In Pursuit of Pancho Villa 1916-1917

By Joe Griffith

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Doroteo Arango, alias Francisco “Pancho” Villa, was born in 1877 (1879 according to some sources) in San Juan del Rio, State of Durango, Mexico. During his lifetime, he was a ruthless killer (killing his first man at age sixteen), a notorious bandit (including cattle rustling and bank robbery), a revolutionary (a general commanding a division in the resistance against the 1913-14 Victoriano Huerta dictatorship), and despite his bloodthirsty nature, an enduring hero to the poor people of Mexico. In their minds, Villa was afraid of no one, not the Mexican government or the gringos of the United States. He was their one true friend and avenger for decades of Yankee oppression.

In late 1915 Pancho Villa had counted on American support to obtain the presidency of Mexico. Instead the U.S. Government recognized the new government of Venustiano Carranza. An irate Villa swore revenge against the United States and began by murdering Americans in hopes of provoking President Woodrow Wilson’s intervention into Mexico. Villa believed that American intervention would discredit the Carranza government with the people of Mexico and reaffirm his own popularity.

Villa and his “pistoleros” launched raids along the U.S.- Mexico boundary to frighten the Americans living in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona border towns. Concerned for the safety of Americans, President Wilson ordered the War Department to begin deploying troops to Texas and New Mexico. In April, 1915, Brigadier General John J. Pershing and his 8th Infantry Brigade were sent to Fort Bliss, Texas with the mission of guarding the U.S.- Mexico border from Arizona to a bleak outpost in the Sierra Blanca mountains ninety miles southeast of El Paso.

While the presence of American troops served to deter Villa on the north of the Rio Grande, the murder of U.S. citizens in Mexico continued. One of the most heinous atrocities occurred January 11, 1916, when Villa’s bandits stopped a train at Santa Ysabel (See Map 1). The bandits removed a group of 17 Texas business men (mining engineers) invited by the Mexican government to reopen the Cusihuiriachic mines below Chihuahua City and executed them in cold blood. However, one of those shot feigned death and rolled down the side of the embankment and, crawling away into a patch of brown mesquite bushes, escaped. The train moved on, leaving the corpses at the mercy of the slayers, who stripped and mutilated them. After the escapee arrived back at Chihuahua City, a special train sped to Santa Ysabel to reclaim the bodies. When the people of El Paso heard of the massacre, they went wild with anger. El Paso was immediately placed under martial law to prevent irate Texans from crossing into Mexico at Juarez to wreak vengeance on innocent Mexicans.

Despite outrage in the United States and Washington over the Santa Ysabel massacre, President Wilson refused to intervene and send troops into Mexico. Two months later, Villa decided to strike again. This time he would invade the United States. At 2:30 a.m., on the morning of March 9, 1916, he and 500 “Villistas” attacked the 13th U.S. Cavalry at Camp Furlong near Columbus, New Mexico (Map 1). Despite prior knowledge that Villa and his men were pillaging, raping, and murdering their way toward the border, the cavalry was caught completely by surprise. One reason for the cavalry’s sluggishness was because some of the troops had been drinking, but perhaps more importantly, all of the troops’ rifles were chained and locked in gun racks. Still, the cavalry managed to get organized and fought off the “Villistas” killing many of them in the process. During their retreat, however, the “Villistas” stopped at Columbus, New Mexico for a looting and window-shooting spree that left several U.S. civilians dead. For three hours, bullets struck houses and shouts of “Viva Villa! Viva Mexico! Muerte a los Americanos!” (death to Americans) were heard in the streets. The town was set afire, though Villa’s men realized nothing beyond a few dollars and perhaps some merchandise from the burntout stores. The terror continued until about 7 a.m., and when Villa finally rode off, the smoke-filled streets of Columbus were littered with the dead and wounded. Fourteen American soldiers and ten civilians were killed in the raid.

