1916: Trial Run on the Mexican Border

By Jack K. Johnson

“Military ends are frequently attained more by the demonstration than by the actual exercise of military force.” — W. A. Mann, Chief of the Militia Bureau, 1916

The Militia Bureau’s chief was writing about the Mexican Border Campaign of 1916—an important, but often overlooked, episode in American military history that jump-started U.S. preparedness for World War One and marked the first mass federal mobilization of the National Guard. The Guard and its predecessor militia organizations had mobilized before, most recently for the Spanish American War, but always as volunteers. This time it was different: for the unit, activation was mandated; for the individual soldier, declining to serve was not an option.

Prequel

The Spanish American War of 1898, in spite of outward successes, exposed serious shortcomings in the American military establishment. This was especially true for the National Guard, prompting landmark legislation in 1903 and 1916 that fundamentally changed the Guard’s structure and preparedness, transforming it from group of ‘state armies’ into an integrated instrument of national defense. The 1903 Dick Act, named for its champion, Ohio Congressman and National Guard general, Charles Dick, repealed the old 1792 Militia Act and gave the federal government much more control over the National Guard. Among other things, it empowered the president to call up the Guard, so long as the service was in the U.S. and didn’t exceed nine months. It

"I've had about enough of this!" Political cartoon by Clifford K. Berryman for the Washington Evening Star, March 18, 1916. (National Archives)
specified minimal training requirements and stipulated that the Guard’s organization and equipment be patterned after that of the Regular Army. In return, states would receive federal subsidies for the National Guard.

The National Defense Act of 1916—arguably the most comprehensive defense legislation passed by Congress up to that time—ushered in sweeping changes for the Army and firmed up the National Guard’s position as the nation’s principal reserve force. It was a response to rising international tensions and the accelerating prospect of American entry into Europe’s stalemated “Great War,” which had been going on since 1914. For the Guard, the 1916 Act increased training requirements, improved pay, sped the flow of updated weapons and equipment, and brought in Regular Army officers to serve as inspector/instructors. Of particular note, the Act clarified once and for all the power of the president to call up the National Guard for war or any other national emergency, for the duration of conflict, and outside the USA, if necessary.

Trouble with Mexico

The ink on the National Defense Act, signed June 3, 1916, had scarcely dried when President Woodrow Wilson issued orders to mobilize the National Guard. The spark was Mexico, which had been in revolutionary turmoil since 1910. Growing friction between the two nations—often punctuated by violent flare-ups on the border—came to a head in the early dawn of March 9, 1916. A dominant Mexican warlord, Francisco “Pancho” Villa, leading a force of several hundred irregulars, crossed the border south of Deming and attacked, looted, and burned the town of Columbus, New Mexico. Twenty-four Americans were killed, including 14 soldiers at an adjacent U.S. Cavalry outpost.¹

An expeditionary force of 6,600 Regulars was quickly assembled under the command of Brig. Gen. John J. “Blackjack” Pershing and sent deep into northern Mexico in pursuit of Villa. On May 6, another cross-border raid occurred at Glenn Springs and Boquillas, Texas, causing more

¹ Published accounts of the number killed vary widely, but the U.S. Army Center of Military History currently puts it at 14 military and 10 civilian.
casualties and more U.S. troops to enter into Mexico in pursuit of the raiders. Tensions flared. Pershing’s “punitive expedition” soon numbered 12,000, but it had largely denuded the border of its stateside military defenses, leaving wide, unguarded segments. On May 9, Wilson ordered the governors of Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, to mobilize their states’ 5,200 National Guardsmen for border service.

Pershing, in the meantime, was chasing Villa through an unfriendly Mexican countryside. He managed to disperse most of Villa’s followers, but failed to find Villa himself. Mexico’s shaky government, headed by its cantankerous president, Venustiano Carranza, was also in pursuit of Villa but Carranza’s army actively resisted the American incursion. Mexican federal troops skirmished repeatedly with Pershing’s troops, risking outright war. On June 15, Mexican irregulars conducted another hit-and-run raid across the border—this time on San Ygnacio, Texas—killing more Americans. To top it off, on the following day, Brig. Gen. Jacinto Trevino, Mexico’s military commander in the area, ordered his forces to stop all movements of Pershing’s troops except those headed northward, back toward the U.S. Pershing rejoined that he would move his troops wherever he wished.

