



The flamboyant Pancho Villa was famous on both sides of the border.

Photo by D.W. Hoffman, Library of Congress

Chasing Pancho Villa

By John T. Correll

The pursuit into Mexico included the horse cavalry as well as Benny Foulois and his eight-plane air force.

In the early morning hours of March 9, 1916, Pancho Villa and his “Division of the North” swept down on Columbus, N.M., three miles from the US-Mexico border, shooting at anything that moved. Half of the nearly 500 riders struck at the town itself and the other half attacked the US Army’s Camp Furlong, which was adjacent.

Villa and his band had been raiding and killing along the Mexican side of the border for months. In January, they ambushed a train carrying American mining engineers and killed 18 of them. Rumor said he would soon make a foray into the United States.

The 13th Cavalry Regiment at Columbus had conflicting information about Villa’s whereabouts and had patrols out looking for him. The Villistas crossed into New Mexico under cover of darkness and threaded their way between the cavalry detachments.

Columbus looked like an easy target. The population, counting children, was about 300. There were two hotels, a bank, a post office, and several stores. Villa’s scouts had reported only 30 men in the army garrison on the edge of town. Actually, 348 troops were in the camp that night.

The Villistas came whooping in at 4:30 a.m., shooting indiscriminately, ransacking stores and homes for loot, and setting fires. The soldiers recovered quickly from the surprise attack and

mounted an effective defense. Fast-shooting Benét-Mercié machine guns established command of the streets and the raiders never got farther than the middle of town.

into Mexico by a troop of cavalry, and forced to abandon most of their loot.

Villa had a week to disperse his forces before the US Army came after him.

The “punitive expedition,” led by Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing, consisted of horse cavalry, infantry, artillery, and the 1st Aero Squadron, commanded by Capt. Benjamin D. Foulois. The squadron had eight JN-3 Curtiss Jenny biplanes—every airplane the Army possessed except for those at the aviation school in San Diego. It was the first time a US aerial unit had ever deployed in active field service.

MAKING AN ENEMY

Francisco “Pancho” Villa, 38, was already famous in the United States as well as in Mexico. Uneducated but a natural leader, he joined an outlaw gang at age 17, becoming chief when the old chief was killed in a stagecoach robbery. A few years later, he took up cattle rustling and enjoyed considerable public approval because of resentment toward the big ranchers.

When the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, the flamboyant Villa rose to folk hero status, leading partisan forces in support of reformer Francisco Madero, who ousted long-time dictator Porfirio Diaz. In 1913, Madero was overthrown by Gen. Victoriano Huerta and “shot while trying to escape.”

Villa aligned with another rebel leader, Venustiano Carranza, in opposing the Huerta regime.

In 1914, Villa signed a motion picture contract with the Mutual Film Co. of New York, which combined documentary



Before the fighting ended around 6 a.m., 10 American civilians and eight soldiers had been killed, but so had 100 of the Villistas. By daybreak, the invaders were on the run, pursued 12 miles



Bettmann/Corbis photo

Pershing (foreground) led the punitive expedition south in two columns. His main striking force in Mexico would be the cavalry.

states, was strong for retaliation. Congress, expressing doubt that any government authority in Mexico was “capable of punishing these atrocious acts,” endorsed intervention. Wilson ordered a “pursuit of Villa with the object of capturing him and putting a stop to his forays.”

Pershing, a brigade commander at Fort Bliss, Texas, and a rising star in the Army was appointed to lead the expedition. He headed south March 15 with about 4,800 troops in two columns, one departing from Columbus and the other from a ranch near Hachita, N.M. Two days later, the columns came together at Colonia Dublán, 116 miles inside Mexico, where Pershing set up a forward headquarters. Colonia Dublán was chosen because it was the location of a small colony of American Mormons. Pershing figured his presence would be less likely to create an incident there than at a Mexican village.

At Colonia Dublán, Pershing obtained a Dodge touring car from one of the Mormons. He put an American flag on one bumper and his guidon on the other and turned in the bay horse he had ridden into Mexico. For the remainder of his time there, his travel would be by automobile.

On March 19, Foulois and his eight-plane air force arrived in Mexico to join Pershing. Their mission was observation and communications, not combat—their JN-3s had no fittings to mount weapons. Besides, the airmen struggled along on 90-horsepower engines that could not support the additional weight of Lewis machine guns.

In addition to scouting for Villa and carrying messages back and forth to the cavalry patrols, the airmen took dispatches from the newspaper reporters with them on their regular flights back to Columbus. The *New York Times* proudly labeled its reports “By Army Aeroplane from Field Headquarters.”

