



The United States Armed Forces and the Mexican Punitive Expedition: Part 2

Winter 1997, Vol. 29, No. 4 | Genealogy Notes

By Mitchell Yockelson

Part 1 of this article in the fall issue (Vol. 29, No. 3) discussed the tumult following the 1910 Mexican Revolution and American concerns over the civil war in Mexico. Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico, on March 9, 1916, prompted the United States to organize an expedition in retaliation. While the army prepared for the expedition, Secretary of State Robert Lansing negotiated with Venustiano Carranza to allow the United States to enter Mexico without interference. Carranza balked at granting approval to the expedition. As a compromise, he insisted that his own troops would track down Villa. The United States refused his offer, and after a week of fervent bartering, Carranza reluctantly agreed to allow the Americans across the border as long as they strayed no further than the state of Chihuahua.¹ The army was under the impression that Carranza would allow the expedition to ship supplies over the Mexican Northwestern Railway, but initially he refused. Several weeks into the expedition, Carranza made some concessions and allowed the Americans to use the railroad, but by then supplies were already moving by horse and primitive Dodge trucks, which habitually broke down. Still, Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing reported that "supplies are coming in as rapidly as transportation will permit"² The army's telegraph lines also needed constant attention since the Mexicans made a sport of cutting the wires. The Punitive Expedition learned the hard way that Carranza had little interest in cooperating with the efforts to capture Villa.

By April 8, General Pershing was more than four hundred miles into Mexico with a troop strength of 6,675 men. The expedition set up its headquarters in the town of Colonia Dublan and its supply base on a tract of land near the Casas Grandes River. Having no idea how long he would be in Chihuahua or how much further he would have to penetrate to locate Villa, Pershing wanted to ensure that his army was well supplied. Since the expedition was denied the full use of the Mexican railway system, Pershing turned to his motor transport companies. The only problem was that the army did not have enough trucks to transport the food, clothing, weapons, and ammunition stored at Columbus.

Logistically, the Punitive Expedition started as a nightmare. Nothing of this magnitude had ever been attempted by the U.S. Army. Word of this dilemma was forwarded to Secretary of War Newton Baker, who was somehow able to spend \$450,000 of unappropriated funds to purchase new trucks. The funds were well spent as more than ten thousand tons of supplies were

eventually delivered by truck to Pershing.³ Moving supplies by truck was no easy feat during the expedition, however, because roads depicted on available maps turned out to be nothing but trails that were impassable during wet weather. As a result, engineers had to rebuild many of the roads. The expedition also had to rely on mules and wagons to a large extent to keep supplies moving.

The airplanes sent for use by the First Aero Squadron proved to be inadequate because they did not have enough power to overcome the erratic winds or to climb high enough to cross the mountains of northern Chihuahua. Pershing complained in a report to Brig. Gen. Frederick Funston that "the aeroplanes have been of no material benefit so far, either in scouting or as a means of communication. They have not at all met my expectations. The further south Villa goes into the mountains the more difficult will be their tasks, and I have no doubt we shall soon be compelled to abandon them for either scouting the enemy or keeping in touch with the advance columns."⁴ Gradually the airplanes were replaced, and the commander of the First Aero Squadron, Benjamin Foulois, happily reported that the "squadron rendered efficient service in reconnaissance and in maintaining communications with the troops away from the base camp."⁵

Working airplanes were not enough to locate Villa. Although a majority of the Mexican citizens encountered by Pershing's forces wanted Villa captured as much as the Americans did, their hatred for the United States was even stronger, and they gave the U.S. forces few leads. After almost two weeks of pursuing aimless leads and fighting a few minor skirmishes, a squadron of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry fought five hundred Villistas at San Geronimo. There were no American losses, but several of the bandits were wounded. It was thought that Villa was among those wounded, but this proved false.⁶