It was a critical moment, and it was Wilson’s move. A pacifist at heart, his ideals had up to now kept the U.S. out of Europe’s war. Although it paled in comparison, the trouble with Mexico was deadly serious. If the president did not take action and the deteriorating situation was not defused soon, Congress might intercede in ways that embarrassed him, derailing his ambitions for election to a second term. Wilson likewise knew that military involvement in Mexico would be a detrimental distraction if U.S. entry into the European war could not be avoided. Because the Regular Army had already drawn upon its own available reinforcements, Wilson decided to immediately mobilize the rest of the National Guard. Within a few weeks, nearly all of America’s National Guard was federalized for duty on the border with Mexico, numbering 159,000 men. From Brownsville on the southern tip of Texas, westward along the Rio Grande to El Paso and beyond to San Diego, tent camps sprang up amid the cactus and sagebrush on a 1,600-mile “front.”
Mobilization
Minnesota’s entire National Guard was called up on June 18. The First, Second, and Third Infantry Regiments each had three battalions and were organized as a brigade. The First Field Artillery Regiment had two battalions—the First (based in St. Paul) and Second (in Minneapolis). The mobilization order also directed unit commanders to recruit to full wartime strength. Unfortunately, most Minnesota Guard units were well under their authorized peacetime strength. The First Minnesota Infantry, for example, counted 687 members, 231 short of the 918 allowed during peacetime and well short of the 1836 authorized for an infantry regiment at war strength. St. Paul’s First Artillery Battalion was woefully undermanned. Battery C numbered but twenty members and Battery A existed only on paper with one lonesome soldier occupying its roster. Compounding the manpower issue were supply shortages of every description, notably uniforms and up-to-date field equipment. But their spirit was willing. By the time they arrived on the border, they were in better shape than most other states.

When the call went out, Minnesota Guardsmen assembled immediately at their home armories where they prepared for extended active duty. They were given medical exams and those deemed physically unfit were discharged—13 percent statewide in Minnesota. In the meantime, a temporary mobilization camp was hastily set up at Fort Snelling and named Camp Bobleter in honor of Col. Joseph Bobleter of New Ulm. It was customary to name temporary camps after prominent soldiers or citizens, and Bobleter had commanded the Twelfth Minnesota during the Spanish-American War. By June 26, all were assembled at Camp Bobleter and on June 30, Minnesota’s three infantry regiments and the Second Field Artillery Battalion were officially mustered into federal service.

For most soldiers, training at Camp Bobleter lasted about three weeks. They organized, paraded, drilled, practiced a few basic soldier skills, and acclimated to the daily customs of a military encampment. Inspections were frequent and sanitary regulations strictly enforced. In mid-July, battalions began departing for a five-day trip to the Mexican border. Each battalion had its own troop train. A stove was set up in a baggage car on which meals were prepared. At stops along the way, the men would get off for exercise, sometimes marching into town for a parade led by a regimental band. The trip went smoothly for all except the Second Field Artillery Battalion. One night, while the men slept and the train was stopped to take on water,
it was rammed from behind at 30 mph by another train. Eight soldiers were injured, but the
journey got underway again the next morning. Their destination, as with the other Minnesota
troop trains, was south Texas, about 25 miles northwest of Brownsville. There, an unfinished
tent city named Camp Llano Grande awaited.

Back in Minnesota, a major recruiting effort had finally brought St. Paul’s First Artillery Battalion
up to requisite strength. On July 23, the same day the Second Battalion’s train was rammed,
the First was mustered into federal service. Because so many of its members were raw recruits,
the First remained at Camp Bobleter for training until October 1 when it entrained south and
united with the others at Llano Grande. As for the other units, they continued to receive
recruits from home throughout their active duty tour on the border.

Camp Llano Grande
Camp Llano Grande became the desert home for 13,000 National Guard troops from
Minnesota, Nebraska, Indiana, and North Dakota. Located a few miles from the town of
Mercedes and about five miles from the Rio Grande, the flat 200-acre site had once been part
of a large farm called Llano Grande (Big Plain). It was served by a rail line and had a flag depot,
but other than the main house, which had earlier been converted to an inn and became the
camp’s hospital, and an old ranch house that became camp headquarters, there was little else
in place when the Minnesota troops arrived. A flurry of activity ensued. Minnesota was

Most of Minnesota’s contingent was located in a mesquite grove. Enlisted men slept in large squad tents.
(Herb Stone/Minnesota Military Museum)

assigned to a mesquite grove. Company areas had to be laid out, ditched for drainage, and
brush cleared; temporary latrines dug; incinerators erected; water pipes laid and buried.
Nearly everything was under canvas, although platforms were eventually built for the tents,
and framed out structures erected for permanent latrines, kitchens and mess halls. It wasn’t
easy. Daytime temperatures hovered in the 90s. Dust blew and caked everything. Rains, when they came, were usually torrential and swamped everything. Supply shortages were chronic. When troops first arrived, the correct requisition form had to be used to order supplies, and there were no forms, nor forms to order the forms!

While troops were establishing their own regimental areas, a camp-wide telephone system, showers, warehouses, commissary, parade grounds, stock pens, recreational facilities, and firing ranges were being constructed. Remarkably, by the end of August almost everything was completed. The camp was crude, but fully functional. The business of training and border patrols could finally get underway.

