NATIONAL ARCHIVES

The United States Armed Forces and the Mexican Punitive Expedition: Part 1

En Español

Fall 1997, Vol. 29, No. 3 | Genealogy Notes

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Eighty years ago, in February 1917, the last of the U.S. troops serving in the Mexican Punitive Expedition recrossed the border from Palomas, Chihuahua, Mexico, into Columbus, New Mexico. Eleven months earlier the bandit Francisco "Pancho" Villa had raided Columbus. With approximately 485 men, known as Villistas, Villa had attacked the border town on March 9, 1916. According to War Department reports, ten American officers and soldiers were killed, two officers and five soldiers wounded, eight civilians killed, and two wounded. The Mexican irregulars' losses numbered approximately one hundred killed, with seven wounded and captured.1 From March 16, 1916, to February 14, 1917, an expeditionary force of more than fourteen thousand regular army troops under the command of Brig. Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing operated in northern Mexico "in pursuit of Villa with the single objective of capturing him and putting a stop to his forays."2 Another 140,000 regular army and National Guard troops patrolled the vast border between Mexico and the United States to discourage further raids.3 The expedition generated a vast array of military records that are now held in the National Archives and Records Administration, resources that are underused and are of value to genealogists and historians. This article is divided into two installments and examines the conflict and the records. The first part describes the events preceding the Mexican Punitive Expedition. The second part will trace the campaign in Mexico and discuss some of the records created by the United States armed forces during its activities in Mexico and along the border in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.4

Although the Mexican Punitive Expedition is considered a minor event in U.S. history, it is a story filled with adventure, intrigue, and confusion. The origins of the expedition are rooted in the 1910 Mexican Revolution, when a rebel faction led by Francisco I. Madero, Jr., attempted to overthrow Mexico's dictator of more than thirty years, President Porfirio Diaz. The United States was concerned that the conflict would harm American business interests in Mexico and its citizens living along the border. As a result, President William H. Taft sent about sixteen thousand troops to Texas for "war games" in April 1911. The troops, consisting of elements of several regiments, were designated as the Maneuver Division. Although officially sent to the

border for training exercises, unofficially the division prepared for a possible incursion into Mexico. By June the revolution had succeeded, and Madero was elected president. The Maneuver Division was disbanded on August 7, 1911.

Madero's victory was short-lived. On February 19, 1913, Gen. Victorio Huerta arrested Madero and forced him to resign. On February 22, Madero was presumed assassinated on orders from Huerta. A civil war erupted a few days later between Huerta's forces and supporters of Madero, who were led by Governor Venustiano Carranza and Pancho Villa. With a contingent of several thousand men, Villa formed a military band known as the Division of the North and operated in the mountains of northern Mexico.

In the United States a new American President, Woodrow Wilson, took office. Like his predecessor, Wilson now faced the task of choosing a side in the ongoing Mexican Revolution. Wilson's administration refused to recognize Huerta because of the corrupt manner in which he had seized power, and it instituted an arms embargo on both sides of the civil war.5

When Huerta's forces appeared to be winning the civil war in early 1914, Wilson lifted the arms embargo by offering to help Carranza. This action had volatile consequences. For several months, U.S. Navy warships had been stationed at the ports of Tampico (under the command of Rear Adm. Henry T Mayo) and Vera Cruz (under Rear Adm. Frank R. Fletcher's command) to protect American and other foreign interests associated with the rich oil fields in the area. On April 9, a group of sailors detached from the USS *Dolphin* went ashore at Tampico to retrieve supplies. Huerta's troops arrested and detained two of them. The sailors were released a short time later, and President Huerta offered an apology to the United States for the incident. Ultimately, Admiral Mayo demanded a twenty-one-gun salute to the U.S. flag in addition to the apology. Huerta agreed only if the Americans would return the honor. When learning of the incident, an angry President Wilson refused Huerta's request. Instead, he ordered the U.S. Navy's Atlantic Fleet to Mexico's Gulf Coast to strengthen the forces under Mayo and Fletcher and occupy Tampico.6 Another crisis festering down the coast in Vera Cruz, however, prevented U.S. troops from occupying the city, and the Tampico incident came to an end with no real conclusion.

