



A Curtiss JN-3 of the First Aero Squadron during the Mexican Punitive Expedition. (Nat'l Archives - 111-SC-102708)

First Aero Squadron in Mexico

By CALVIN W. HINES

When Pancho Villa attacked Columbus, New Mexico on the night of March 9, 1916, he set in motion a chain of events which led to his destruction as a rebel leader and his eventual assassination in 1923. As news of this raid spread across the United States, it aroused an already antagonistic population to demand immediate Federal action. President Woodrow Wilson, at first hesitant, soon gave in to the pressure and dispatched American troops to several points along the Mexican border. The measure affected all of the armed services, including the First Aero Squadron of the United States Signal Corps. Although some of its machines served in the Vera Cruz Expedition of 1914, the Aviation Section had otherwise seen only minor tactical duty in Oklahoma and the Southwest.

① Also the United States had maintained an aerial patrol along the Mexican border since the outbreak of trouble with Mexican revolutionaries in 1913.

On the European continent, however, aircraft had long since progressed from such incidental military roles. To meet the changes required by World War I military tactics, each belligerent began to place greater emphasis on the airplane for both scouting and combat. Taking the numerous stories of bombing raids and aerial engagements which found their way into the pages of the American press as vivid evidence of renovated strategy, Secretary of War Newton Baker promptly instructed Major General Frederick Funston, Commander of the Southern Department, to use the First Aero Squadron in close connection with the Punitive Expedition. ②

At the time of the Columbus Raid, the First Aero Squadron had been stationed in Texas for almost one year. Transferred from Fort Sill, Oklahoma to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio on September 10, 1915, the Squadron found

flying conditions much improved over the turbulent mid-west. Command of the Squadron of 10 officers and 84 men rested in the hands of Captain Benjamin D. Foulois, a veteran flyer who had contributed much towards the formation of an Army Air Service. The other officers, all pilots, were Captain Townsend F. Dodd and Lieutenants Joseph E. Carberry, Thomas S. Bowen, Carleton G. Chapman, Herbert A. Dargue, Robert H. Willis, Ira A. Rader, Walter G. Kilner and Edgar S. Gorrell. With the exception of Lt Bowen, injured early in the campaign, all of the unit personnel served with the Squadron until it returned to Columbus in April 1916. During the entire tour of duty the Squadron received only two additional men, neither of whom was a pilot.

On the day the Squadron was called to service on the border, it had eight of the thirteen planes commissioned in the United States Army. These 90 hp Curtiss aircraft (JN-3 type) had been in active use since the early months of 1915. As the Squadron planned to maintain its own supply lines during the operation, it was assigned 12 trucks and one automobile for transportation purposes. However, all of these vehicles soon fell prey to either the demands of the Quartermaster Corps or the guns of Mexican bandits. ③

Almost as soon as Secretary Baker's instructions reached General Funston, the Squadron commenced preparations to move to Columbus. Immediately the question arose whether to move the planes by air, as in the flight from Oklahoma, or by rail. ④ While military authorities thought the planes could be moved easier and faster by flying them to Columbus, General Funston, on Captain Foulois' recommendation, ordered the Squadron to move to the zone of operations by rail. ⑤ He made this choice

because of the airplanes' long service and the lack of landing fields or gasoline depots between San Antonio and Columbus.

Two days after Villa's raid, the Squadron had completely disassembled and cased all eight airplanes for transport and loaded them along with 25 airplane guns and some 65,000 rounds of ammunition on the flat cars of a special Southern Pacific train. In order to keep the unit together during the move, the Squadron had several Pullman cars attached to accommodate personnel.

Shortly before noon on March 13, 1916, the Squadron left Fort Sam Houston for assignment as a military unit in a combat situation. When for the first time this so-called Fourth Arm of the service set out for foreign duty, considerable secrecy surrounded its movements after its departure from San Antonio. Stopping only for water, the train arrived on schedule in El Paso the following morning. There an infantry company with several boxcars of ammunition joined the train. As this lengthened the train considerably, railroad authorities contemplated switching those cars containing the airplanes over to a siding to await later shipment. On hearing of this plan Captain Foulois presented papers verifying his Squadron's priority status which prevented any intentional delay in the transporting of the unit to its destination. Departing El Paso the train arrived in Columbus without incident on the morning of March 15, 1916. After moving the cases from the train to the proposed air strip on the south side of town, they reassembled the aircraft and placed them under tarpaulins until wooden hangars could be constructed. (6)

Later in the day Captain Foulois received official instructions explaining the specific duties of the First Aero Squadron. In accordance with Secretary Baker's request, the Squadron would not engage in offensive operations against Pancho Villa. Instead they should act as scouts for the expedition and fly aerial reconnaissance over the country in which the bandit was expected to hide. This would serve a defensive role by protecting American troops from surprise attacks and also aid in the location of Villa's troops. (7) As it would be extremely difficult to distinguish between Carranzista and Villista troops from the air, the pilots were to mark the area of Mexican troop concentration on a map and report it to the nearest American column.

Another duty assigned the Squadron in connection with the original mission, involved communication and dispatch service between the main base at Columbus and all advance bases. Although the General Staff thought it feasible to divide the unit's aircraft among the three columns of the Punitive Expedition, the decision rested with Brigadier General John J. Pershing. He decided that such a dispersal would both reduce the effectiveness of the unit and increase the problem of supply. Therefore, while the main base remained at Columbus, the First Aero Squadron would move as one unit into Mexico behind the troops. (8) Thus informed of their duties, the Squadron personnel set to work inspecting their airplanes in anticipation of the first reconnaissance flight.