**Border duty**
The Mercedes area had been subjected to harassment from Mexican rebels, but the U.S. Third Cavalry, assigned to patrol the region, was stretched too thin to stop it. Now, Camp Llano Grande became part of a string of new National Guard encampments and reinforced Army garrisons that were spread out along the entire border. The Rio Grande, which marks the boundary with Mexico for all of Texas, was divided into sectors, and each sector was systematically patrolled by detachments of troops stationed nearby. Working from sentry and observation posts at strategic locations, the soldiers at Llano Grande stood ready to defend their sector from attack and to cross into Mexico for active campaigning, if necessary.

Fortunately, their patrol activity proved uneventful. The very presence of a large U.S. military force on the border served as a deterrent to raids and disturbances. There were occasional attempts by Mexicans to breach a picket line, but no serious incidents or American casualties in the Brownsville sectors. The only recorded instance for a Minnesota unit occurred the night of August 30. A detachment from Minneapolis’s Co. A of the First Minnesota was guarding the Mercedes pumping station on the banks of the Rio Grande when they were fired upon from the Mexican side of the river. This prompted an exchange of about 150 rounds. No Minnesotans were hit; Mexican casualties were unknown.
Training

Because Minnesota regiments had successfully filled out their ranks with raw recruits before leaving for Texas, these men needed basic soldier skills. There was squad and company drilling (lots of it), bayonet practice, inspections, and “practice” marches into the countryside to build endurance. Target practice was conducted on a miniature scale due to the confined size of the firing ranges, and live ammunition was in short supply, but infantrymen became basically familiar with their newly issued .30 caliber M1903 Springfield rifles. Minnesota’s three machine gun companies (one such company had recently been added to each infantry regiment) were issued .30 caliber Hotchkiss M1909 Benet-Mercier machine guns and given two weeks of instruction at a special school set up in Harlingen, 15 miles away.

As time went by, training became more intense and realistic. An October 25 letter to the Stillwater Gazette by an unnamed “correspondent” of Co. K of the Third Minnesota Infantry noted that, “Close order drill has ceased to be the principal form of instruction, field combat exercises being substituted. Every morning and often in the afternoon, the battalion or regiment forms in the manner prescribed for the problem in hand and takes the field. Sometimes it is patrolling or outpost duty; at others it may be advance guard or a sham battle. This is a welcome change . . . and a relief from the one, two, three, four monotony of close order drill.”

It was tougher for the artillery. Each battery had its full complement of four M1905 3-inch field guns, which had been brought from Minnesota, but as late as September, the Second Field Artillery Battalion had less than a third of the required number of horses and mules. Both battalions had sent some horses to Llano Grande by rail—many were privately owned by the officers who rode them—but it was the Army’s job to supply horses, and the Regulars kept the best stock for themselves. Floyd Gibbons, reporting for the Minneapolis Journal, wrote: “‘Dead horses’ was the name which the men applied to the majority of animals received from the government. Most were undersized, soft, and sickly. . . .
Then there was the matter of horseshoes, or rather there wasn’t the matter of horseshoes. The matter really was that there were no horseshoes. Our cavalry and artillery horses must go barefooted.” Adding insult to injury, Army-issued steel collars—needed for horses harnessed to artillery—could not be adjusted to properly fit the horses. Finding suitable ranges large enough for artillery was also a challenge. Service practice had to be conducted on the sandy wastes between Brownsville and Port Isabel on the Gulf coast, 40-50 miles from Llano Grande.

Off duty
To fill time during off-duty hours, the camp commander encouraged company, battalion, and regimental athletic competition, which was hotly contested in boxing, football, baseball, and track. The YMCA's recreation center offered a quiet place to get away, relax, and write letters home. Motion pictures, still very much of a novelty, were shown throughout the camp, and the camp’s many regimental bands—each of Minnesota’s four regiments had its own band of 20-25 members—took turns giving concerts. In fact, band music showed up everywhere. Major Orris Lee, a First Brigade staff officer, noted in a letter to his wife: “We arise at 5:30 and if you wanted to hear all kinds of music you ought to be here. All of the bands are out at reveille and march up and down the officers row playing some lively tune, and as we have twelve regiments within hearing distance, you can imagine the medley that greets the sun.” Visits to nearby towns were allowed, but not without a prized weekend pass—and with this proviso: don’t go into town alone and carry a side arm.

War games
Llano Grande wasn’t the only encampment in the area. Although Llano Grande was the largest, there were several others in the Brownsville Military District, numbering some 50,000 Regulars and Guardsmen. It was the largest concentration of troops anywhere on the border. On November 16, ten days of field maneuvers commenced that involved 23,000 of them—mostly Guardsmen—from the Brownsville district. The war game scenario, under the overall command of Brig. Gen. James “Gallopin’ Jim” Parker, supposed that a “Brown” army had invaded the U.S. at Port Isabel and attacked a defending “White” army (which included all the
Minnesota troops) north of Brownsville. Infantry, cavalry, and artillery forces maneuvered day and night in an elaborate exercise that ranged across much of the lower Rio Grande Valley.