Although Villa’s losses from from his American incursion were high, he had achieved his aim of arousing the United States. Now, he and his men headed due south from Palomas seeking the safety of the mountains of the Sierra Madre. However, the 13th U.S. Cavalry was now in hot pursuit. Colonel Frank Tompkins had managed to gather 32 cavalrymen and was nipping at the heels of the fleeing Mexicans. His troops sighted Villa’s rear guard and killed over thirty men and horses. Colonel Tompkins kept up the chase for eight hours and killed a number of stragglers as well as more of Villa’s rear guard. Lacking supplies, Tompkins and his cavalrymen were forced to return to Camp Furlong. On their way back, they counted 75 to 100 “Villistas” killed during their hastily organized pursuit.

The populace of Columbus was in a state of hysteria. The American cavalry troops collected the bodies of the “Villistas” that had been shot in the streets and on the outskirts of town and piled them on funeral pyres and cremated them. For a day or more the fires smoldered and the odor of burning flesh permeated the air. Columbus lay virtually demolished, so completely burned and pillaged that it never recovered its former vitality.
To prevent repetitions of the Columbus outrage, President Wilson called out 15,000 militia and stationed them along the U.S. - Mexico border (Map 1). Wilson also informed President Carranza that he intended to send a military expedition into northern Mexico to capture Pancho Villa, and Carranza reluctantly agreed. President Wilson then appointed Brigadier General John J. Pershing to lead 4,800 troops (mostly cavalry), supported by aircraft and motorized military vehicles (the first time either were used in U.S. warfare) on a punitive expedition into Mexico to capture Villa.

However, there was a catch to Pershing’s mission orders from Wilson that would be decisive in the end. Pershing was to pursue and punish Villa, but not to upset the Carranza government by firing on any of his troops. The futility of Wilson’s orders was plain even before the expedition began, when the local Carranzista commander at nearby Palomas threatened to attack the Americans. Pershing was only able to stave off an incident by hiring the man as a guide for his troops. Carranza would take advantage of Wilson’s restrictions to make life miserable for the Punitive Expedition throughout their mission.

Pershing’s expedition also provided an opportunity for one of the Army more headstrong members. . . George S. Patton, then a young lieutenant. Fearing he would be left behind on mundane border patrol with his unit, Patton pleaded with Pershing to take him along as a replacement for one of his two aides that was absent when the expedition was ordered into Mexico. Pershing agreed at the last moment and took him. The thirty year old Patton was convinced that he would now be able to fulfill his destiny as a great warrior.

Villa had a nine days headstart before Pershing’s Expedition crossed into Mexico (Map 1) at noon on March 15, 1916. By that time, Villa and his men were well hidden in the mountains. To cover the uncharted terrain, Pershing divided his force into East and West columns and proceeded methodically into the unfamiliar Mexican interior.

Basically, the two American columns of the expedition got nowhere in their pursuit of Villa. Northern Mexico was a vast wasteland with few towns and dominated by the barren and rugged Sierra Madre Mountains with peaks averaging ten to twelve thousand feet and honeycombed with deep canyons providing excellent hiding places for Villa and his men. The few roads were little more than dirt trails, dusty in dry weather and muddy quagmires in the rain. Villa’s men were on their home ground while Pershing was moving into unfamiliar and largely unmapped territory depending on Mexican guides whose loyalty was always questionable.
Pershing’s soldiers, mostly raw recruits, encountered every imaginable mishap during their eleven months in Mexico. President Carranza had promised assistance, but when, for example, Pershing’s men were on the verge of capturing Villa, the “Carranzistas” attacked them. Another time, Pershing’s Indian scouts misinformed him about the location of Villa’s lair. On other occasions, the scouts brought in blood-filled boots and bullet-riddled shirts as “proof” that he had been killed.

Columbus, New Mexico after Villa’s raid.

Pershing’s East column fanned out from Columbus (Map 1) through cactus and desert, pueblos and small settlements, Ascension and Corralitos. The West column meandered about among hills and plains to Culbertson’s Ranch (Map 1), one hundred miles west of El Paso, near the New Mexico - Arizona - Mexico border, and the Ojitos to the south. After some months, both columns converged at Casas Grandes only to split again a little later, with one heading south for Pearson, Cumbre, and Madera, and the other marching southeastwardly for Guerrero, Agua caliente, Ojos Azules, and Carrizal.