On the morning of March 16, Captain Townsend F. Dodd, pilot, and Captain Benjamin D. Foulois, observer, took off from Columbus on the first air sortie of the campaign. Safely airborne, Dodd flew the craft south across the border for a distance of about 25 miles. As the main purpose of this flight was to determine what effect the high altitude would have on the plane's performance, the fliers kept a constant check on the craft's stability and engine drive. As, unfortunately, the airplane did not penetrate far enough into northern Mexico to encounter the unusual air currents of the Sierra Madres, the pilots did not anticipate the dangers which lay ahead until the damage was done.

Three days later, the United States Army Commander at Casas Grandes telegraphed the commander at Columbus ordering Captain Foulois to move his Squadron to the Casas Grandes-Colonia Dublan area at the earliest possible moment. (9) In compliance with this directive,

after checking over all eight planes, the First Aero Squadron departed at 5:10 P.M. on Sunday, March 19. Before leaving, Captain Foulois instructed the remainder of the unit's personnel to proceed to Casas Grandes on the next truck convoy out of Columbus.

Almost immediately after take-off, the planes began to experience troubles from both mechanical difficulties and turbulent climatic conditions. After only a few minutes flight plane number 52, piloted by Lt Joseph E. Carberry, had to return to Columbus because of engine trouble. (10) After the plane landed at Columbus, Major William Sample, the base commander, promptly notified the Division Commander at Casas Grandes that only seven planes would report that day. As it was, not one airplane arrived at Casas Grandes on March 19. Buffeted by strong headwinds, the aircraft remained aloft until darkness prevented further navigation, then landed short of their destination.

Four of the seven airplanes managed to stay together and landed at the town of Ascension, halfway between Columbus and Casas Grandes. (11) The other three planes put down at different points; one at Ojo Caliente, another at Janos, and the third at Pearson where it was wrecked in landing. (12) At first light on the morning of March 20, the four planes at Ascension took off for Casas Grandes, where they arrived before noon. Shortly thereafter, Lt Carberry, who had returned to Columbus and Lt Kilner, who was forced down at Janos, arrived at Casas Grandes just minutes apart.

With two members of the Squadron still missing, Captain Foulois expressed his concern to the base commander who sent out word to all army units to be on the alert for any sign of the missing flyers. Lieutenants Willis and Gorrell, the pilots in question, had left Columbus with the rest of the Squadron and were also overtaken by darkness. Flying at 3,000 feet above the other planes, they failed to observe the landing at Ascension. Later realizing that the rest of the group had landed, they flew toward what seemed to be a campfire. On reaching the blaze they found it to be only an area of burning timber, the glow from which showed neither level ground nor sign of life. At this point Willis flew off to the north to search for a landing spot while Lt Gorrell circled the surrounding country in an effort to determine his location. (13) Following several minutes' flight Gorrell noticed a sharp increase in the plane's fuel consumption. As the aircraft's eight-hour supply should have been only half gone, he suspected a gas leak and descended to a lower altitude in an attempt to land. Fortunately, he had reached a plateau area near the border of Lake Frederico, only a few miles south of Ascension, where he was able to put the plane down without mishap. Darkness, however, prevented him from finding the gas leak and he was forced to wait until dawn. By then the tank had drained completely dry, leaving not even enough fuel to start a fire. (14)

In the morning, failing to see any sign of habitation, Lt Gorrell followed a wagon trail south for about six miles, where he came upon an abandoned army camp. Gorrell, deciding that he could assist search parties by returning to the plane, posted a note before leaving the camp, describing his location and the condition of the plane.

Four days later, Lt Gorrell was rescued by a truck convoy under the command of Lt J. L. Parkinson. (15) As Gorrell's plane carried only three days' rations and there was nothing edible on the plateau, he had been without food for almost 24 hours. In addition to field rations, the convoy carried several drums of gasoline and a soldering iron. (16) After repairing the leak and filling the tank with fuel, Lt Gorrell took off once again for Casas Grandes, where he arrived later in the day almost a week overdue.

Lt Willis, last reported over Colonia Juarez southeast of Casas Grandes, had become lost soon after leaving Gorrell. Attempting to land in the dark on what seemed to be level ground, he failed to notice the rug-

gedness of the terrain and completely shattered the landing gear in the effort. Taking the rations from his wrecked plane, he set off to the north across the desert. Later he reported that he saw no human being until he was about ten miles south of Casas Grandes, where a Mexican on horseback directed him to the American camp.

Three days later, following Lt Willis' directions, a detachment went from Casas Grandes to Pearson, the scene of the crash, in an effort to salvage what remained of the plane. As they neared the wreck, an unknown group of Mexicans fired upon them, thereby preventing their reaching the craft. Protected by Troop "A" of the Thirteenth Cavalry on their second attempt, they reached the plane unopposed, but found it slashed to pieces with the engine the only valuable part remaining. Having lost another plane when Lt Thomas S. Bowen met with disaster on the Casas Grandes, the Squadron now had only six aircraft operations.

Lt Bowen's accident was the first one which came as a direct result of the abnormal air currents over the region. In the group which flew without mishap from Columbus to Ascencion, he also stayed the night. On March 20, Bowen took off after the other three planes and flew to a point about seven miles north of Casas Grandes, where he landed to take on more gasoline. He then resumed flight, reached Casas Grandes in a few minutes, and was circling the field when the machine hit a puff of air and side-slipped. According to Lt Bowen, he might have been able to control the aircraft had it not been so close to the ground. As it was, the plane fell 65 feet and crashed nose first. Lt Bowen received several minor injuries in the fall, the worst of which was a broken nose. He returned to the main base at Columbus for treatment before transfer to the Post Hospital in San Antonio. Lt Bowen was the first officer to be injured in the Mexican Punitive Expedition.