For more than a week, nothing was seen of Villa, who had melted into the countryside of his Chihuahua stronghold. At first, the Mexican government’s attitude toward the US intervention had been ambiguous but soon hardened into wanting the Americans to go home.

Carranza would not allow Pershing to use the Mexican railroads, so the expedition had to be supplied by truck from the logistics base at Columbus. Eventually, Pershing had 162 trucks in operation, and the population of Columbus became

battle footage with fictional content for movies that starred Villa as the hero. He got 20 percent of the revenues. There is no truth to the claim that the contract called for him to restage the battle scenes when needed for cinematic effect.

Contrary to his image as the Robin Hood of the border, Villa was inclined toward sudden and extreme violence and executions, which sometimes included the families of his victims.

The revolution was already in progress when Woodrow Wilson took office as President of the United States in 1913, but Wilson hoped to steer it in the direction of his idealistic and progressive principles. Wilson regarded Huerta as “a butcher” and thought that Mexico needed to be rid of him.

Wilson never understood that while the various factions welcomed American money and arms, they did not want his guidance or his meddling in Mexican politics. All sides resented a heavy-handed operation in which US forces temporarily occupied Vera Cruz in 1914.

Huerta was driven into exile that year. Villa parted ways with Carranza and, by late 1914, their forces were actively fighting each other. In 1915 Wilson recognized Carranza as the legitimate leader of Mexico and allowed him to use railroads in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona to outmaneuver the Villistas. Villa, who had previously expressed friendship for Americans, took it as betrayal and vowed vengeance.

“We decided not to fire one more bullet against the Mexicans, our brothers,

and to prepare and organize ourselves to attack the Americans in their own dens and make them know that Mexico is a land for the free and tomb for thrones, crowns, and traitors,” Villa said in January 1916 in a letter to his fellow revolutionary Emiliano Zapata.

The situation was further complicated by the Germans, who were stirring up trouble in Mexico in hopes of keeping the United States preoccupied in its own hemisphere and out of the war in Europe.

PERSHING TAKES CHASE

Villa’s motives for the raid are not entirely clear. He was well aware that Columbus was an insignificant target. Nevertheless, he figured to replenish his supplies there and perhaps obtain weapons from the army camp, which he expected to be lightly defended. An additional factor may have been a grievance by Villa against the owners of the Commercial Hotel. The Villistas set it afire during the raid.

The most likely explanation is that Villa wanted to provoke a US intervention in Mexico. “Villa, spoiling for a fight, with Germany whispering encouragement in his ear, danced up and down the border like an enraged rooster trying to provoke the rush of a large dog,” said historian Barbara Tuchman. “He believed his only hope lay in forcing an American invasion that would rally the peons in an anti-American rising behind his banner. Then he, not Carranza, would be the national hero.”

After the attack on Columbus, US public opinion, especially in the border

the largest in New Mexico. Even so, it wasn't enough, especially when rains washed out the roads in July. The 4th Field Artillery ate beans three times a day for 62 days.

Villa finally surfaced March 27, capturing the Carranza garrison at Guerrero in the Sierra Madre mountains in a five-hour battle in which Villa was wounded in the leg. On March 29, a squadron of the US 7th Cavalry engaged 500 Villistas at San Jerónimo, killing 56 and losing five of their own, after which, Pershing said, the Villistas "scattered to the four winds."

Villa was not about to give Pershing's well-equipped regulars the set-piece battle they wanted.

AERO SQUADRON TRAVAILS

The 1st Aero Squadron started out with problems that got steadily worse. The best that can be said of the experience is that it taught the Army some valuable lessons about airplanes.

It began well. The JN-3s were shipped by train to Columbus where they were unpacked and assembled. As soon as the first one was ready March 16, Foulois and his deputy, Capt. Townsend F. Dodd, made a reconnaissance flight into Mexico to assure Pershing that there were no enemies within a day's march of his columns.

The first flight after the squadron arrived at Colonia Dublán was a different matter. On March 20, Foulois and Dodd attempted a reconnaissance flight toward Cumbre Pass in the heart of the Sierra Madres to locate Villistas. "About 30 miles out, I noticed the ground getting closer and closer," Foulois said.

The JN-3 was at its altitude limit. Colonia Dublán was already a mile above sea level and the Sierra Madres loomed ahead, much higher than the Army pilots had ever flown. Cumbre Pass lay at about 9,000 feet. The underpowered engine could not make it and Foulois and Dodd had to turn back, the mission a failure.