Even with the recent setbacks, the morale of the troops remained high. Pershing reported that "the spirit of this command is splendid and cooperation of all elements is entirely satisfactory. In fact, I have never seen such willingness and such eagerness to push forward to the task, as is shown by all members of this command. While all realize the difficulties to be undertaken, and while immediate results are not expected, there is a fixed conviction that we shall accomplish our object in the end"⁷

Probably the most frustrating point during the entire Punitive Expedition occurred on April 13, 1916, when a detachment of troops from Carranza's army attacked the American troops at Parral. Upon receiving reinforcements, they drove back the Mexicans. One American soldier was killed, and one was wounded. The Mexicans suffered fourteen killed. Pershing kept his men at Dublan and sent out scouting parties and detachments to locate Villa without success.

At the town of Carrizal, troops from the Mexican National Army attacked two troops of the Tenth Cavalry on a scouting mission on June 21. Seven enlisted men were killed, and even more were wounded. Villa's forces captured twenty-three enlisted men and one civilian interpreter. The prisoners were sent to Chihuahua City but were released a short time later.

Tensions between the United States and Mexico were at a breaking point. Not since the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 had the two countries come so close to all-out war. Neither country was prepared, and neither wanted war. The War Department recognized that a force of at least 200,000 was needed to invade Mexico and that Carranza did not have the troops to ward off an American invasion. To avoid further incidents like Carrizal, Funston ordered Pershing to cease sending out long-range patrols.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that Carranza's de facto government openly disliked the American presence in Mexico. Maj. Gen. Hugh Scott and Funston met with Carranza's military chief, Alvaro Obregon, at El Paso and agreed to gradually withdraw Pershing's forces if Carranza would control Villa.

The expedition learned that some of Carranza's soldiers were joining forces with the Villistas. To counter this threat, Pershing's men spent the remainder of their time operating in a limited area close to their base of operations at Dublan. By order of General Funston, the supply route was moved further north to prevent Carranza's men from cutting off the expeditionary force from Columbus. It was not really necessary for Pershing to send troops any further into Mexico. Villa's forces at this point were badly depleted by casualties and desertion, and those who remained were largely scattered. Although the Villistas were still on the loose, they were not much of a menace.

National Guard units from Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico had been called into service on May 8, 1916. With congressional approval of the National Defense Act on June 3, 1916, National Guard units from the remainder of the states and the District of Columbia were also called for duty on the border.⁸ In mid-June President Wilson called out 110,000 National Guard for border service. None of the National Guard troops would cross the border into Mexico but were used instead as a show of force. Nonetheless, activities on the border were far from dull. The troops had to be on constant alert as border raids were still an occasional nuisance. Three of the raids were particularly bloody. On May 5, 1916, Mexican bandits attacked an outpost at Glenn Springs, Texas, killing one civilian and wounding three American soldiers. On June 15 bandits killed four American soldiers at San Ygnacio, Texas, and on July 31 one American soldier and a U.S. customs inspector were killed. In all three cases Mexican raiders were killed and wounded, but the exact numbers are unknown.

The focus of the Punitive Expedition now changed from actively seeking out Pancho Villa to a more defensive position of protecting the troops from Carranza's forces. A new enemy, boredom, now tormented the troops. During the warmer months, the troops faced an almost daily dose of dust storms and swarms of flies. Organized recreation was virtually nonexistent for the men on duty in Mexico. In the absence of a USO or YMCA, soldiers organized baseball games, boxing matches, and hunting expeditions. Gambling was also another diversion for the troops since they had nowhere to spend their army pay. As long as no disorder resulted from the gambling, Pershing and his staff made little effort to discourage it.⁹

Another feature of the camp at Colonia Dublan were the numerous Mexican prostitutes who followed the troops. To prevent the men from leaving camp, Pershing had the prostitutes rounded up and placed under guard in a specially created barbed-wire stockade. Soldiers wishing to visit the stockade were required to show the guard on duty that they had the necessary fee that was regulated by the provost marshal. After completing business with one of the visiting ladies, a soldier was required to take a prophylactic provided by the army. The result of this strict sanitary measure was one of the lowest venereal disease rates an army has ever known.¹⁰

