

100 years ago: Pancho Villa attacks the United States

By **Jim Cornelius**
News Editor

In the deepest dark of the morning of March 9, 1916, Mexican revolutionary General Francisco Villa and some 485 men slipped across the border and infiltrated the small burg of Columbus, New Mexico.

The Mexican riders roared down the streets of the sleeping town, shrieking “Viva Villa!” as they fired into buildings and set blazes that would reduce several of Columbus’ wooden structures to ash.

It was, prior to September 11, 2001, the only significant terrorist attack on the soil of the United States.

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Three years earlier, Pancho Villa had been a political exile living in a hotel in El Paso, Texas. In March 1913, he slipped across the border leading eight men to take on the Mexican federal government, which General Victoriano Huerta had commanded in a bloody coup d’etat.

He sent a defiant telegram to the Huertista governor of the state of Chihuahua, General Antonio Rabago:

“Knowing that the government you represent was preparing to extradite me, I decided to come here and save you the bother. Here I am in Mexico, resolved to make war upon the tyranny which you defend. Francisco Villa.”

Within months he had built an army, and by December 1914 he was the most powerful man in Mexico. His Division del Norte decisively defeated Huerta’s federal army in a run of battles that culminated in a terrible slaughter at Zacatecas, then rode into Mexico City where Villa and another peasant revolutionary, Emiliano Zapata, paraded in the streets and were photographed in the presidential palace.

Villa’s erstwhile political boss, “First Chief” Venustiano Carranza, took a dim view of all this. The revolutionary factions fell out in a civil war even bloodier than the revolution that deposed Huerta. In 1915, Villa lost a series of titanic battles, the United States officially recognized Carranza’s government and cut off Villa’s access to arms and ammunition. The American government even allowed Carranza’s forces to transit U.S. territory to prepare for a battle at the border city of Agua Prieta.

Villa, who had hitherto always protected Americans and American interests in Mexico, was mightily enraged at what he saw as rank betrayal.

By March 1916, his forces were reduced to a guerilla band. And they were riding for an isolated spot on the border where the imaginary line between Old Mexico and New Mexico demarked through a desert of sagebrush.

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It has never been determined with absolute certainty why Villa chose to attack Columbus. Perhaps he thought he could hijack arms from the U.S. forces

stationed at nearby Camp Furlong — and the prospect of loot was certainly enticing to his wretched little army.

It has been surmised that he also wanted revenge on a merchant named Sam Ravel, who may have double-crossed him on an arms deal. Witnesses said that the Villistas searched for Ravel, inquiring after him by name and briefly taking hostage his young brother Arthur.

Perhaps he was seeking to kill some Americans and provoke a U.S. invasion that would send patriotic Mexicans flocking to his tattered banner.

This being the depths of World War I in Europe, there are theories that German agents-provocateurs goaded Villa into an attack in order to get the U.S. tied down in Mexico so that it could not intervene on behalf of France and Great Britain. While there’s no doubt that this was a strategic aim of the Germans, they seem to have been putting their bets on Carranza. There’s never been any convincing evidence that the Columbus raid was a German plot.

Whatever the strategic purpose, the attack on Columbus was a dismal

failure. Ten civilians were killed and eight soldiers from Camp Furlong died repelling the attack.

The defenders killed 67 Villistas in town, mostly after Lt. John Lucas and his men set up four French Benet-Mercie light machine guns and hosed down the streets — illuminated by fires set by the rampaging Villistas — with some 20,000 rounds of .30-06. Another hundred or so Villistas were slain as the fire-eating Col. Frank Tompkins pursued the retreating Villistas into Mexico.

Faced with an attack on U.S. soil, President Woodrow Wilson had little recourse but to retaliate. He sent General John J. Pershing at the head of a Punitive Expedition to capture or kill Villa.

As with later strategic manhunts, the effort to track down an elusive enemy on his home ground proved futile. Despite hard campaigning, some close calls and the occasional skirmish that added to the Villista body count, the cavalry never quite caught up to Pancho Villa.

Despite Carranza’s grudging acceptance of their

presence, U.S. troops got no cooperation and a good deal of hindrance from their Carrancista counterparts. In fact, the biggest battle during the whole campaign was a nasty scrap at the city of Carrizal, between American forces and Carrancista troops. The incident almost sparked a full-scale war with Mexico. The Germans must have been licking their chops.

But nobody wanted a war, so tensions ratcheted down. The Punitive Expedition pulled back, and finally out of Mexico at the beginning of 1917 — just in time for the U.S. to declare war on Germany and send Pershing “Over There” at the head of the American Expeditionary Force.

One hundred years have passed since that terrifying night in a small New Mexico town. The border remains a dangerous place. And America continues to face the threat of attacks from armed men, whose resentments and ideology were spawned by the very global conflict for which the U.S. military prepared with a futile pursuit of Pancho Villa across the mountains and deserts of Mexico.

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