February 5, 1917

The “Punitive Expedition” Ends in Mexico

Following Pancho Villa’s surprise attack on Columbus, New Mexico in March of 1916, the U.S. government authorized General John “Black Jack” Pershing to lead an expedition into Mexico in order to eliminate Villa’s band. While this action had the consent of the Mexican government, which was only just beginning to stabilize after years of Revolution, tensions between the American troops and the people of Chihuahua state emerged almost immediately, adding to the difficulties Pershing faced in his mission. The Pershing expedition clashed with Villa’s men several times, but also skirmished with the Mexican national army, leading to a severe diplomatic crisis between the two nations that lingered for many years as it helped spur nationalist sentiments in Mexico that affected U.S economic interests. Ultimately, while Villa’s forces were seriously depleted, the expedition failed to eliminate him as a force in Mexican politics- indeed, his reputation may have been enhanced by the skill he showed in evading and defying the American forces. Ultimately, Villa made a deal with the Mexican government that allowed him to retire in comfort, though he was ultimately assassinated in 1923. Pershing went on to command U.S forces in Europe during World War I, and one of the young officers who had served with him in Mexico, George Patton, would play a prominent role in World War II.

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1 https://kynghistory.ky.gov/Our-History/History-of-the-Guard/Pages/Mexican-Punitive-Expedition.aspx