

Long Distance Logistics: The Mexican Expedition

The Army's Mexican Expedition in 1916 and 1917, originally called "the Punitive Expedition," provided lessons about supporting and maintaining a campaign across long distances.

■ By Sara E. Cothren and Alexander F. Barnes

An Army truck kicks up dust and sand as it speeds by a number of mule-drawn wagons. By the time the Mexican Expedition ended in February 1917, the Army was using almost 300 trucks to support the combat forces deep in Mexico. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)



The young lieutenant turned around and was mildly surprised by the dust and sand cloud following the truck as it moved through the staging area. He had expressly told the drivers to keep their speed down while the convoy was getting organized. This last batch of National Guardsmen had proven to be a pretty good group of Soldiers, but some of them drove like they had never seen a truck before. If they couldn't follow orders here in camp, what was it going to be like when they started on the convoy to the forward operating base more than one hundred miles down the road?

The latest report had indicated that the route was fairly secure, but the lieutenant knew how quickly that could change. Just two weeks ago, they had been fired on while passing through a supposedly "friendly" village.

He also wasn't encouraged by the mix of trucks he was going to be leading. Why couldn't the Army send him just one kind of truck? Instead, he had a mix of makes and models, each with a different cargo capacity and operating speed. It was not surprising that some of his drivers were struggling to operate the darn things.

In spite of his misgivings, the lieutenant signaled over to the sergeant that he was ready and the convoy started moving. General Pershing's cavalry and infantry units were on the move again looking for Pancho Villa and would need the supplies and ammunition these trucks were carrying. Besides, it could be worse; he could be leading one of the pack mule and horse-drawn wagon convoys.

During the second decade of the 20th century, while most Americans were watching the events in Europe with trepidation, a fire was burning much closer to their homes. A period of almost perpetual revolution and instability, starting in 1913, was wracking the United States' southern neighbor. Many U.S. citizens in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico feared that the violence in Mexico would spill over the border. Tension remained extremely high between the United States and

Mexico throughout 1913 and 1914.

In response, President Woodrow Wilson adjusted the stationing of his military units to protect American businesses and American citizens living in Mexico and along the border. The Mexican seaports on the Gulf of Mexico continued to be hot spots as both sides in the Mexican Revolution fought for their control.

Mounting Tension

The relationship between the U.S. government and Mexican leader Victoriano Huerta worsened on April 9, 1914, when Mexican authorities arrested eight U.S. Sailors at the port of Tampico. The commander of a U.S. Navy warship, the USS *Dolphin*, had arranged for a pickup of supplies from a local warehouse. While the American Sailors were loading the supplies on their boat to carry them out to the *Dolphin*, they were arrested and marched through the town to the jail.

Although the Sailors were quickly released, Adm. Henry C. Mayo, commanding the U.S. Navy ships in the Tampico area, demanded that the Mexicans formally apologize and display the American flag in the port. He also insisted that Mexicans honor the flag with a 21-gun salute.

International incidents have a tendency to rapidly spin out of control, and this was no exception. Very quickly, both governments were involved in making demands. In the meantime, the U.S. Navy directed all available ships and a regiment of Marines to head for the Gulf of Mexico.

Adding to the tension were reports that a German ship, the *Ypiranga*, was headed for Vera Cruz loaded with machine guns and ammunition for Mexican revolutionaries. This proved to be the final straw for President Wilson; he ordered the secretary of the Navy to land his forces and prevent the unloading of the *Ypiranga*. By 11:30 a.m. on April 21, 1914, the U.S. forces had prevented the ship from docking.

The Navy had also landed a force of Sailors and Marines to seize key port facilities as well as the customs house

and the area near the railroad station. Other naval forces that had been off the coast of Tampico rapidly made their way south to join the effort. Within the forces were two legendary Marine Corps figures: Smedley Butler and Alexander Vandergrift.

The U.S. Army Occupation

Against a spirited but ineffective Mexican defense, the Americans quickly cleared Vera Cruz of resistance. By the evening of April 22, the city was under U.S. control and over 300 Mexicans and 19 Americans were dead. Shortly thereafter, Soldiers from the Army's 5th Brigade, 2nd Division, replaced the naval forces and continued the occupation.