At Colonia Dublan (Map 2), Pershing established his permanent command post where he began to plan how he would snare Villa. Everywhere U.S. Troops went, men, women, and children cheerfully provided them with misinformation about his (Villa’s) whereabouts.

As in past American invasions (e.g., the Mexican War of 1846-1848), the Pershing Expedition was a financial “boon” to Mexico. The American soldiers’ wants were catered to and satisfied everywhere they went. Prices skyrocketed. If they so desired, soldiers could submerge themselves in Mexican beer. Cantinas were open all night. In many restaurants soldiers devoured “deer” meat that once ran in the streets barking. Life was hard only when the Americans marched or rode along the dirt roads and were eating their dry ration crackers and looking for water. Dublan was transformed into an enormous military encampment complete with a railhead where tons of supplies were unloaded by a thousand civilian workers. The soldiers and civilians worked by day and brawled by night in the saloons and bordellos that had sprung up in the once sleepy town.

Villa’s men mingled with the populace at will by simply removing the cartridge belts they normally strapped across their chests. They even mixed with the Americans and attended Western “cowboy” movies with Pershing’s officers.

In May, 1916, Lieutenant Patton saw combat for the first time. Based on information about the location of Julio Cardenas, one of Villa’s most trusted subordinates and commander of his personal bodyguard; Patton, accompanied by ten soldiers from the 6th Infantry Regiment, and two civilian guides traveling in three Dodge open top touring automobiles, conducted a surprise raid on a ranch house at San Miguelito (Map 2) near Rubio. During the ensuing fire-fight, Patton and his men killed three men. One was identified as Cardenas. The other two dead Mexicans were an unnamed Villista captain and a private. Patton’s men tied the bodies to the hoods of the cars, while Patton put Cardenas’ silver-studded saddle and sword into his vehicle. The spectacle of the three cars with the bodies tied on the hoods caused a great commotion along the road, but Patton and his party sped through the countryside to their headquarters at Dublan without incident.

In June, Pershing was informed that Villa could be taken at the small village of Carrizal, northwest of his command center at Dublan. (Map 2). When the Pershing’s troops assaulted the village on June 21, they quickly realized they had been hoodwinked for they found themselves fighting “Carranzistas,” not Villistas. Scores of “Carranzistas” were killed or wounded. Villa was reported to have watched with much delight — from a safe distance — as his two enemies battled each other in total confusion.
The unfortunate American attack on Mexican government troops became known as the “Carrizal Affair” and created a such a rowe that war with Mexico seemed possible. The situation led President Wilson to call 75,000 National Guardsmen into Federal service to help police the U.S.-Mexico border (Map 2). In fact, hostilities with Mexico probably would have erupted then and there, but for the bitter war raging in Europe. Wilson, anxious not to become involved in Mexico at a time when relations with Germany were deteriorating, agreed to submit Mexican complaints arising out of the punitive expedition to a joint commission for settlement. Some time later the commission ruled that, among other things, that the debacle at Carrizal was the fault of the American unit commander.

For the remainder of 1916, the intensity of the hunt for Villa waned and replaced by the tedious routine of life in a temporary bivouac. Boredom spawned drunken shoot-outs between troops and local Mexicans. In an attempt to keep his men busy, Pershing initiated a tough new training program that included cavalry maneuvers. It was clear by this time, however, that given President Wilson’s restrictive orders and the growing intransigence of the Carranza regime that the Pershing led Mexican incursion was doomed to failure.14

Meanwhile, back in the United States, National Guard units were being called out to secure the U.S.-Mexico border. Units of the Georgia National Guard were mobilized at Camp Harris, Macon, Georgia during July, 1916 and sent to Camp Cotton, Fort Bliss, near El Paso, Texas in October (See chart). Company H, 3rd Separate Infantry Battalion and 2nd Company, Coast Artillery were mustered into Federal service on August 10 and September 26 respectively, but remained at home station and were not sent to Texas.15