On January 18, 1917, General Funston informed Pershing "that it was the intention of the Government to withdraw from Mexico at an early date." Pershing "recommended that the date of the beginning of the movement from Dublan, Mexico, be not later than January 28, 1917, the withdrawal to be entirely by marching, and the command to assemble at Palomas, Chihuahua, and march across the border together." The recommendation was approved, and the Punitive Expedition officially ended on the afternoon of February 5, 1917. Shortly after the withdrawal, various units of the National Guard were returned to their homes. Small forces were maintained in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico to "prevent further trouble from scattered bands of outlaws"¹¹

As a token of appreciation, the United States Congress approved the issuing of the Mexican Service Badge, then the Mexican Border Service Medal. Eligibility for the Mexican Service Badge, according to War Department General Order 155, December 1917, was authorized by the President for issue "to all officers and enlisted men who are now, or may hereafter be, in the military service . . . in Mexico as members of the Vera Cruz expedition . . . in Mexico as members of the punitive or other authorized expeditions . . . those who participated in an engagement against Mexicans . . . and those who were present as members of the Mexican border patrol."¹² Individuals not eligible for the Mexican Service Badge were authorized by Congress on July 9, 1918, to receive the Mexican Border Service Medal. Its purpose was to recognize the National Guardsmen and regular army troops mobilized to patrol the Mexican border between 1916 and 1917.¹³

Despite its failure to capture Pancho Villa, the Mexican Punitive Expedition can be deemed a success. Secretary of War Baker praised the efforts of Pershing and his men by stating that "its objective, of course was the capture of Villa, if that could be accomplished, but its real purpose was a display of the power of the United States into a country disturbed beyond control of the constituted authorities of the Republic of Mexico as a means of controlling lawless aggregations of bandits and preventing attacks by them across the international frontier. This purpose is fully and finally accomplished."¹⁴

Most important, the Mexican Punitive Expedition provided military training experience for the eleven thousand regular soldiers who made up the expedition. Pershing's experience during the Punitive Expedition and the death of Funston on February 19, 1917, made him the obvious

choice as commander of the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I. Many of the same men who served with Pershing in Mexico accompanied him to France.

Hostilities in Mexico continued well after the Americans left. On March 11, 1917, Carranza was officially elected the new president of Mexico but continued to fight off overthrow attempts by Villa and Emiliano Zapata. On April 10, 1919, Carranza had Zapata assassinated. A year later Carranza himself was assassinated after fleeing Mexico City during a rebellion. Pancho Villa met a similar fate on July 20, 1923. Around the same time, the army disbanded troops stationed along the Mexican border, thus bringing to a close a turbulent period in Mexican-American relations.

The holdings of the National Archives contain a significant amount of primary records pertaining to activities on the United States-Mexican border during the Mexican Punitive Expedition. Unfortunately, researchers wishing to use these records for genealogical purposes may find them frustrating.

In most cases, personnel-related documents were removed from the official records and placed in an individual's service record, which are in the custody of the National Personnel Records Center (Military Personnel Records), 9700 Page Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri 63132. An NATF Form 180 is required when requesting a search for personnel records in this repository. The complete name of the serviceman, branch of service, and approximate dates of service is the minimum information records center staff need to conduct a search.¹⁵ In the event that a soldier served with a National Guard regiment, consult the appropriate state archives.

In some instances, duplicate copies of documents relating to personnel are filed either in the field or headquarters-level records of the army. In the descriptions below, records most likely to contain such documents are specially noted.

Since the military activities in Mexico were conducted mainly by the U.S. Army, this article references only a few U.S. Navy and Marine Corps records. The two exceptions are the Tampico incident and the attack and occupation of Vera Cruz.

The following summary of military records is arranged by record group number, not in order of research value. Only substantive series of records relating to the Mexican situation are included. This list is in no way exhaustive. For more detailed information on these and other record groups, consult the *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States* (1995). Additional information on these record groups can be obtained from the Old Military and Civil Branch (NWCTB), 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20408-0001.