A few hours after Bowen's crash, Captains Dodd and Foulois received orders to search the area south of Casas Grandes for American troops moving in the direction of Lake Babicora near the entrance to Cumbre Pass, deep in the Sierra Madre mountain range. As the aviators approached the edge of the foothills, violent updrafts and whirlwinds buffeted the plane and made control extremely difficult. In several instances the pilots attempted to search out regions which would offer less wind resistance, but the low engine power prevented the craft from attaining sufficient altitude to clear the peaks safely. After expending the gas supply on a fruitless mission, Dodd and Foulois returned to base at Casas Grandes.

Aware of the insurmountable barrier presented by the Sierra Madre mountain range, Captain Foulois requested General Pershing to consider shifting the Squadron's advance base to a zone beyond the mountains. As the location of air fields depended on the depth of American penetration into Mexico, Pershing advised Captain Foulois to do the best job possible until a favorable time to move forward. Meanwhile, he endorsed Foulois' request for higher powered engines and sent it on to General Funston's headquarters in San Antonio. (17)

On the following day Captains Dodd and Foulois received orders to find Colonel Erwin's troops somewhere to the southwest in the Galera Valley, and left Casas Grandes shortly before noon. As Colonel Erwin's command was encamped near a level patch of ground, the pilots had no trouble distinguishing the column or landing on the valley floor. After delivering their dispatches and obtaining Colonel Erwin's report, Dodd and Foulois returned to base.

On March 22, in the first of two missions in planes number 42 and 45, Lieutenants Kilner and Carberry had to fly near the Sierra Madres in an attempt to find Colonel Dodd's column of Cavalry. Flying southwest of Casas Grandes towards the Galera River Valley the pilots found weather conditions excellent that day, thereby enabling them to carry out their assignment and return to base in a matter of hours.

The second flight failed in its mission to locate any troops moving south on the Mexican Northwestern Railroad. Participating in this reconnaissance were planes number 44 piloted by Captain Dodd and Lt Christie and number 53 commanded by Lt Chapman. The location of the railroad east of Casas Grandes forced the problem of crossing the Sierra Madres almost at once. Flying low, the planes penetrated the Sierra Madres as far as the northern end of the Cumbre Pass tunnel. Here they had to climb to a higher altitude and immediately encountered the strong headwinds which forced Foulois to withdraw from an earlier mission. Again all attempts to overcome this turbulence proved futile, and the reconnaissance unit returned to base. In their reports, the pilots stated that at times the violent air drafts drove the planes to within 20 feet of the tree tops. Once again, the rugged Mexican terrain saved Pancho Villa from capture.

With this incident coming just two days after a similar failure, Captain Foulois renewed his request for a change of station, or more modern equipment, stating that the abortive attempts to clear the mountain peaks showed the Squadron's aircraft unable to meet the service's requirements. In this second dispatch Captain Foulois urged immediate purchase of the following items, which he felt would serve to increase the Squadron's effectiveness. (18)

- Two Martin Airplanes, Model S, Hall-Scott 125 hp motors.
- Two Curtiss Airplanes, Model R2, Curtiss 160 hp motors.
- Two Sturtevant Airplanes, Sturtevant 140 hp motors.
- Two Thomas Airplanes, Thomas 135 hp motors
- Two Sloane Airplanes, Hall-Scott 125 hp motors.

In addition to operational aircraft, each of the manufacturers was to supply these spare parts: two spare propellers, one set lower wings, one set landing gear, three spare magnetos and three spare radiators. Acting on this request and Pershing's second endorsement, General Funston ordered eight new aircraft from the War Department but the Secretary of War replied that all airplanes available for service were in the possession of the First Aero Squadron in Mexico.

Accepting this statement as final, the Squadron continued to carry out, as best it could, the missions assigned to it. Owing to the rapid movement of United States troops into Mexico, the Squadron was soon called upon to fly as many as 15 sorties a day, most of which were mail and dispatch runs.

On March 23 Lieutenants Carberry, Christie and Chapman received the assignment of flying south of Casas Grandes to the town of El Valle, where Colonel Dodd's command was reportedly located, to deliver General Pershing's special orders. En route to El Valle, the pilots noticed a column of troops moving south in the direction of the city. Under orders to report the movement of any military force, the airmen took their planes down for a closer look. According to Major Mack Emerson, who was a sergeant in this group during the incident, the planes circled the area twice before coming in low to observe the column. On recognizing the troops as American artillery, the planes dipped their wings and the pilots waved to the men, who returned their greeting with loud cheers and a waving of hats. (19) As soon as the planes landed at El Valle, the pilots delivered the messages and informed Colonel Dodd of the American column approaching El Valle from the north.

Before the planes could get under way for the return flight, a storm broke upon them. As the high winds and swirling dust made any air venture hazardous, Colonel Dodd ordered the pilots to remain in camp until the storm passed. All aircraft were lashed down and the engines were covered against the blowing dust. When the wind finally subsided three days later, all planes returned to Casas Grandes, where they underwent repairs for damage resulting from the storm. At this point just three

of the original eight planes were still on duty.

During the period of March 26 to 29, a total of 20 flights were made, mostly "hops" to the towns of Espindolers, Galera Lopena and Las Cruces, for the purpose of delivering and receiving unit dispatches. On one of these mail flights from Casas Grandes to Columbus, Lt Carberry's plane was refitted with a newly-arrived engine and propeller. After this equipment change he returned to Casas Grandes in less than two hours, well under the normal flying time. With this added speed and power, the Squadron extended its mail service to the villages of Namiquipa, El Valle, San Geronimo, Santa Anna and Bachineva, thereby releasing Lt Chapman for a mission far more important than courier duty.