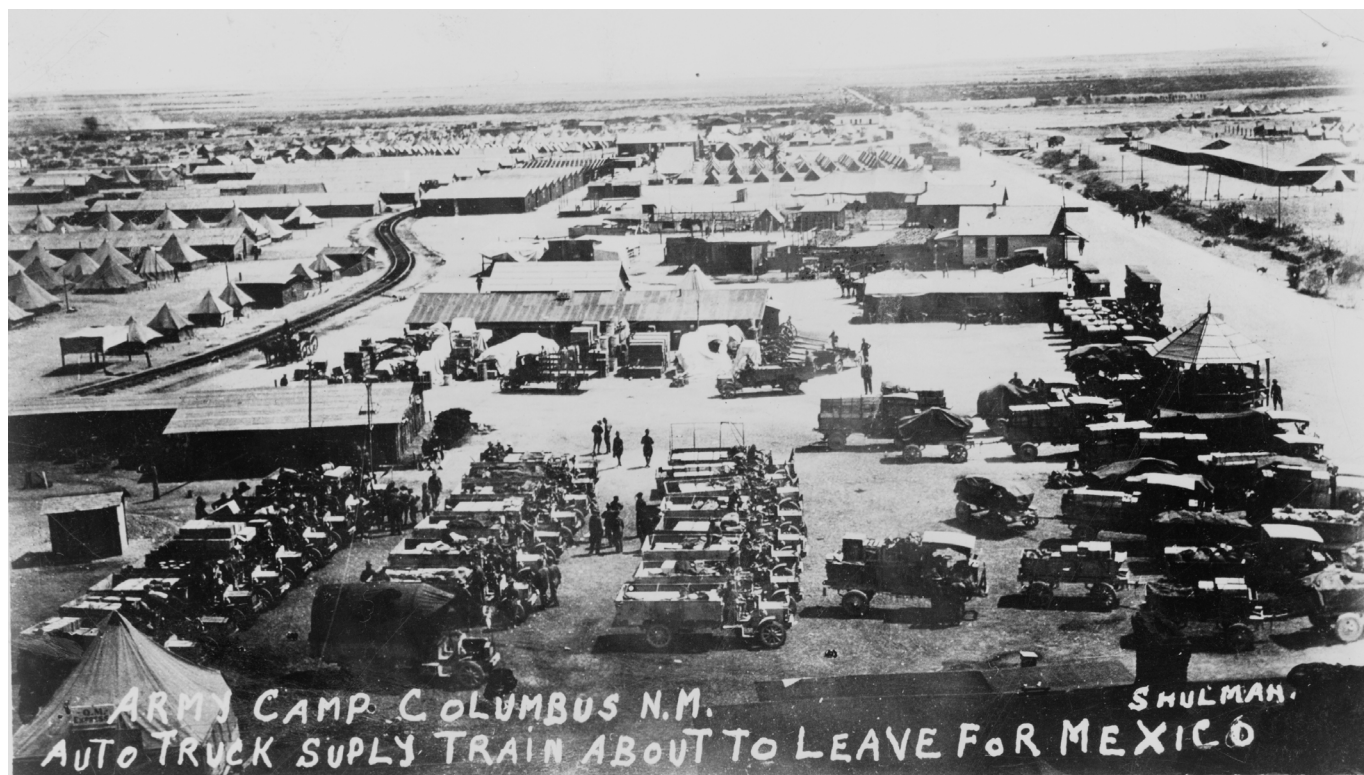
Other Army units moved in force to the Mexican border with Texas and Arizona while the 5th Brigade was establishing control of Vera Cruz. Gen. Frederick Funston took over the Army occupation force in Vera Cruz and soon began the serious job of administering the city. This was no small chore because Vera Cruz was renowned for being unhealthy and disease-ridden.

From all accounts, Funston proved to be a very able administrator and, for the most part, the U.S. Soldiers and local Mexican citizens settled into an uneasy peace. Occasionally, Funston had to flex his administrative and military muscles, such as when it became evident that the local ice-making plant gave the local bars and canteens priority for its products, at the expense of the local hospitals, citizens, and the U.S. Army. Funston had his troops seize the facility and reprioritize the shipments.

By November 1914, the incursion at Vera Cruz ended and the U.S. Army's 5th Brigade returned to its bases in Texas. With calm apparently restored between the two countries, most of the units that had moved to guard the border were returned to their original Army posts.

The Focus on Europe

The lessons learned during the deployment of the brigade to Vera



A convoy, in the foreground, lines up before departure. In the background, supply support activities and troop billets fill the countryside near Columbus, New Mexico. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Cruz were digested and staff analysts at the War Department continued to work on the adjustments needed to build the new Army formations. Once again, all eyes turned toward Europe as the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria) squared off against the Allied Powers (France, the British Empire, the Russian Empire, and others).

By 1915, Italy had joined the war on the side of the Allies. Although most Americans favored the Allies, enough people supported Germany—or strict neutrality—to keep the discussions interesting.