Record Group 24, Records of the United States Navy Personnel

Included in this record group are deck logs, entry 118, and muster rolls, entry 134, for ships composing the U.S. Navy's Atlantic Fleet, such as the USS *Dolphin*. The deck logs provide a daily summary of operations and a roster of officers aboard a given ship. The muster rolls record the names of enlisted men serving on board a ship or assigned to a station.

Record Group 45, Naval Records Collection of the Office of the Naval Records and Library

Under the Subject File designation of WE-Mexico are collections of U.S. Marine Corps and Navy operations reports, correspondence, and casualty lists for Tampico and Vera Cruz.

Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General

Two series, entries 189–190, pertain to correspondence, telegrams, and other papers relating to supplies for a proposed expedition during the Mexican Revolution.

A function of the Office of the Quartermaster General was the procurement and issuing of medals and badges. Entry 283 is a serial list of Mexican Service Badges issued (Numbers 1–25000), and entry 285 is a serial list of Mexican Border Service Medals issued (Numbers 2401–34060). Entry 256 is a name index to all medal- and badge-related series in this record group.

Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's–1917

Included in this record group is correspondence such as letters received, replies, telegrams, reports, and other documents sent to the War Department in Washington that relate to troops stationed along the Mexican border and the operations during the Mexican Punitive Expedition. The correspondence is included in entry 25 and is arranged numerically; it is indexed by name and subject in entry 27. In many cases, correspondence that pertains to a similar topic is consolidated under one number. This is the case for the Mexican border, which is filed under #2378529, and the Mexican Punitive Expedition, which is filed under #2377632. A more complete description of the filing arrangement in this series is found in the *Guide to Material on Latin America in the National Archives of the United States* (1974), pp. 172–173. Personnel-related documents for all staff officers up through 1917 are included in entry 25. Also, in extreme cases, it is possible to locate documents pertaining to enlisted personnel in the regular army or National Guard, particularly if a soldier was discharged, deserted, or died while in the army.

Record Group 112, Records of the Office of the Surgeon General

General correspondence, 1894–1917, entry 26, contains a copy of the surgeon general's final report on the Mexican Punitive Expedition, file # 156351. There are also personnel files in this series for medical officers serving during the Mexican Punitive Expedition and along the Mexican border.

Record Group 127, Records of the United States Marine Corps

Included in this record group are muster rolls, entry 101, for the marines occupying Vera Cruz.

Record Group 165, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs

General correspondence, entry 297, of the War College Division contains drafts of reports, copies of telegrams, photographs, and monographs relating to the U.S. Army's operations in Mexico and along the border, mainly under file #9497. Records pertaining to the operations of

the "Maneuver Division" were transferred from the War College Division correspondence and are now included in the general correspondence of the Military Intelligence Division (MID), entry 65, under file #6274. File 13137 contains a report on Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico. The MID, entry 63, also contains reports from military attachés, 1917–1941, relating to political, social, military, and economic conditions in Mexico. Entry 152, Records of the Office of the Military Censor, contains reports on censorship along the Mexican border, 1917–1919.

The Historical Division files, entry 310, contain histories, diaries, orders, memorandums, and reports for units stationed on the border during the Punitive Expedition. There is a subject index at the beginning of the series.

Record Group 391, Records of United States Army Mobile Commands

Included in this record group are administrative records for infantry, cavalry, and field artillery regiments, entries 2118, 2122, 2124, and 2133, that served during the Mexican Punitive Expedition and along the Mexican border. In some cases, copies of strength returns, muster rolls, and records are included in these series.

Record Group 393, Records of United States Army Continental Commands

Part I of this record group includes the general correspondence and reports of the Southern Department for the period of 1913 - 1916, entry 4437. The correspondence is indexed in entry 4435. Correspondence and reports created after 1916 are arranged by the War Department decimal filing scheme and included in entry 4439. Part 3 contains the general correspondence for the El Paso District in entry 135. The index for the correspondence is in entry 133. Included in this series are the reports relating to the Glenn Springs, Texas, raid.