On the night of March 27, 1916 rumors reached General Pershing's headquarters of a large band of Villistas supposedly moving towards the town of Guerrero. As Guerrero was situated within flying distance of El Valle, General Pershing directed Colonel Dodd to investigate the matter. Lt Chapman, on duty in El Valle at the time, was given the assignment. Immediately after his takeoff Dodd received news that the suspected bandits had allegedly massacred a Carranzista garrison in Guerrero the night before. As Chapman reached the vicinity of Guerrero, he noticed a large group of men south of the town having a great celebration. After marking the location and taking note of the approximate number of men, Lt Chapman returned to El Valle and made his report.

On the following morning, Lt Chapman was ordered back to Guerrero to maintain surveillance and report any sudden movement in the bandit forces. (20) This second flight apparently alerted the Villista camp and Chapman immediately flew back to Dodd with the news of the Mexicans' activity. As this was the largest number of Villistas yet discovered, Colonel Dodd's column made a forced march to the city, where they attacked and defeated the bandits at San Geronimo Ranch on the night of March 31, 1916.

Meanwhile, violent weather continued to plague flight operations to the bases south of Columbus and on receiving a report that these conditions were expected to worsen, Captain Foulois considered a change in station. On March 30, he submitted the following plans contemplating the re-establishment of the Squadron to a point south of Division Headquarters. (21)

Plan I

Object: To maintain aero communication between Columbus, Casas Grandes and Namiquipa.

(a) Two airplanes with sufficient commissioned and enlisted personnel and supplies to take station at El Valle. One airplane to fly from El Valle to Namiquipa every morning, returning the following morning to El Valle.

(b) Two airplanes to be assigned to maintain aerial communication between Casas Grandes and Columbus as follows: one airplane to leave Casas Grandes every morning, flying to Columbus without stop, returning to Casas Grandes the following morning without stop.

(c) Two airplanes to be assigned to maintain aerial communication between Casas Grandes and Namiquipa as follows: one airplane to leave Namiquipa every morning, fly to Casas Grandes without stop, and return the following morning without stop.

Plan II

Object: To maintain aerial communication between Casas Grandes, El Valle, Namiquipa and points south. Communication between Casas Grandes and El Valle to be maintained by radio-telegraph, motorcycles and road transportation.

(a) Transfer entire squadron of six airplanes to Namiquipa, maintaining fuel bases only at Casas Grandes, El Valle and an advanced fuel base south of Namiquipa, location to be determined later.

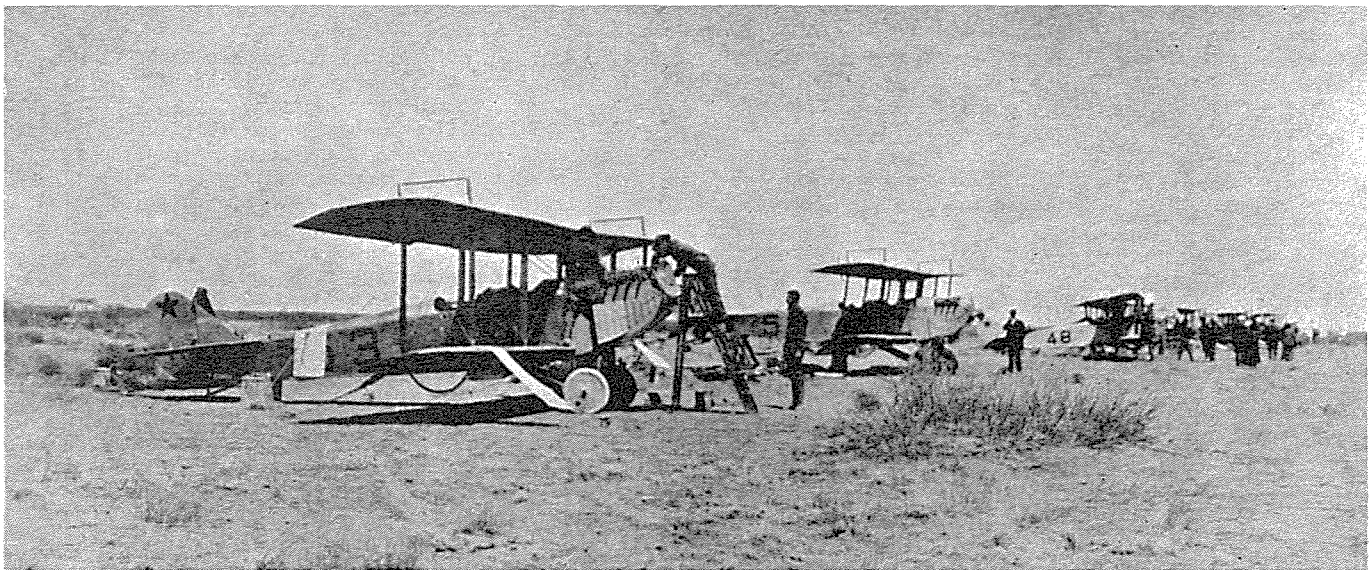
(b) Upon transfer of squadron to Namiquipa, the following assignment of airplanes to be made.

1. Two airplanes to maintain daily communication between Namiquipa and Casas Grandes.

2. Two airplanes to maintain daily com-



First Aero Squadron Curtiss JN-3, in middle of picture, landing at El Valle, Mexico. (Nat'l Arch. - 111-SC-81482)



Line up of Curtiss JN-3s, "53" in foreground, that were used against Pancho Villa. (Nat'l Archives - 111-SC-82635)

munication between Namiquipa and El Valle.