The U.S. consul's office in Vera Cruz had been warned that a German ship delivering arms for Huerta was expected in the port on April 21,1914. President Wilson ordered U.S. forces in the area to seize the town's customhouse and capture the guns. On the afternoon of April 21, a contingent of 787 marines and sailors quickly went ashore and seized the customhouse. By noon of April 22, the U.S. troops had occupied the town.7 Although they had hoped to avoid bloodshed, U.S. forces were nevertheless fired upon by Mexican soldiers, and a violent street battle ensued. The American losses were four killed and twenty wounded on April 21 and thirteen killed and forty-one wounded on April 22. We have no accurate casualty number for the Mexican troops, but it was reported that between 152 and 172 were killed and between 195 and 250 were wounded.8

On April 30, 1914, the U.S. Army's Fifth Infantry Brigade, under the command of Brig. Gen. Frederick Funston, arrived at Vera Cruz. The brigade assumed occupation duty from the marines and also organized a military government to restore order to the city. President Huerta never officially recognized the U.S. occupiers, but he made no serious attempts to resist their power. On July 15, 1914, Huerta resigned from the office of president and moved to Spain. The Fifth Infantry Brigade left Vera Cruz on November 23, and the U.S. government agreed that Carranza and his de facto government could use the city as their capital.9

The United States and six Latin American nations officially recognized the Carranza government on October 19, 1915, a direct insult to Pancho Villa and his followers, who had earlier parted ways with Carranza. Feeling betrayed, the Villistas set forth on a course of retaliation directed mainly at Americans. In one instance, Villa's irregulars assassinated seventeen U.S. citizens aboard a train traveling from Chihuahua City to the Cusi Mine at Santa Isabel, Chihuahua. Although this act infuriated the American public, it was the Villistas' next attack, the raid on Columbus, New Mexico, that caused the U.S. government to seek retribution.10

Why Villa chose Columbus as a target for his most daring raid is unclear. The small town had only one hotel, a few stores, some adobe houses, and a population of 350 Americans and Mexicans.11 Most likely, Villa was enticed to attack Columbus because it was the home of Camp Furlong and the Thirteenth U.S. Cavalry Regiment under the command of Col. Herbert J. Slocum. The Thirteenth had been garrisoned at Columbus since September 1912.12 At the time of the attack, the regiment comprised 500 officers and men, but only about 350 men were at the camp. A local citizen warned Slocum that Villa was nearby. As a precaution, Slocum strengthened the patrols and outposts of the camp with detachments from the regiment. Since Villa had numerous sympathizers living in Columbus and the vicinity, he had no trouble obtaining information on Camp Furlong's troop strength or other bits of intelligence.

Although Villa's rationale for attacking Columbus has never been explained, the outcome is clearly documented. The secretary of war reported that "Villa's command crossed the border in small parties about 3 miles west of the border gate, concentrated for and made the attack during hours of extreme darkness after the moon had set and before daylight."13 After a bloody confrontation in which eighteen Americans died, two troops of the Thirteenth Cavalry under the direction of Maj. Frank Tompkins pursued the bandits. The troops chased the Mexicans south of the border for twelve miles before their ammunition and supplies were exhausted.14 The raid, however, could hardly be considered a victory for Villa and his men. Besides killing a small number of soldiers and civilians, his men came away with a few horses and a meager amount of loot from the stores and homes of the town.

Both public outcry and pressure from the army moved President Wilson to order the military to pursue Villa and punish him. General Funston, now commanding the Southern Department, telegraphed the War Department the day after the raid, "I urgently recommend that American troops be given authority to pursue into Mexican Territory hostile Mexican bandits who raid

American territory. So long as the border is a shelter for them they will continue to harass our ranches and towns to our chagrin."15 Wilson responded by directing Secretary of War Newton Baker to organize a punitive expedition.

The U.S. Army quickly made preparations to conduct the expedition. Troops and supplies poured into the newly established base command in Columbus, which was still recovering from the raid. Maj. Gen. Hugh Scott, army chief of staff, selected Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing to lead the expedition. Pershing's military record was admirable. He had served in the frontier Indian Wars, the Philippine Insurrection, and as an observer in the Russo-Japanese War. While on the western frontier, he had commanded a troop in the all-black Tenth U.S. Cavalry Regiment and earned the nickname "Black Jack." At the time of the raid, he was in command of the El Paso District. It was not Pershing's fighting record, however, that impressed Scott but the competence in diplomacy he had shown during his service in the Philippines and China, a skill necessary for the upcoming expedition.

A jealous General Funston coveted the Punitive Expedition command, and when passed by Scott, he exhibited an animosity toward Pershing that persisted throughout the expedition.16 Pershing was still subordinate and reported directly to Funston, who intended to manage almost every detail of the expedition, but Funston did allow the commander of the Punitive Expedition full control over troop assignments. One officer Pershing chose to serve on his staff was a young lieutenant named George S. Patton, Jr., who would later achieve glory as an army commander during World War II.

