

MEXICO'S PANCHO VILLA | SPARKED DEPLOYMENT

Oklahoma Guard carried its weight as early as 1916

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Oklahoma was still in the infancy of statehood in 1916 when its National Guard was called up by the federal government for its first action outside the state.

Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa had raided and pillaged the border city of Columbus, N.M., on March 9, 1916, killing several American soldiers and civilians.

It was his retaliation for the U.S. government's support of his political rival, Mexican dictator Venustiano Carranza.

Two months earlier, Villa had raised the ire of the American public when his men killed 17 Texas businessmen on a train in Mexico.

Villa also had led a few other cross-border incursions to raise money for his army.

It was the Columbus raid, however, that sparked a retaliation by President Woodrow Wilson.

Within a week of the raid, Wilson — with Carranza's approval — dispatched Brig. Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing, along with an Army force of more than 5,000 men, to go into Mexico to hunt and punish Villa.

Pershing's army was spread thin, however, so two months later Wilson ordered the mobilization of National Guards in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico.

That was followed in June 1916 by the mobilization of nearly all the National Guards in the United States, including Oklahoma's.

A force of about 1,000 Oklahoma National Guardsmen gathered at Fort Sill a month later, then traveled by train across southwestern Texas to the Mexican border along its northern state of Chihuahua.

Their primary duty was to protect the flank of the regular Army and prevent Villa from heading



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Oklahoma National Guard members pose for a picture in front of a tent near the Mexican border. They were mobilized in 1916 in support of regular Army troops who were trying, unsuccessfully, to hunt down Pancho Villa.

eastward into Texas, said Mike Gonzales, curator of the 45th Infantry Division Museum in Oklahoma City.

As it turned out, Gonzales said, it was mostly idle duty for the National Guard units "who had expected it to be a great adventure."

Oklahoma's troops had gone to the border itching for a fight.

The Oklahoma Guard troops al-

so had a military legacy to uphold.

In 1898, during the Spanish-American War, members of the state's militia were among Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in their famous charge on San Juan Hill.

Gonzales noted that the first reunion of the Rough Riders was held in 1900 in Oklahoma City, and Roosevelt attended the event.

If nothing else, the 1916 de-

ployment of the Oklahoma National Guard was a boon because the regular Army spotted training and tactical deficiencies among all the nation's Guard units.

The training they received, Gonzales said, benefited the Oklahomans, because three months after the last of the units returned home in February 1917, they were mobilized again for duty in World War I.

In the end, Villa escaped the hunt when the Mexican government asked the Americans to leave.

Villa made peace with his government in 1920, but was killed by old enemies three years later.

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