

Fort Sam Houston's Involvement in the Mexican Punitive Expedition in Mexico 1914

In April of 1914, the sudden eruption of the crisis that would lead to American occupation of Veracruz, Mexico, brought five pilots and three planes to Galveston, Texas, too late to join the expedition. In June Congress shored up the unsteady organizational foundation by establishing the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps on a permanent basis. Three months later Captain Benjamin Foulois took command of the 1st Aero Squadron at North Island. In 1915 as European aviators began the difficult process of transforming fragile wood and fabric machines into deadly weapons of modern warfare, American eyes fixed once more on the rising possibility of trouble along the border with Mexico. A detachment of the 1st Aero Squadron began operating outside of Brownsville and Mission in the Rio Grande valley in April. In July Foulois took the remainder of his squadron to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, partly to practice coordinating observation with artillery and partly to bring them closer to the likely scene of action.

Five officers and seven aircraft made up the entire contingent of the Aeronautical Section when it returned to Augusta in late 1912. Amid relatively routine cross-country flying, however, abrupt orders arrived in February 1913 for the flyers to report to Texas City, Texas, immediately. Ironically, General Carter, who found aircraft dangerous and useless in 1911 on Fort Sam Houston, now needed them to augment his Second Infantry Division, engaged in guarding the border with Mexico against raids spawned by the ebb and flow of fighting in that country's ongoing revolution.

In November 1915, the 1st Aero Squadron tackled its longest overland flight, traveling in stages to take up residence at the former Remount Depot at Fort Sam Houston. Military flying was back to the Alamo City. On March 9, 1916, the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa raided Columbus, New Mexico, President Woodrow Wilson responded by ordering a "Punitive Expedition" under Brigadier General John J. Pershing to go into Mexico and either hunt down Villa or break up his band to prevent any further border raids. Included in the 10,000 men Pershing took with him into Mexico was the 1st Aero Squadron which left San Antonio almost at once to take up temporary quarters at Columbus and later at various locations in Mexico. Foulois and his men did a great deal of scouting and maintained an aerial mail route for the Mexican Punitive Expedition troops.

Weather, terrain, inexperienced pilots, the lack of maps and communications combined with the shortcomings of the underpowered aircraft posed unsolvable problems. Crashes and maintenance troubles steadily reduced their numbers until April 14; the First Aero Squadron was down to its last two aircraft. Hampered by underpowered engines in the thin air over the mountains of northern Mexico, the original JN-2 aircraft became inoperable after a month, and both of them, were condemned and destroyed as unserviceable upon their return to Columbus. With European powers putting ever greater numbers of vastly superior aircraft into the skies over the trenches, it was clear to American aviators that something must be done quickly to improve and expand American military air strength. In August 1916, Congress appropriated the unheard-

of sum of \$13 million for military aeronautics, and Colonel Squier focused the efforts of his small staff on the formation of five additional squadrons; the acquisition of more powerful aircraft; and the creation of newer, larger training facilities. Foulois, the most experienced flying officer in the Army, was named as Department Aeronautical Officer, Southern Department Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Foulois' candid and comprehensive report on the operations, plus the support of Pershing and Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, led to the first substantial U.S. aviation appropriation -- \$13,281,666 approved by Congress on Aug. 29, 1916.



Signal Corps No. 43 The 1st Aero Squadron in Mexico following a mission, March 1916