3. Two airplanes to maintain daily communication between Namiquipa and points south, within effective range of aircraft.

Plan III

(a) Upon the establishment of effective radio-telegraph communication between Namiquipa and Casas Grandes, the following is recommended.

1. Discontinue the use of airplanes between Namiquipa and Casas Grandes, except in emergencies.

2. Continue the airplane communication between Namiquipa and El Valle, if radio-telegraph, motorcycles, or other means fail.

3. Concentrate all available airplanes at Namiquipa and El Valle for daily communication between Namiquipa and the advanced troops.

4. If communication between Namiquipa and El Valle is of secondary importance only and can be maintained by radio-telegraph, motorcycles or other means, the use of airplanes between these two points should also be discontinued and every available airplane concentrated at Namiquipa for the purpose of maintaining aerial communication south of Namiquipa.

Plan IV

(a) In the event that contact is gained with the enemy, it is recommended that every available airplane be concentrated at the front for observation and reconnaissance of the enemy.

In conclusion, Captain Foulois repeated his request for newer machines, stating that severe weather conditions and equipment failure had reduced the Squadron's effectiveness considerably. He also emphasized that the combined efforts of the entire technical staff could keep the planes working on only a day-by-day schedule.

Even though Captain Foulois' first appeal for more aircraft had been rejected, General Funston's strong stand on the measure and nationwide sentiment forced Congress to reconsider the proposal. (22) On March 31, 1916, Congress passed the Urgent Deficiency Act which gave the Air Service a sum of \$500,000 for operation and

expansion. This act also provided for the immediate purchase and delivery of 24 new high-powered airplanes, eight of which would go directly to the First Aero Squadron in Mexico. (23) Owing to delays in filling the orders, the Squadron's new machines arrived too late to be of service. A statement made by Secretary Baker in reference to the situation, suggests the result of government "red tape" in times of crisis. (24)

There is no present intention of buying 24 machines outright. The first thing will be to buy eight machines and experiment with them to get the best type we can of those that have been developed for European service.

Consequently, the members of the First Aero Squadron were compelled to perform as best they could the details and missions assigned them in the aircraft remaining.

Squadron operations in Mexico continued as before, weather permitting. As the unruly weather of northern Mexico continued to hinder the Squadron, Captain Foulois persuaded General Pershing to incorporate Plan III into the unit's activities. Convinced that an improvement in aerial reconnaissance was essential to the expedition, Pershing ordered the Squadron to concentrate all aircraft at Namiquipa by April 6.

In spite of hazardous flying conditions which hampered search operations for the Villistas who escaped from Guerrero on March 31, a total of 23 missions were flown during the two-day period of April 1 and 2. Most of the flights were made through violent snow storms. On several occasions pilots had to make forced landings many miles from the nearest air base. Assuming that the bandit force at Guerrero had scattered and would not regroup until it had moved farther south, the Squadron Commander reduced the number of flights to six on April 3, and four on April 4, in order that the mechanics would have sufficient time to check over the planes before the journey to Namiquipa.

On April 5, the planes took off for Namiquipa, leaving the remainder of the unit's personnel to proceed to the new base on the next truck train out of Casas Grandes. Upon reaching Namiquipa, the Squadron received orders to locate the troops of Colonel William C. Brown, somewhere in the vicinity of San Antonio, Mexico. According to Captain Foulois' Report of Operations:

Lt Herbert A. Dargue, piloting airplane number 43, left San Geronimo and located a pack train of Colonel Brown's column returning toward San Geronimo.

Landing and receiving information that Colonel Brown's troops were proceeding toward Cushuirachic, Lt Dargue flew toward the canyon of that name, landed and reported to Colonel Brown. He then flew back to San Geronimo with a report from Colonel Brown to the Div-commander.

At home, public criticism of the War Department's use of the airplanes in Mexico was vigorous. To meet the Squadron's needs, the Aero Club of America offered to sell two airplanes to the Government for one dollar apiece. Its drive to renovate the military service, continuing even after passage of the Urgent Deficiency Act, came to a climax with an article in the New York World, written by that paper's correspondent in Mexico, reporting that the pilots were shocked at the condition of the planes they had to fly and quoted several as saying that it was criminal to send men up in such "suicide busses".

When asked to verify the alleged statements, all the pilots concerned repudiated the account and declared that such an interview never took place. The Congressional investigation which followed determined that the New York World's B. C. Utecht, had sent the article in without the approval of the Expedition's censor. Therefore, on the testimony of Captain Foulois and other Squadron members, the facts mentioned in the article were declared false and the reporter expelled from Mexico. This furor gave new life to the many critics of the War Department, thereby stimulating renewed editorial attacks on the Government's Mexican Policy. An article which appeared in The Independent Magazine a few days earlier, expressed disapproval of the National Defense Policy in these words: (24)

That the American Eagle needs wings, a substantial Aeronautical Service, is a matter on which both preparationists and pacifists agree. It is about the only thing on which the different factions of the present Congress do not disagree, and the only reason why the military programs proposed for this year do not include an appropriation for twenty-five million dollars for aeronautical research is that the shortage of officers in the army would make it impossible to get the necessary pilots.

In the same article, Alan R. Hawley, President of the Aero Club of America also stated:

An immediate appropriation of one million dollars to at once properly equip four aeroplane squadrons with the necessary high-powered aeroplanes may save the lives of 10,000 American soldiers on the Mexican border. A hundred high-powered aeroplanes would make it possible to round up Villa and his band in a very short time, where it might take thousands of men a long time with considerable losses to attain the same end.