Record Group 395, Records of United States Army Overseas Commands

The historical records created at the organizational level during the Vera Cruz Expedition, entries 1175–1184, and during the Mexican Punitive Expedition, entries 1185–1229, are clearly the most significant source of documents in the National Archives for the study of the Fifth Infantry Brigade during the Vera Cruz Expedition and the regiments constituting the Mexican Punitive Expedition.

Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917–

Included in this record group are classified and unclassified, correspondence arranged by the decimal filing scheme. The general correspondence, entry 37, 1917–1925, contains a series arranged by country. The correspondence under the heading of "Country— Mexico" includes weekly summaries of activities on the border as submitted by the commanding officers to the Adjutant General's Office. Entry 37, contains a series of bulky or oversize files that were separated from the general correspondence. Under the heading of "Countries-Mexican Expedition, 370.22" is a copy of the final report of the Punitive Expedition. It includes the

reports of the Punitive Expedition Air Service, Quartermaster General, Chief of Engineers, Judge Advocate General, and the Inspector General. There are also attachments to the report, such as maps and blueprints.

Entry 21, Organization Records of National Guard units, consists of orders, sick reports, circulars, rosters, payroll vouchers, and general correspondence concerning recruits, promotions, and furloughs. Entry 16 contains miscellaneous files. Among the miscellaneous files is a compiled list of casualties for the Mexican border and the Mexican Punitive Expedition. Entry 112 has regimental Strength Returns.

Published Records

Abstracts of some of the important reports and correspondence cited in these National Archives record groups are often published in the War and Navy Department's annual reports and the *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*. These invaluable works are included among the Congressional Serial Set, which is available in many large public and university libraries.

Mexican Punitive Expedition: Part 1

Mitchell Yockelson is a reference archivist in the Modern Military Records Branch, National Archives and Records Administration. He specializes in U.S. Army records for the period from the Spanish-American War to World War II.

Notes

1. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1916 (1925)*, pp. 485–487.
2. Report from General Pershing to General Pershing, Correspondence of the War College Division (#6174), Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, Record Group 165 (hereinafter cited as Pershing Report, RG 165, NARA). Additional copies of the report are located among the general correspondence, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, RG 94.
3. John S. D. Eisenhower, *Intervention: The United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1913–1917* (1993), p. 253.
4. Pershing Report, RG 165, NARA.
5. "History of the 1st Aero Squadron," entry 310, box 231, RG 165, NARA.
6. Eisenhower, *Intervention: The United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1913–1917*, pp. 267–268.
7. Pershing Report, RG 165, NARA.

8. War Department, Annual Report of the Secretary of War for the Fiscal Year, 1916, Vol. 1 (1916).
9. Clarence C. Clendenen, *Blood on the Border: The United States Army and the Mexican Irregulars* (1969), p. 330.
10. Ibid., pp. 334 - 335. See also Donald Smythe, "Venereal Disease: The AEF's Experience," *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives* 9 (Summer 1977): 66 (reprinted in 26 [Summer 1994]: 120.)
11. Annual Report of the Fiscal Year 1916, by Maj. Gen. Frederick Funston, United States Army, Commanding the Southern Department, p. 33, entry 27, file #243231, box 141, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-, RG 407, NARA.
12. War Department, General Order 155, 1917.
13. Albert F. Gleim, *Army Mexican Service Medal Issues* (1994), p. 1.
14. War Department Annual Report, 1917, p. 10.
15. In many cases records for Army personnel discharged between November 1, 1912, and January, 1960, were destroyed in a July 12, 1973, fire at the National Personnel Records Center.

Articles published in *Prologue* do not necessarily represent the views of NARA or of any other agency of the United States Government.

The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

1-86-NARA-NARA or 1-866-272-6272