There were occasional successes in the following days, but the JN-3s—predecessor of the classic JN-4 Jenny that came later—battled harsh conditions that included severe rain, hail, and snowstorms. "The dust in the air was so thick that the snow was actually brown by the time it hit the ground," Foulois said.

Villa (center) was still on friendly terms with the US when he and Obregón (left) visited Pershing (right) in 1914.

Foulois lost the first of his eight airplanes March 20 when it was caught in a whirlwind upon landing and crashed. Over the next month, five more were lost, overmatched by the rugged terrain and unfavorable operating conditions. The two aircraft remaining were in such bad shape that they were flown to Columbus, condemned, and destroyed.

As replacements, Foulois received Curtiss R-2s, with larger 160 hp engines. However, the R-2s were hastily manufactured, had numerous faults, and did not perform well on the border.

Between March and August, the squadron flew 540 missions in Mexico, enabling Pershing to stay in touch with his cavalry detachments ranging deep into the countryside. There were good days, such as April 1, when the airmen flew 19 missions without any problems. In August, Foulois and Pershing decided to relocate the main squadron back to Columbus and keep two airplanes on rotational duty at the advanced station at Colonia Dublán.

In his final report, Foulois recommended that in the future, the Army should test airplanes under conditions resembling those they would encounter in the field rather than subjecting them only to testing at sea level under favorable conditions, which was the practice up till then.

HEARTS AND MINDS

Carranza, challenged by both Villa and Zapata, was not in firm control. Fearing that some of his commanders might defect to Villa, he demanded that US forces withdraw but tempered his

remarks, not wishing to cut ties completely with the United States.

In any case, directions from Carranza might not have made that much difference. "Carranza has no more control over local commanders or of states or municipalities than if he lived in London," Pershing said.

"Practically every Mexican so far encountered had questioned our right to be in Mexico," Pershing said. The *New York Times* reported that shots were sometimes fired at small detachments as they rode through villages.

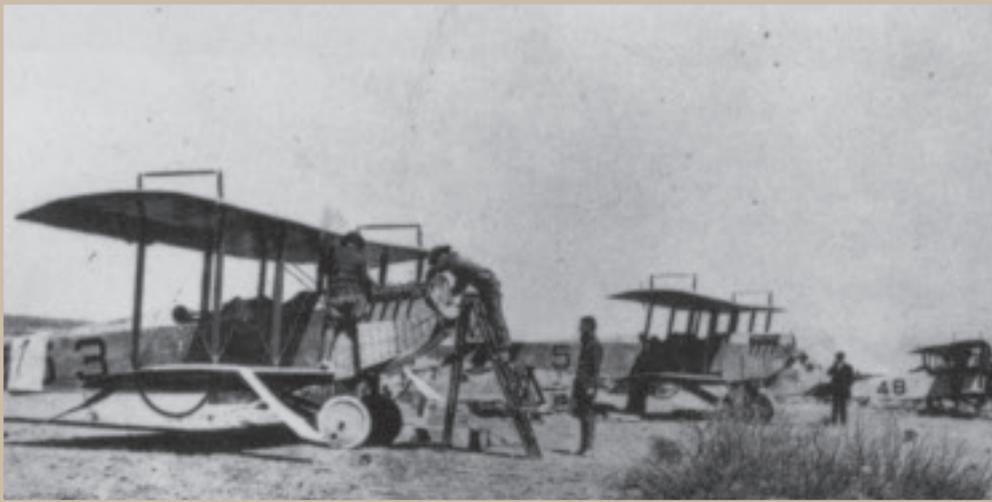
On April 7, Pershing sent Foulois to Chihuahua City with dispatches for the US consul general. Foulois took a second airplane as backup with the duplicates of the dispatches. Upon landing, Foulois set out for town but was arrested by a contingent of *rurales*, the Mexican national police. An angry crowd opened fire on the airplane, flown by Lt. Herbert A. Dargue, as he lifted off to join the backup airplane on the opposite side of town.

After a long wait, the military governor freed Foulois, but both airplanes were damaged by the mob before they were able to depart the next day.

A more serious clash came April 12 in Parral, Villa's hometown, where a squadron of the 13th Cavalry was fired on by armed civilians and engaged in a running battle with Carranza troops. Two days later, a cavalry detachment supported by one airplane reached the village of Ojito, southwest of Parral, marking the deepest penetration of the expedition into Mexico, 450 miles from Columbus.



Photo by Robert Runyan, Library of Congress



The JN-3 biplanes could not handle the altitude or field conditions in Mexico. Six of the eight were lost in the first month and the other two were in such bad shape that they were condemned and destroyed.