Reports of German atrocities in Belgium and France were countered by stories in German-American periodicals detailing Great Britain's goals for world domination. In many large Irish-American communities, feelings were more likely to be anti-British than pro-German, but the results were the same.

President Wilson talked of being “too proud to fight” and stressed his

goal of keeping the United States out of the war in Europe. Conversely, former President Theodore Roosevelt and his “Preparedness” followers continued to press for greater support for the Allies and the need to build a stronger military. However, regardless of their beliefs, most Americans felt secure knowing that the entire Atlantic Ocean separated their country from the fighting.

The Punitive Expedition

And then, on the night of March 8, 1916, all that changed. Under the command of the Mexican revolutionary leader, Pancho Villa, several hundred Mexicans crossed the border and attacked the town of Columbus, New Mexico. With this attack, the already fragile American-Mexican relations took a very drastic turn for the worse. Although the U.S. cavalry forces stationed in and near Columbus managed to drive off the raiders, enough blood had spilled on both sides to demand a military solution.

On March 15, just seven days af-

ter Villa's attack, the first column of U.S. forces, led by the 13th Cavalry, departed Columbus and crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico. Following the 13th were the 6th and 16th Infantry Regiments, Battery C of the 6th Field Artillery, and some logistics support troops.

The next day, Gen. John J. Pershing led a second column, consisting of the 7th and 10th Cavalry, another battery from the 6th Field Artillery, and some support troops from a staging base in New Mexico, across the border. The expeditionary force soon added Curtiss JN-3 airplanes of the 1st Aero Squadron to conduct aerial reconnaissance of Chihuahua in search of their target.

The original plan called for the two columns to converge at Casas Grandes, where Villa had been recently sighted. When the two columns met, they compared notes. There was no sign of Villa and, very importantly, no sign of the Mexican Army. It was obvious that if Villa were going to be punished, Pershing

would have to do it without the help of the Mexican government.

Sustaining Pershing's Forces

With Pershing's two forces now joined, he commanded 4,800 Regular Army Soldiers with more than 4,000 horses and mules. His arrival at Casas Grandes meant that the Americans had penetrated almost 100 miles into Mexico and were at the site that would become their major logistics hub for the next 11 months.

Pershing's forces at Casas Grandes were soon supplied with the Army's latest transportation acquisitions: touring cars and cargo trucks. The Mexican government had forbidden the U.S. Army from using the Mexico Northwestern Railway system. Given the railway restrictions, these acquisitions were essential to supplying the troops as they moved south in pursuit of Villa and his supporters, the "Villistas."

Soon three columns of cavalry on parallel routes were dispatched toward the town of Namiquipa. The orders from Washington were

to occupy as much of Chihuahua as possible, find reliable sources of information among the local population, use all possible means to perform reconnaissance of the unoccupied areas, keep the supply pipeline secure, and keep Villa and his men on the move, allowing them no rest from the chase.

There were now 162 trucks supporting and maintaining the supply line and delivering much needed food and materiel from Columbus to Pershing's forward operating base at Namiquipa. However, even this large-scale distribution system, by 1916 standards, was inadequate, and Pershing needed more trucks added to his operation.

Back in Washington D.C., Hugh Scott, the Army chief of staff, also tired of Mexican President Carranza's unwillingness to help support the American efforts, ordered the quartermaster general of the Army to purchase and dispatch as many trucks as he could to Columbus. Despite having no funding to make the purchase, the quartermaster general placed the order while Scott went

to Secretary of War Newton Baker and confessed that he had just spent \$450,000 that the department didn't have. Surprisingly, Baker told him not to worry and obtained the funding to make good on the deal. Soon Pershing's force was supplemented with another 100 trucks.

Ultimately, it was an exercise in futility. The Americans never caught Pancho Villa, and Pershing's forces tried to occupy much more land than they could control. On a positive note, the efforts by Pershing's forces kept the Mexican leader and his troops on the run and away from U.S. border towns.

In February 1917, after 11 months in Mexico, Pershing and the last of the Regular Army troops in his command crossed the border back into the United States. The expedition to capture Pancho Villa came to an end just in time; two months later the United States entered the war that was raging in Europe.

