

## ON THE BORDER

Between the fall of 1910 and the summer of 1916, Mexico had been embroiled in a violent revolution, with opposing political and military forces struggling for control of the country. In 1913, United States President William Howard Taft sent a large military force into Texas and stationed them along the Rio Grande to protect Americans in the region. This show of American military force caused Mexican militants to redirect their violence from their own countrymen to Americans. In 1913, when Woodrow Wilson became President, he denounced the new revolutionary government in Mexico and refused to recognize it as the legitimate government. As a result of his position, violence toward Americans intensified and there were incidents of murder, robbery, kidnapping for ransom and property destruction.



U.S. military plane ever to be targeted by gunfire.

In response to the violence, President Wilson sent 4,800 Regular Army troops under General John "Blackjack" Pershing to defend the border towns and their citizens. On February 24, 1913, fighting commenced along the border near Brownsville, Texas and on March 2, Mexicans attacked U.S. troops along the border near Douglas, Arizona. The struggle for control continued throughout 1914. Mexico elected a new government and president, Venustiano Carranza, in 1915. Carranza had one major opponent--a bandit-turned revolutionary named Francisco "Pancho" Villa. President Wilson's recognition of Carranza's constitutional government created an enemy in "Pancho" Villa.

Longstanding resentments simmered between the United States and Mexico, boiling over in 1915, when two signal corps officers took off in a small airplane in April from the Fort Brown cavalry drill field. Their mission was to spy on the movements of Mexicans allied with the revolutionary Pancho Villa. The pilots claimed that they never crossed over into Mexican territory, but whether or not they did, Mexicans shot at them with a machine gun and other weapons. The pair managed to return to Fort Brown safely, earning the distinction of flying the first

In October 1915, bandits lassoed railroad tracks six miles north of Brownsville, splitting them apart, and then waited until an approaching train derailed. The engineer was killed in the crash, clearing the way for the bandits to climb quickly aboard the train, where they robbed the passengers and shot two dead. An increasing number of border incidents early in 1916 culminated in an invasion of American territory on 8 March, when Francisco (Pancho) Villa and his band of 500 to 1,000 men raided Columbus, New Mexico. Elements of the 13th Cavalry repulsed the attack, but there were 24 American casualties (14 military, 10 civilian). Immediate steps were taken to organize a punitive expedition of about 10,000 men under Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing to capture Villa. The 7th, 10th, 11th, and 13th Cavalry regiments, 6th

and 16th Infantry regiments, part of the 6th Field Artillery, and supporting elements crossed the border into Mexico in mid-March, followed later by the 5th Cavalry, 17th and 24th Infantry regiments, and engineer and other units.

Pershing was ordered to respect the sovereignty of Mexico, and was further hindered by the fact that the Mexican Government and people resented the invasion. Advanced elements of the expedition penetrated as far as Parral, some 400 miles south of the border, but Villa was never captured. The campaign consisted primarily of dozens of minor skirmishes with small bands of insurgents. There were even clashes with some Mexican Army units.

On June 18, 1916, President Wilson mobilized the National Guard. Before the National Guard could be mobilized and sent to the southwest, soldiers had to be gathered and equipment distributed. The command of the National Guard faced a tremendous challenge in organizing the units, preparing sufficient housing, and issuing uniforms and equipment, all while continuing training. To further compound the challenge, the federal government did not provide any equipment for the guardsmen, thus placing the entire burden on the state. The Army's normal practice was to provide all necessary equipment to the National Guard while in federal service, but not in this case.

War would probably have been declared but for the critical situation in Europe. Virtually the entire Regular Army was involved, and most of the National Guard had been Federalized and concentrated on the border.

Fighting was limited to guerrilla warfare since Villa's forces could not afford to confront the U.S. Army directly. Accidents, climate and disease were the primary killers of U.S. soldiers during the Mexican Border Campaign. The presence of U.S. troops on the border was a constant drain on resources and cost American taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars per day; therefore, on January 27, 1917, President Wilson ordered their withdrawal. With the escalation of World War I in Europe, the United States Army and National Guard (including Arizona's 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry) were redirected to the battlefields of France.

Normal relations with Mexico were restored by diplomatic negotiation, and the troops were withdrawn from Mexico in February 1917. After withdrawal of the Pershing expedition, minor clashes with Mexican irregulars continued to disturb the border from 1917 to 1919, as US troops entered Mexico in pursuit of bandits. Engagements took place at various locations along the border, including Nogales, Arizona on 27 August 1918.