The aggregate strength of the Georgia units that were sent to Camp Cotton, Texas was 3,892. The units were mobilized on June 18, 1916 and mustered into Federal service, most between July 2-31 and one as late as September 26. After some mobilization training at Camp Harris, they departed for duty on the U.S.-Mexico border.16

An example of the service of one of the Georgia National Guard units deployed to the border is revealed in the reports of the 2nd Squadron Cavalry. The unit departed Camp Harris at Macon, Georgia on October 25, 1916 and arrived at Fort Bliss, Texas (Map 2) on November 1, 1916. At Fort Bliss, they underwent a month of mounted training until Then, the squadron left on December 1, 1916 for field duty at Fabens, Texas (Map 2) with three officers and 70 men, 79 horses, 2 transport wagons, and eight mules. The group marched 32 miles to Fabens finally reaching there at 1:40 p.m. on December 2, 1916. They performed border patrol with the 1st Kentucky Infantry and from December 16 on with the 2nd Kentucky Infantry. The squadron left Fort Bliss, Texas at 1 a.m. on March 22, 1917 with three officers and 77 men, two wagons and full equipment. They arrived at home station, Atlanta, Georgia at 1 p.m., March 27, 1917. The distance traveled was 1,700 miles.17

In January, 1917, the ill-fated attempt to capture Pancho Villa ended with the recall of the Punitive Expedition from Mexico. On January 27, the first of 10,690 men and 9,307 horses embarked for Columbus. It took over a week to assemble the full expeditionary force back at Fort Bliss, where, on February 7, 1917, with General Pershing at the head, they marched into El Paso to the acclaim of cheering crowds. That officially ended Pershing’s campaign. The expedition had gone as far south as Parral, but Pershing had not captured Pancho Villa. Therefore, the expedition was only notable as the last U.S. Cavalry expedition in U.S. military history. Although Villa had once been nicked in the knee cap by a Carranzistas bullet, he was now completely mended and feeling well. However, many of his best men had either died or deserted him. But, with the gringos gone, he was now free to continue his struggle with his arch foe Venustiano Carranza.18

Unabashed by his failure to capture Villa, General Pershing claimed the expedition was successful as a learning experience. However, in the minds of Mexicans, Pancho Villa was the clear winner. He had emerged triumphant from battle with the United States led by the great General Pershing. No doubt, in the eyes of the Mexican people, Pershing’s withdrawal from Mexico added to Villa’s myth of invincibility.

But, a few years later, on Friday, July 20, 1923, Villa’s luck ran out. Accompanied by his entourage of Dorades (“Golden Ones”), which was what he called his bodyguards, Pancho Villa frequently made trips to Parral (Map 2) for banking and other errands. This day, Villa had picked up a consignment of gold with which to pay his Canutillo ranch staff and was driving through the city in his black 1919 Dodge roadster when a group of seven riflemen fired 150 shots in just two minutes into his car. In the fusillade of shots, 16 bullets lodged in his body and four more in his head. Villa was reported to have killed one of the assassins before he died. Truly, Pancho Villa had lived by the gun and died by the gun.19

It was never determined who ordered the killing. However, the assassins were given light prison terms leading to general speculation that someone in the Mexican government must have given the order simply because Villa had become an embarrassment to post-revolutionary Mexico.20

But even in death, Pancho Villa was not at rest and still stirred controversy. Three years after he was buried in the Cemeterio Municipal at Parral, it was alleged that an ex-Villista officer, Captain Emil L. Holmdahl, had opened the tomb and removed Villa’s head to sell to an eccentric Chicago millionaire who collected the skulls of historic figures. Despite the rumors of a headless Villa, his sons prevented examination of the remains to see if the head was still attached. Three years later, the Federal government ordered Villa’s body, reported to be headless, moved to Mexico City to be interred in the Tomb of Illustrious Men.21

Units Mobilized from Georgia

[Map 2]

