolled at Georgia Tech at age 33 to play football. He was eligible to play because he had not previously attended college. He scored 5 touchdowns, winning the game against rival University of Georgia.

Later, Wood was assigned to Washington, where he quickly became known and sought after as a physician. He served many of the political and military elite, includ-

ing presidents Grover Cleveland and William McKinley. In 1897, he met Theodore Roosevelt, the 38-year-old assistant secretary of the U.S. Navy who shared his love of outdoor adventure and the military. They became fast friends/companions/competitors; Roosevelt wrote to a friend that he had found a "playmate."

When the *U.S.S. Maine* was sunk in Havana Harbor in 1898 and war was declared on Spain, Wood and Roosevelt schemed on how to go to war together. Wood the career soldier and Roosevelt the career politician had excellent connections and became commander and

deputy commander of the First Volunteer Cavalry, later famously known as the Rough Riders. When a more senior general became ill, Wood was promoted to brigadier general, and Roosevelt became the regiment colonel.

After the war, Wood became military governor of Cuba and major general of volunteers. During the U.S. occupation, Walter Reed was sent to investigate infectious diseases, including yellow fever. Wood provided \$10,000 to fund the second phase of Reed's research and approved the use of human volunteers. When the U.S. occupation ended in 1902, Wood was to revert to captain, medical corps.

Wood's success in Cuba was obvious and well known; President McKinley promoted him to U.S. Army brigadier general. At that time, as a brigadier general, Wood was essentially guaranteed a second star and a rotation through the chief of staff position. He served as chief of staff from 1910 to 1914, the only physician ever to do so. As chief of staff he eliminated the antiquated bureau system, developed the maneuver unit concept, and laid the groundwork for the Reserve Officers' Training Corps.

After serving as chief of staff, Wood stayed on active duty and rotated through other senior-level positions. Because of Wood's political



Staff of the 1st US Volunteer Regiment, the "Rough Riders" in Tampa. Underwood & Underwood, photographer (1898).

activity promoting universal service and improving readiness, President Woodrow Wilson passed over him, instead selecting John J. Pershing to command the American Expeditionary Force in World War I. Wood stayed politically active and ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 1920, losing to Warren G. Harding at the convention. Wood was appointed governor general of the Philippines, a position he held until his death in 1927.

While in Cuba, Wood was severely injured by striking his head on a chandelier, most likely resulting in an undiagnosed skull fracture. Over time he developed neurologic symptoms and was seen by neurosurgeon Harvey Cushing, MD, at Johns Hopkins, who removed a meningioma in February 1910. Wood made a dramatic recovery. Over a decade later while in the Philippines, his symptoms returned, and after significant delay he went home to see Cushing who was then at Harvard Medical School. When Wood died after surgery, Cushing admitted that he should not have tackled such a difficult case so quickly after returning from a trip to Europe.

Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and the on-base General Leonard Wood U.S. Army Community Hospital are named in Wood's honor. ●

About this column

This column provides biographical sketches of the namesakes of military and VA health care facilities. To learn more about the individual your facility was named for or to offer a topic suggestion, contact us at fedprac@frontlinemedcom.com or on Facebook.