In response to this statement, Aero Clubs throughout the country began to mobilize their qualified aviators, equipping them with the latest high-powered aircraft. Nevertheless Secretary Baker declined the offer of the Aero Club, stating that the present appropriation would serve the needs of the Air Service for the duration of the Mexican Expedition. (25)

Unaware of these events, the First Aero Squadron continued to operate from their new base at Namiquipa, flying regular dispatch missions to the advance troops south of them. On April 6, disaster struck again when airplane number 44, piloted by Lt Kilner, lost a wheel while landing and ground-looped, resulting in extensive damage to the wings and fuselage. (26) Fortunately, Kilner was not injured in the crash, but the plane was wrecked beyond repair. After all useful parts were salvaged, it was condemned and destroyed.

By this time, American forces had been on Mexican soil almost a month. General Venustiano Carranza, the

Provisional President, was suffering a great loss of prestige because of the continued presence of the Punitive Expedition. An incident reflecting this irritation occurred on April 7, 1916 when the First Aero Squadron was assigned a dispatch flight to the city of Chihuahua. As this was to be the first mission flown to Chihuahua City, Captain Foulois decided to use planes number 43 and 45 on the flight. He also asked for duplicate dispatches, which were to be delivered to Marion H. Letcher, the United States Consul. Before leaving Namiquipa, Captain Foulois warned the other aviators of the hostile feelings then prevailing in the country and ordered one plane to land north of the city, the other, south. Upon landing, each plane's ranking officer, Captains Dodd and Foulois respectively, was to start for the residence of the American Consul with his set of dispatches. On delivering the papers, the officer was to return to his plane and leave immediately for Namiquipa.

When the flight reached Chihuahua, each plane reconnoitered the area in an attempt to locate a suitable landing site. As the planes circled the city, the local inhabitants sounded a general alarm. This action struck the aviators as being unusual, as the only aircraft in the Western Hemisphere belonged to the United States, which, for the present, was not at war with Mexico. It was later learned that Pancho Villa also possessed some airplanes which he had purchased with the intention of bombing Chihuahua City. (27) This he threatened to do repeatedly, and although the threats never materialized, the fear still persisted in the city. Therefore, when unmarked aircraft appeared on April 7, the local inhabitants assumed that they were sent by Villa.

After the planes made their appointed landings and before setting out for the Consulate, Captain Foulois instructed Lt Dargue, his observer, to fly north of the city and land near the other plane. As Dargue took off, a large group of Carranzista soldiers fired on his plane from nearby brush. Although the craft was hit by several bullets, Lt Dargue was not wounded and managed to take his plane north of the city, where he landed near the other aircraft. Hearing the gunfire, Captain Foulois returned to check on the situation and was promptly arrested by the Carranzistas, who escorted him to the local jail. Here, after considerable language difficulty, Captain Foulois was able to get word to the American Consul, who obtained his release.

Meanwhile, north of the city, another incident was taking place which would result in additional damage to the American aircraft. As soon as Lt Dargue landed the second time, he reported the local hostility to Captain Dodd, who left immediately on foot for the American Consulate. He ordered Lts Dargue and Carberry to remain with the aircraft and at the first sign of trouble to fly to the American-owned smelters nearby.

Shortly after Captain Dodd's departure, a large group of unfriendly Mexicans approached the two airmen. This gathering soon got out of hand and a number of the participants started throwing rocks and lighted sticks at the planes. When the situation grew worse, Lt Carberry took off and flew to the American smelters as instructed. As Lt Dargue attempted to do the same, the top of the fuselage came off and he was forced to land. He then managed to keep the mob from destroying the aircraft until he was rescued by Mexican soldiers sent on the American Consul's request. With the arrival of these troops, the crowd dispersed, allowing both planes to be repaired and return to base.

On the day following the Chihuahua City incident, the Squadron made a temporary move from San Geronimo to San Antonio, Mexico. Here, in the lower altitudes, the planes performed much better. On April 11, the first mission from San Antonio to Columbus was flown by Lts Gorrell and Dargue. This flight, which brought a false report of Villa's death, covered a distance of 330 miles, a new distance record for sustained flight. When news of this event reached Brigadier General Scriven, a staunch advocate of Army Aviation, he said:

I trust that this achievement made under the most adverse flying conditions, . . . will serve somewhat to correct the unfair impression created throughout the country by newspaper accounts of the shortcomings of Army fliers in Mexico.

On that same day, during one of the other missions, another hostile incident involving Carranza troops took place, when Lt Chapman, flying a reconnaissance mission to Santa Rosalita, landed near the city to check a malfunction in the plane's rudder controls. When his plane was mistaken for a Villista aircraft, Carranzista soldiers made him a prisoner. Upon his release by the garrison commander, Lt Chapman returned to his plane to find his field glasses, goggles and ammunition missing, apparently stolen by the Carranzista soldiers.

Also on April 11, the Squadron was ordered to change stations from San Antonio to the village of Satevo, 45 miles to the south. During this move, bandits attacked the Squadron truck-train about 15 miles north of Satevo, near the town of Cienagas. Squadron members, outnumbered two to one, repelled the initial assault without suffering any casualties.