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<tr>
<th>1st Infantry Regiment</th>
<th>2nd Infantry Regiment</th>
<th>2nd Squadron Cavalry</th>
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<td>Field Staff and Band</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Company A, Engineers</td>
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However, local residents of Parral insist to this day that their mayor had Villa’s body shifted in the graveyard a meter or so to the right of the marked grave and replaced with another body to prevent any more of Villa’s remains from being taken. It was the headless decoy body, they insist, that was later taken to Mexico City. Whether Villa’s body is still in the ground at Parral or not, his tall, stately tombstone remains in place and people still come to place flowers on the grave. So, even in death, Pancho Villa remains elusive.22

On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. Pershing received orders to organize a division with himself in command and to take the formation to France as the first American unit to fight alongside the Allies. He submitted a list of officers whom he wanted on his staff and included Lieutenant Patton’s name. However, several days later, Pershing was appointed the commander-in-chief of the American Expeditionary Force, which included all troops to be sent to France.23

Therefore, with a small headquarters party, Pershing went overseas at once as a symbol of reassurance and promise to the war-weary Allies, who had fought immense battles of attrition for the past three years. Although the Americans entrance into the war was a great psychological boost to them, the United States was unprepared to join in the massive clash of arms on the Western Front. Positioning units along the Mexican border and pursuing Villa had been a small start toward mobilization, but now the U. S. Army had to raise, equip, and train a much larger force. The War Department planned to ship Pershing 2,000,000 partially trained troops. He was tasked to bring them to combat readiness over there.24

As for the Georgia units that had gone to the Mexican Border, some were retained in Federal Service; others returned to Georgia. Nevertheless, on July 3, 1917, the entire National Guard of the United States was mobilized for World War I. In August, 1917, the Georgia National Guard units were reorganized with most of the units being assigned to the 31st Infantry Division with the exception of the Coast Artillery units which were assigned to Savannah Coastal Defense. However, there was one special new battalion to be organized from Georgia.25

Requests from National Guard officers and Governors for early acceptance of their state units to go to war against Germany poured into the War Department. The clamor became so general and so insistent that the Secretary of War conceived the idea of forming a composite Division to include troops from every State in the Union. That was the origin of the famous 42d (Rainbow) Division, which was later to distinguish itself in many important engagements of World War I. In August, 1917, companies B, C, and F of the 2nd Georgia Infantry were reorganized as the 151st Machine Gun Battalion and assigned to the 42d Division. When the 42d Infantry Division arrived in France in November, 1917, there were National Guard units from 26 States and from the District of Columbia in its ranks. Almost a year later, on September 16, 1918, the 31st Infantry Division consisting of National Guard units from Georgia, Alabama, and Florida departed for France and joined the American Expeditionary Force on October 3 1918.26

As for the legend or myth of Poncho Villa today, conservative Mexicans may insist he was nothing more than a self-serving bloodthirsty bandit. However, to most Mexicans his memory has been embellished through songs and stories and he is now generally remembered as a Mexican “Robinhood” figure. Of all the Mexican revolutionary leaders, he is probably the best known and remembered for his victories in the constitutionalist revolution and for being the only foreign military leader to have “successfully” invaded continental U.S. territory.

As for Americans, the massive mobilization of U.S. forces in 1916 and the pursuit of Pancho Villa in Mexico are scarcely noted in our history books and thus, not read about in school. However, it is important to Georgians because it was the first mobilization and deployment of Nation Guard Units for Federal service and an end to the old militia system of recruiting volunteer units of rank amateurs for Federal service as it was

done for the Mexican War of 1846-1848. It was also the forerunner of the total force policy so important to our defense preparedness today. If alive today, Pancho Villa would probably claim credit for teaching General Pershing and the gringos from the north how to organize for a fight.

Notes


2. Ibid, 128.


4. Ibid., 133.

5. Ibid.


8. Ibid., 138.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 139.

11. Ibid., 142.


16. Ibid., 3.


19. Ibid., 265.

20. Ibid., 266.

21 Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Blumenson, 93-94.

24. Ibid, 94.

25. Thisted, 2.
Joe Griffith is retired from the U.S. Army and is a member of the Board of Directors for the Historical Society of the Georgia National Guard. He is a frequent contributor to the Journal and serves on the Society’s “History Book Committee.”