The diplomatic bargaining between the U.S. Department of State and Carranza allowed Pershing to complete preparation for the expedition. His orders, as directed by General Funston, were to lead two columns that included infantry, cavalry, field artillery, engineers, the First Aero Squadron with eight airplanes, field hospitals, wagon and ambulance companies, and signal detachments. One colunm would leave from Columbus and the other from Hachita, via the Culberson Ranch. From garrisons along the border, troops entrained for Columbus and brought the expedition up to strength.17

In the coming months they advanced four hundred miles into Mexican territory, adapting their maneuvers to a hostile terrain while experimenting with new technologies in such forms as motor transport and aircraft reconnaissance. Part 2 of this article will discuss the successes and failures of the Mexican Punitive Expedition and how records created by the military, such as unit histories and awards and decoration files, can be used for genealogical purposes.

Mexican Punitive Expedition: Part 2

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Suggested Readings

To learn more about the Mexican Punitive Expedition, consult the following works.

Allen, Inez V, and Robert S. Thomas. *The Mexican Punitive Expedition under Brigadier General John J. Pershing, United States Army, 1916 - 1917*, chapters 1 - 5. Washington, D.C.: The Chief of Military History, 1954.

Clendenen, Clarence C. *Blood on the Border: The United States Army and the Mexican Irregulars*. New York: MacMillan, 1969.

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Harris, Charles H., and Louis R. Sadler. "The Plan of San Diego and the Mexican-United States War Crisis of 1916: A Reexamination." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, No. 3 (August 1978): 381 - 408.

Mason, Herbert Mofloy, Jr. *The Great Pursuit.* New York: Random House, 1970.

Meyer, Michael C., and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Quick, Robert. E. *An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Vera Cruz*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962.

Smythe, Donald. *Guerilla Warrior: The Early Life of Jobn J. Pershing*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973.

Tompkins, Frank. *Chasing Villa*. Harrisburg, VA: Military Service Publishing Company, 1934.

Ulibarri, George S., and John R Harrison, comps. *Guide to Materials on Latin America in the National Archives*. Washington, DC: National Archives, 1974.

Notes

1. War Department, Annual Report of the Secretary of War for the FiscalYear, 1916, Vol. 1 (1916), pp. 7 - 8. There is some dispute over the actual number of American soldiers and civilians killed at Columbus. Various historians have put the number of casualties anywhere from fifteen to eighteen. War Department reports state that a combined total of eighteen soldiers and civilians were killed.

2. Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (1981), 36:287.

3. War Department Annual Report, 1916, pp. 13, 23, 189 - 191. The strength of the U. S.Army on the border and during the Punitive Expedition is based upon reports published by the War Department. This information is also included in the Returns of Military Organizations, entry 66,

Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's - 1917, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (hereinafter, records in the National Archives will be cited as RG ___, NARA).

4. Since this article is military in scope, diplomatic records are not discussed.

5. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1914* (1922), pp. 446 - 447 (hereinafter cited as *FRUS*).

6. Ibid., p. 175.

7. Navy Department, Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Navy for the Fiscal Year, 1914 (1914) pp. 468, 470 - 471.

8. Surgeon General's Report, April 1914, Subject File (WE-Mexico, Vera Cruz), box 776, Naval Records Collection of the Office of the Naval Records and Library, RG 45, NARA.

9. War Department Annual Report, 1914, pp. 135 - 136. See also entry 1177, Records of U.S. Army Overseas Operations and Commands, 1898 - 1942, RG 395, NARA.

10. *FRUS,* 1916 (1925), pp. 480 - 484, 650.

11. John S.D. Eisenhower, *Intervention: The United States and the Mexican Revolution*, 1913 - 1917 (1993), pp. 217 - 219.

12. *History of the 13th Cavalry Regiment*, entry 310, box 485, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, RG 165, NARA.

13. War Department Annual Report, 1916, pp. 7 - 8.

14. Border Disturbances Involving Operations of U.S. Troops (Chronology of Events), p. 2, Miscellaneous File #207, entry 16, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917 - , RG 407, NARA.

15. Annual Report of the Fiscal Year 1916, by Maj. Gen. Frederick Funston, United States Army, Commanding the Southern Department, pp. 3 - 5, entry 27, file #243231, box 141, RG 407, NARA. The Southern Department was the geographic area for the military that encompassed Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

16. Donald Smythe, *Guerilla Warrior: The Early Life of Jobn J. Pershing* (1973), pp. 220 - 221.

17. Clarence C. Clendenen, *Blood on the Border: The United States and the Mexican Irregulars* (1969) pp. 213 - 227.

Mexican Punitive Expedition: Part 2

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