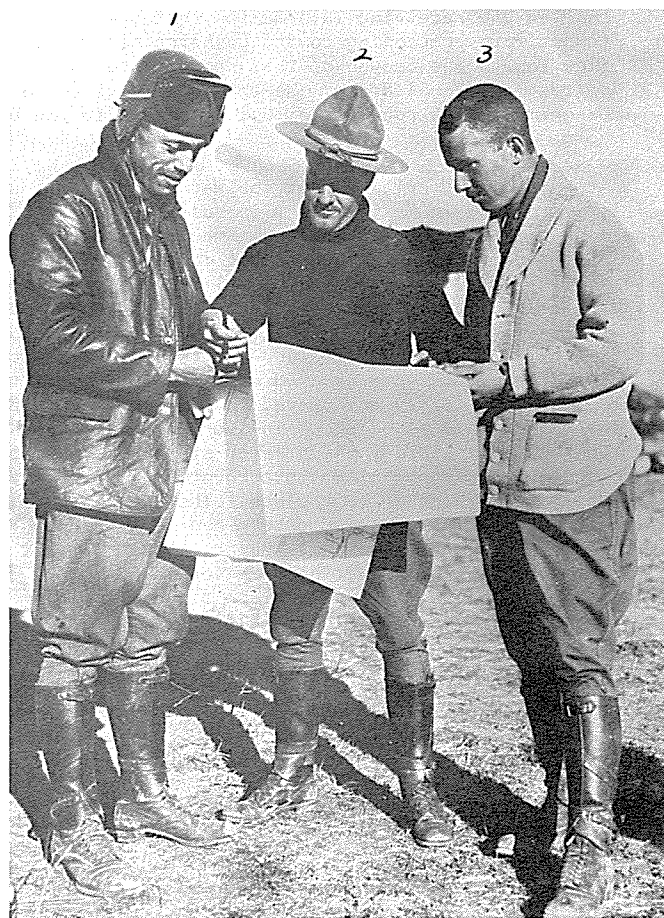
On the following day, Lt Chapman made a second reconnaissance south of Santa Rosalita toward Parral to locate any troops moving in that direction. His mission almost resulted in tragedy when one blade of his plane's propeller flew off, immediately throwing his machine out of balance. The excess torque nearly ripped the engine from its mounting with only a few wires below the machine holding it in place. Only by sheer skill was Lt Chapman able to land without crashing. (28)

On April 13, Captain Foulois and Lt Carberry flew a second mission to Chihuahua, where they learned of the skirmish between American and Carranzista forces at Parral. At the same time, General Gutierrez, the Military Governor, issued an ultimatum demanding the immediate withdrawal of all American units in the Chihuahua Military District. (29) As an American refusal could lead to open warfare, the First Aero Squadron made an immediate reconnaissance from Columbus to Boca Grande, Pulpit Pass, Oxaca Pass, Carretas and Janos to locate a large Carranzista force reported moving towards American lines. Even though they sighted no such group, Lts Dargue and Gorrell were credited with setting a new non-stop distance record of 350 miles.

In a reconnaissance flight that same day, Lt Rader flew south from Satevo towards Parral to locate Major Howze's column of Infantry. On sighting the unit, Lt Rader attempted to land, but rough terrain caused another accident. Rader had to abandon his plane, leaving it as a monument to the deepest penetration into Mexico of the American forces. He then joined Major Howze's column and returned with it to the north.

On April 14, after making the squadron's third flight to Chihuahua, Captain Foulois had to make a return trip with additional dispatches for the American Consul. Because of the anti-American feelings shown on previous occasions, he enlisted an escort of 14 men and proceeded to the city in motor vehicles. At the outskirts of Chihuahua, Foulois ordered the men to conceal themselves and await his return. With his driver, Corporal Arthur Westmark, Captain Foulois proceeded to the American Consulate, delivered the dispatches and returned to the trucks without difficulty.

Chihuahua continued to earn its reputation as a trouble spot, as Captain Foulois discovered the following day. On this fourth flight, Captains Dodd and Foulois in plane number 45, decided to land near the penitentiary on the east side of town. When they met with no violence, the pilots assumed that they had landed unnoticed and set out together for the American Consulate. When, however, they attempted to take off, the top of the fuselage blew off, damaging the rudder. Also, just as the plane was airborne, a large group of Mexicans ran on to the field, shouting and throwing rocks. Captain Foulois managed to keep the machine aloft and returned to



Lt Herbert A. Dargue, Captain Benjamin D. Foulois and Lt Robert H. Willis study war maps in Mexico. (Photo - National Archives 111-SC-102690)

base without further difficulty. After this incident, the Division Commander cancelled all flights to Chihuahua and directed the Squadron to change stations once again from Satevo back to the old base at Namiquipa, a move completed on April 17.

Two days later, plane number 43 made its last flight with the First Aero Squadron. This reconnaissance mission from San Antonio, Mexico to Chihuahua was made primarily as a test of the Brock Automatic Camera which the Squadron had received earlier in the week. During the flight Dargue and Willis scouted all roads in the surrounding area and took several pictures. As the pilots flew towards the hills west of Chihuahua, the engine stalled, causing a forced landing which completely wrecked the plane. In the crash, Lt Dargue was uninjured, but Lt Willis was temporarily pinned underneath the plane and suffered severe leg and head lacerations. A total loss, the plane was burned on the spot, starting one of Mexico's largest forest fires. Leaving the plane, Willis and Dargue started walking towards San Antonio, where they arrived two days later, suffering from shock and exposure. Here they remained until April 23, when they rejoined the Squadron, then en route to Columbus, New Mexico.

The Division Commander relayed special orders to Captain Foulois concerning the Squadron's removal from action on April 20, the day Willis and Dargue were reported overdue. In accordance with this order, the two remaining aircraft were overhauled and flown back to Columbus on April 22. Three other damaged planes were dismantled and hauled to Columbus on trucks. Operations of the First Aero Squadron were then discontinued until the unit could be equipped with new airplanes.