The Aviation Section, US Signal Corps, to which the 1st Aero Squadron belonged, became the Army Air Service in 1926.

ACROSS THE BORDER

The *New York Times* continued to report on the unending revolution in Mexico. In March 1917, Villa was said to have lost a battle near Chihuahua City, 350 of his riders killed and 500 captured. In May, he took and held a border town opposite Presidio, Texas. His last major action near the United States was in January 1919, a raid on Juarez, across from El Paso.

Villa retired from revolutionary activity in 1920, but troubles continued along the border for years.

In May 1920, war minister Obregón took over as president, having ousted his former boss Carranza—who was killed while fleeing—in possession of much of the national treasury.

Villa's turn came next. He was gunned down by assassins, hired by his enemies July 20, 1923. His car was raked by a fusillade of more than 40 dum-dum bullets as he drove through Parral.

Obregon was assassinated in July 1928.

Today, Pancho Villa State Park is located where old Camp Furlong stood 98 years ago. A few of the original buildings still stand and are designated as national historic landmarks. In the exhibit hall, visitors can see a replica of a JN-3 biplane, a 1916 Dodge touring car like the one that Pershing used, and a 1909 Benét-Mercié machine gun.

Every March on the anniversary of the raid, 100 horseback riders from Mexico, following Villa's invasion route out of Chihuahua, cross the border and join American riders for a parade through Columbus. The contingent is led by a reenactor portraying Pancho Villa. Marjorie Lilly, writing in the Silver City, N.M., *Desert Exposure*, called it "Hooves Across the Border."

"The whole purpose is to show friendship and goodwill and let by-gones be by-gones," said park manager John Read. ■

In May, Mexican raiders attacked several towns in Texas, including Glenn Springs, where they robbed the general store of everything they could carry except for the canned sauerkraut. Mexican government forces made no effort to catch them. In fact, two of the robbers were Carranza officers. Secretary of State Robert Lansing complained that in no instance had Carranza aided in the pursuit of Villa or taken action to protect the frontier.

Pershing's detachments fought occasional skirmishes with Villistas but the confrontations were more frequently with government forces. At Carrizal June 21, the cavalry commander insisted on going straight through town although warned by the Carranzista commander that he would be fired on. In the ensuing firefight, 12 Americans were killed, 12 wounded, and 24 captured. The prisoners were later released on the international bridge at Juarez.

Gen. Alvaro Obregón, the minister of war and a future president of Mexico, bragged that if a war began, he would march north and seize San Antonio. The Germans were well-satisfied with the progress of events.

THE EXPEDITION STALLS OUT

Pershing, who now had some 10,000 troops in Mexico, proposed more aggressive action to find and deal with Villa. The Mexicans said they would attack Pershing if he moved any way except north.

With the US presidential election coming up in November, Wilson saw no good option. Withdrawing the expedition could cost him the White House, but so could getting into a war in Mexico. He chose to equivocate.

Wilson announced that US troops could not be withdrawn from Mexico until the danger to the border was re-

moved. Pershing would stay at Colonia Dublán but was not allowed to make any patrols south of there. Pershing did not like the decision but he raised no objection in public.

In a series of rapid strikes, the surging Villistas attacked Satevo in September, killing 200 Carranzistas, beat them again at Santa Isabel and Chihuahua City, and captured and looted Parral in November.

Wilson saw a fleeting chance to get out when the Carranzistas inflicted three defeats on Villa in early January. The Villistas were depicted—prematurely, as it turned out—as decisively beaten.

On Feb. 5, 1917, Pershing rode out of Mexico at the head of the punitive force and the agonizing adventure was over.

On Feb. 10, a resurgent Villa wiped out the Carranza garrison at Guzman, but that was Carranza's problem, not Wilson's.

History was not quite finished with the principals from the punitive expedition. Pershing was promoted to major general, then became commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe in World War I and was promoted to general of the armies, a higher grade than any American soldier had ever held before.

Foulois was promoted to brigadier general and was chief of the Air Service in France. (His rival, Billy Mitchell, was air commander for the Zone of the Advance.) In 1931, Foulois was promoted to major general and made chief of the Air Corps.

Two officers from the Mexican expedition gained fame in World War II: Lt. Carl A. "Tooe" Spaatz, fresh from flying school, flew with the 1st Aero Squadron, and George S. Patton, a special aide to Pershing, was promoted to first lieutenant after leading a fight against the Villistas.

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent articles, "Short Fuze to the Great War" and "The Cloud Over Lindberg," appeared in the August issue.