Interestingly, some of opening battles of the real 1846 U.S.- Mexican War took place on the same ground as the Brownsville war games, including Resaca de la Palma, where everything ended in a giant encounter of the Brown and White armies on November 24. Captain Charles Green, headquarters adjutant for the First Minnesota Field Artillery, wrote in his diary that there were 56 guns in action at Resaca de la Palma—“more than has been fired together in the U.S. since the Civil War.” Then came a massive parade and review for all participants, and finally, for their strenuous work, the men were rewarded with a day’s leave in Brownsville—much to the delight of local merchants—before returning to Llano Grande.

Following their maneuvers, Minnesota troops joined with thousands of others in a parade through Brownsville, Texas, before being let loose on the town, November 1916. (Minnesota Military Museum)

As a training exercise, the maneuvers turned out to be one of the most worthwhile things the men did during their time on the border. It was particularly beneficial for the officers because it necessitated complex coordination and logistics on a large scale not possible back home.

Demobilization
A big Thanksgiving dinner awaited the men when they got back to camp, amid rumors that the Guard would soon be leaving Llano Grande for home stations. Demobilization had already begun in other such camps. The Third Infantry Regiment was first to leave, departing early
December for Camp Bobleter at Fort Snelling, where it mustered out in time for Christmas. The Second Infantry Regiment and brigade headquarters entrained for home in early January 1917, and the First Field Artillery Regiment pulled out in late February, minus F Battery of the Second Battalion, which had already left.\(^2\) The First Infantry Regiment broke camp at Llano Grande in December, but first went to Camp Wilson near San Antonio, where, for more than a month, it was made to fill in during training exercises for a departing Wisconsin regiment before finally being allowed to depart itself for Minnesota. It mustered out at Camp Bobleter on March 14, 1917, the last Minnesota regiment to do so.

In all, 4,379 Minnesota Guardsmen saw duty on the border. Not everyone was happy with the experience. “We came here to fight, not to sit around in camp,” was a common refrain. But the Guard’s mission was accomplished. It had prevented war, not made it. Border raids had largely ceased. Diplomatic negotiations between the Mexican and U.S. governments were progressing on a positive note. The last column of Pershing’s expedition crossed back into the U.S. on February 5, 1917. Although Villa had never been caught, the Punitive Expedition was proclaimed to be a success because Villa’s followers had scattered.\(^3\) Minor clashes continued along the border until 1919, but the crisis of 1916 had passed.

**It was a trial run**

In point of fact, the 1916 call-up of the Guard did much more than defend the border and assert U.S. resolve with its troublesome neighbor: it was a trial run for higher stakes. Some called it a blessing in disguise. Thanks to Mexico, the U.S. was far better prepared for World War One. When the time came, mobilization and deployment to Europe went much more smoothly because of hard lessons learned during the impromptu mobilization and deployment on the U.S. border.

\(^2\) F Battery consisted solely of University of Minnesota students. They were allowed to muster out early, in time for the fall semester.

\(^3\) Villa staged a short-lived resurgence after Pershing pulled out of Mexico, but retired to a spacious hacienda in 1920. He was assassinated in 1923.
For the National Guard, border service infused the ranks with new manpower and more up-to-date equipment, brought improved organization, invaluable training, and unparalleled experience. Officers and men who lacked the capacity for active military duty on the border were weeded out; those who remained were better soldiers for it. Thanks to recruiting in 1916, most Guard units were already at authorized strength when war was declared against Germany on April 6, 1917.

The Army benefited, too. It’s expedition into Mexico, and its oversight of the Guard’s massive mobilization and training, provided a real-world rehearsal in the use of such modern technologies as trucks and machine guns, and with managing large bodies of troops. It pushed General Pershing to the top of the list when it came time to select a commander for the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France. Many of the 1916 border camps became ready-made divisional training camps in 1917—including Camp Deming in New Mexico, which was renamed Camp Cody and became home to the 34th Division in 1917-1918.

Jointly, the Regulars and the Guardsmen learned from one another. The mobilized Guard taught the Regulars about the motivations and capabilities of an expanded citizen army; the Regulars prepared the Guard—whose return to civilian life would be all-to-brief—for the terrible war already raging in Europe.

Former Minnesota National Guardsmen who trained and patrolled the border at Camp Llano Grande gathered for a 50-year reunion at their old camp site, February 1966. Today, all that remains of the camp is a tiny half-acre park, marked with a roadside sign, in present-day Weslaco, Texas. (Minnesota Military Museum)
References


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