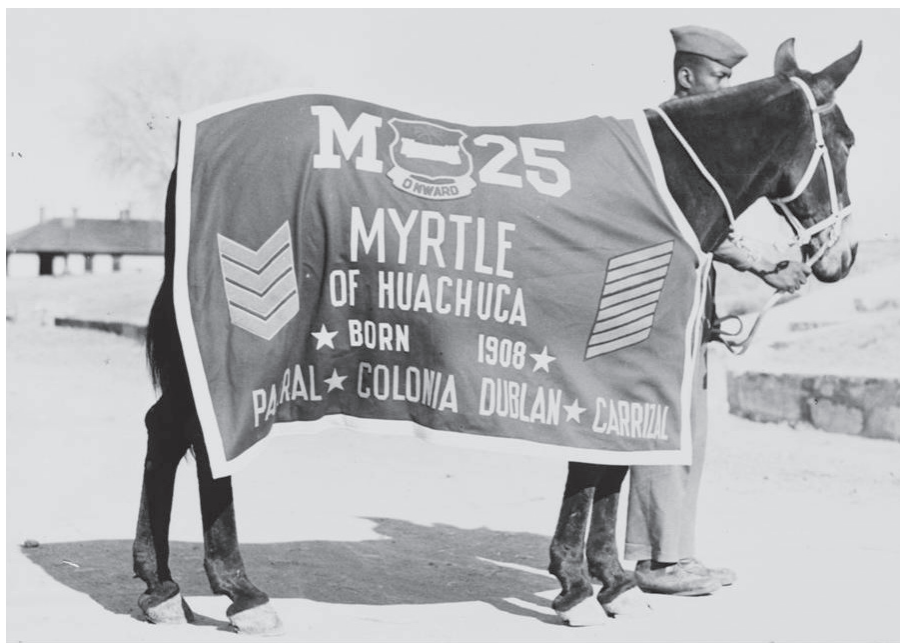
Lessons Learned

Several lessons can be learned from the Mexican Punitive Expedition.

Five hundred miles is a long way to go without supplies. The 13th Cavalry made the deepest penetration into Mexico, reaching the town of Parral, which was 516 miles from the U.S. border. By the time they entered Parral, the Soldiers and their horses had far outstripped the U.S. Army's ability to supply them. As a result, the officers found it necessary to purchase feed for the horses and food for the men from their own pockets in order to make their way back to the main supply line.

Standardization is a good thing. It was the first time in the U.S. Army's history that non-rail motor vehicles were used in a military operation. Recognizing the advancements in wheeled vehicles, the Army purchased every truck it could; unfortunately, it was forced to buy many different makes and models in order to get the quantities needed.

The Mexican Expedition quickly showed that numerous types of



Myrtle the mule took part in the Mexican Expedition alongside Gen. John J. Pershing. This mighty mule participated in numerous battles during the hunt for Pancho Villa. She eventually retired and lived her remaining days at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, until her death at the age of 35. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)



Army aircraft and trucks share the same work area at one of the forward support bases in Mexico. One limitation of early aircraft became a problem early on when the pilots discovered their planes could not get enough altitude to fly over mountains. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

trucks were hard to maintain and sometimes even harder for the young Soldiers to learn to drive. Nevertheless, relying only on rail and horse became a thing of the past as the Army entered the Great War in Europe.

You trust your mother, but you still cut the cards. One of the first lessons learned the hard way during the campaign was that when entering a country undergoing revolution, a Soldier should trust no one. Repeatedly the U.S. forces were given bad information and sent in the wrong direction by local inhabitants. The local Mexican officials and army officers proved to be equally unreliable sources of information. The bloodiest battle fought during the campaign came not against Villa's men but against Mexican soldiers, and it ended badly for the U.S. cavalrymen.

Good can come from bad. Among the positive things to come out of the long dusty campaign was the opportunity to integrate trucks and aircraft into Army operations. Before the expedition, most officers in the Army would have preferred the supply support of horses and mules over

motor vehicles. After the campaign, little doubt remained that motorized vehicles were here to stay. Even the cavalry, the strongest institution supporting the use of horses, had visionaries who could see the future.

Among them was a young lieutenant named George S. Patton who, while leading a patrol of 9th Cavalry troopers mounted on Dodge touring cars instead of horses, raided a ranch belonging to one of Villa's senior lieutenants, Julio Cárdenas. In a short but sharp gunfight, Patton exhibited the aggressive leadership skills he would demonstrate in two world wars.

After the expedition was over, Pershing went on to lead the American Expeditionary Forces in War World I and was a mentor to many officers such as Marshall, Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton, who led the Army in War World II.

Although ultimately unsuccessful at capturing Pancho Villa, the Army's Mexican Expedition had dispersed the Villistas and provided many lessons about supporting and

maintaining a campaign across long distances. The lessons were valuable, especially because the next test for the Army would be what is now known as World War I.

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