Withdrawal from the interior of Mexico marked the end of the First Aero Squadron's service with the Mexican Punitive Expedition. Although the unit was considered on active duty until August 15, none of its aircraft engaged in any further aerial activity more than ten miles beyond the Mexican border. From the time of its arrival in Columbus on April 24, 1916, to its call to France in 1917, the First Aero Squadron underwent several changes, both in organization and in training. For the most part, these alterations came as a direct result of the Punitive Expedition and the lessons the Squadron learned from it.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) "First Aero Squadron to Mexico", Aerial Age Weekly (New York), II (March 20, 1916), 24.
- (2) San Antonio Light, March 10, 1916.
- (3) Colonel Vernon L. Burge, "Early History of Army Aviation", Research Studies Institute, The Air University, Montgomery, Alabama, File 168.011-4, Number 3-3527-60, 10.
- (4) San Antonio Light, March 11, 1916.
- (5) William C. Pool, "Military Aviation in Texas, 1913-1917", Southwestern Historical Quarterly, (Austin), LIX (May 1956), 443.
- (6) San Antonio Express, March 19, 1916.
- (7) San Antonio Light, March 11, 1916.
- (8) Report of Operations of the First Aero Squadron in Mexico, March 10-August 15, 1916. (Microfilm copy in possession of the writer.)
- (9) War Diary of the First Aero Squadron, March 10-April 26, 1916. (Microfilm copy in possession of the writer.)
- (10) Report of Operations, March 19, 1916.
- (11) Ibid.
- (12) "Flying Into Mexico", Literary Digest (New York), LII (April 15, 1916), 1103.
- (13) Military Aviation in Texas, Southwestern Historical Quarterly, LIX, (May 1956), 447.
- (14) "Government Aeroplanes Not Suitable for Mexico",

- Aerial Age Weekly, III, (April 3, 1916), 86.
- (15) San Antonio Light, March 24, 1916.
- (16) "Government Aeroplanes Not Suitable for Mexico", Aerial Age Weekly (April 3, 1916), 86.
- (17) War Department Annual Reports, Report of the Chief Signal Officer, (October 3, 1916), I, 860.
- (18) War Diary of the First Aero Squadron, March 22, 1916.
- (19) Interview with Major Mack Emerson, October 3, 1960.
- (20) "The Fight at San Geronimo", Aerial Age Weekly, III, (April 10, 1916), 116.
- (21) Report of Operations, March 30, 1916.
- (22) "Pershing Without Airplanes", Aerial Age Weekly, III, (May 1, 1916), 210.
- (23) Lloyd Morris, CEILING UNLIMITED, (New York), 1953, 156.
- (24) Henry P. Woodhouse, "Our Biggest Need in Mexico", The Independent Magazine (New York), LXXXV, (March 27, 1916), 453.
- (25) San Antonio Light, April 5, 1916.
- (26) War Diary of the First Aero Squadron, April 6, 1916.
- (27) Larry A. Harris, PANCHO VILLA AND THE COLUMBUS RAID, (El Paso), 1949, 72.
- (28) Frank C. Page, "Aviation--A New Epoch in our Military and Naval Air Service", Worlds Work, (New York) XXXIII, (November 1916), 347.
- (29) "Military Aviation in Texas", Southwestern Historical Quarterly, LIX, (May 1956), 453.

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Announcements

After considered deliberation, and in recognition of the Society celebrating its Tenth Anniversary as this year closes, the Directors of the A.A.H.S. announce that henceforth the Society will offer a Lifetime Membership. Dues for a Lifetime Membership have been set at \$100.00, and the membership will be numbered and announced in the JOURNAL. It will entitle the individual to the JOURNAL throughout his life, a personalized certificate suitable for framing and all additional publications of the Society without charge (see Index, below).

Issuance of numbered Lifetime Memberships will begin immediately with the first received application being given the number, One. Application can be made by writing the Secretary and enclosing payment of \$100.00.

Moneys received from these memberships will be used to expand Society services. Such memberships will be a real and tangible way of assisting the A.A.H.S. and assuring it does an ever-greater job of gathering together all those interested in aviation history and disseminating the information each can contribute.

Who will be the first ten Lifetime Members? Will you be one? The names will appear in Volume 11, No. 1.

INDEX

When 1966 renewal notices are sent out, there will be a place on the form for each Member to order a Ten

Year Journal Index. This Index, to be available early in 1966, will be a complete and comprehensive Index of the first ten volumes of the JOURNAL, plus rare photos and a special listing of all traceable historic aircraft on display in the U. S. and Canada. Price is expected to be \$1.50 per Index and will be established at the lowest figure necessary to pay for the publishing of the Index. Only a limited number will be produced, so be sure to order yours with your renewal next year.

SOCIETY PROJECT

During the Annual Meeting of the A.A.H.S. in July, a major Society Project was announced by the Editor. This is a Project in which all Members can work together to create a record that could otherwise not be accomplished. Subject for the Project will be a history of all aircraft used by gasoline and petroleum companies in the U. S. up to World War II. In total, these aircraft comprise a virtual history of the development of U. S. Commercial and private aircraft.

The Society Project is to record as much about each of these aircraft (of Texaco, Standard Oil, Pure Oil, etc.) as possible--name, type, c/n, license, paint finish, length of service, final disposition, etc. How can you help? For any such plane we need every scrap of evidence, written note, photo (newspaper, magazine, book or glossy) or remembrance. If you find anything applicable in your files, you can help by sending the information to the Editor. He will record and return it (if loaned) or file it (if donated), and your information will help the JOURNAL Staff in developing the history of oil company planes for future presentation.