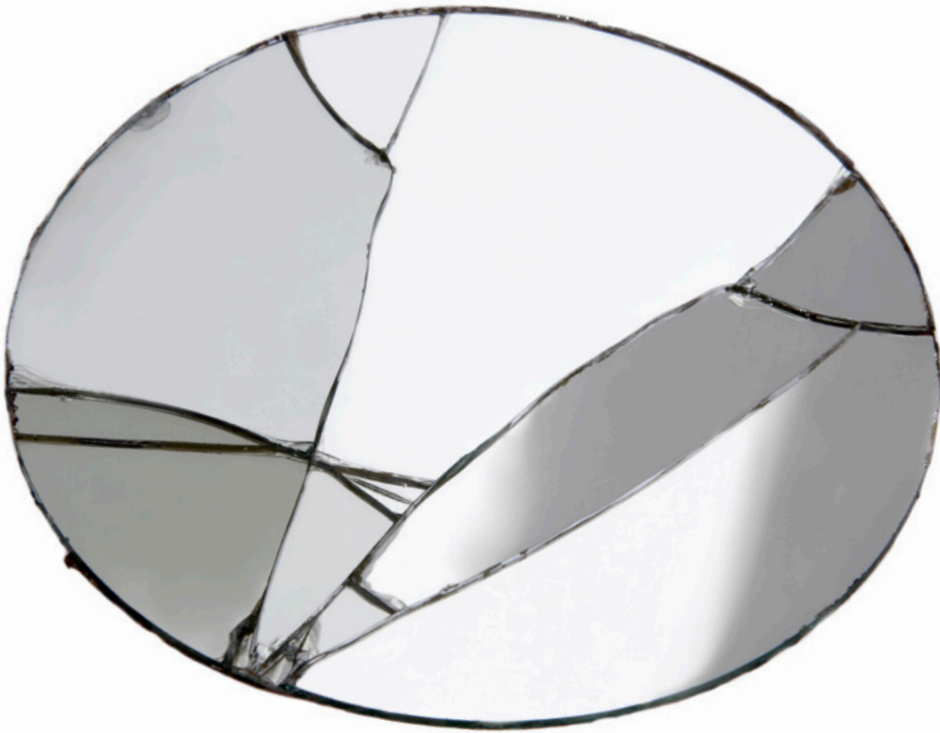


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1916: RI doctors mobilized on Mexican border in hunt for Pancho Villa

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

When President Woodrow Wilson called out the cavalry to capture the notorious Mexican bandit and former Revolutionary War general, Francisco “Pancho” Villa, Providence physicians **DRS. AUGUSTUS W. CALDER, MARCIUS H. MERCHANT** and **BUXTON H. BERTRAM** packed their duffels.

Along with about 700 other medical and military personnel in the Rhode Island National Guard, they mustered out at Quonset Point on a train bound for El Paso, Texas, where they would be encamped at Fort Bliss near the Rio Grande. A Horse Guards Battalion rounded out the contingent, which no doubt attracted the interest of Dr. Calder, a rider and one of the founders of a Rhode Island polo club.

The federal call to action stemmed from a decade of border skirmishes during the Mexican Revolutionary War and escalated three months earlier, in March 1916, when Villa and his guerrilla band of “Villistas” killed 18 American soldiers at a fort in Columbus, New Mexico, three miles north of the Mexican border. This followed the execution of 16 American employees of the American Smelting and Refining Co. on a



Dr. Augustus W. Calder of Providence



Dr. Marcius H. Merchant of Warren

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train outside of Chihuahua, Villa’s home turf, on the previous January 11.

General John “Black Jack” Pershing led President Wilson’s Mexican Punitive Expedition, as it was branded. He and more than four thousand Army regulars crossed the border and pursued the villains for 400 miles into uncharted terrain, from March 16, 1916 to February 7, 1917.



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Ambulance Corps leaving Columbus, NM, for Mexico in search for Villa.



[Left] General Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1877–1923) on horseback, during the Mexican Revolution circa 1914. Possibly related to the Mutual Film Co., which contracted with Pancho Villa to produce a silent film, “The Life of General Villa” during the Revolution in 1914.

[Below] The camp of the U.S. Army 13th Cavalry in Columbus, NM, which was raided by Pancho Villa in March 1916 during the Mexican Revolution. The incident served as the catalyst for the Mexican Punitive Expedition ordered by President Woodrow Wilson.

[Bottom] The Rhode Island National Guard was encamped here in El Paso, TX, on the Rio Grande border.

General Pershing and his men pursued Villa for almost a year, until America’s entry into World War I intervened and Black Jack was called back to lead the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe. Ultimately, in 1923, Villa was assassinated by political foes.

The Rhode Island National Guard mustered out from November 1916 to the following February. Dr. Calder returned to his practice at the Providence Surgical Hospital, Dr. Merchant to his practice in Warren, and Dr. Buxton to the Lying-In Hospital. The latter would become an active editorial board member and business manager of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*.

The Rhode Island National Guard, upon the 97th anniversary of the long-forgotten Mexican Punitive Expedition, published an account, which included the following written excerpt by Dr. Buxton assigned to Ambulance Company No. 1 which he titled: *Experiences on the Mexican Border*.

“We left Quonset Point on June 19th of a Sunday and had a very rapid trip to the border, four days on the road; received very enthusiastic greetings all the way along. I was surprised to find how general the call was throughout the country, brought home very forcibly to me by the fact that almost everyone whom I happened to know from various cities we passed through I found, on trying to reach them by telephone, were either at some mobilization camp or on their way to the border.

...I’ll never forget the night that we reached El Paso, – we landed in the freight yards near the Rio Grande river and had to wait an hour before being shunted out to Fort Bliss about 6 miles out of the city where we were to camp. I got off the train and wandered down to the river to take a look at the border. It was a bright moonlight night and one could look very readily across the small brook which is about what the Rio Grande is during dry weather.

I had an idea that the minute we struck the border



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there would be some exciting moments – perhaps wild shooting or attacks from across the river, but this night everything seemed peaceful – in fact as I walked down to the river bank I came to an infantry man (not a Rhode Island guardsmen, I am glad to say), on guard with his rifle leaning up against a fence while he engaged in a game of dice with another nearby sentry. The game quickly broke up, however, as I approached and I drew the man into conversation. He pointed out the Mexican sentry on the other bank of the river pacing up and down calmly smoking a cigarette. He also told me that two or three nights ago one of his sergeants had been shot by someone from across the way and that almost every night a few shots stray across. I decided that it might be just as well to return to the train as it was fairly bright that night – too bright to be out anyway, so without any noticeable haste, of course, returned to my train expecting to be shot in the back at any moment.” ❖