

“The 23rd Infantry Along the Mexican Border”

On the night of March 8-9, 1916 Mexican bandit, Francisco “Pancho” Villa, crossed the US-Mexican border with a force estimated between 500 and 1,000 men and attacked the town of Columbus, New Mexico. In the struggle looting ensued as well as a fire fight between US forces stationed in the area. Seven American soldiers were killed and seven more wounded, including two officers, as well as ten civilian casualties, eight of which were deaths. Prior to this attack, events like this were common. Forays into American territory and unrest within Mexico and its government were not abnormal and therefore led to a fulltime border patrol of US soldiers. As a result of this latest raid a punitive expedition led by then Brigadier General John J. Pershing with the purpose of capturing Villa and his fellow insurgents was launched into Mexican territory. In addition to the American forces that would be pursuing Pancho Villa, the National Guard would be mobilized along the Mexican border to act as both reserves for the punitive expedition and a border patrol. Among those forces that would be going was the 27th New York Division.¹

Within the 3rd Brigade of the 27th Division was the 23rd Infantry. Among the 23rd Infantry, in Company A, was a Captain Herbert W. Congdon. During his time with the National Guard, he took a number of photographs of life along the Mexican border. In addition to this he has also written about his journey both in *New York Division National Guard War Record* published in 1917 as well as unpublished memoirs he wrote later in life. These resources allow an amazing look back into the lives of the soldiers along the Mexican border during the Pancho Villa Expedition.

¹ O’Ryan, Major General John F., *The Story of the 27th Division* (New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1921) pp. 17, 18; Congdon, Capt. H. W., “Twenty-third Infantry,” in *New York Division National Guard War Record* ed. Capt. Henry Hagan Burdick (New York: Burdick & King, 1917) pp. 16, 17

Once arriving at their destination, on July 11, 1916 at a small village named Pharr, Texas the first thing that Herbert Congdon noticed and probably most men of the 23rd, who originally hailed from Brooklyn, was the heat. Unfortunately for them, they would later find out from the locals that they had arrived at a most unusual moment of “cool” weather and rain. Apparently, according to one local story-teller, a drought lasting between eighteen to twenty-nine months had just lifted. The resulting mud from the rainfall was something that astounded Congdon in its texture, extremely thick, slippery, and sticky. In addition to the strange new weather of Texas the men also had to become accustomed to new and dangerous wildlife consisting of scorpions, centipedes, tarantulas, and snakes, including one that later decided to go to bed with one of the men.²

For Congdon the most exciting part of duty was the outpost work along Rio Grande River, separating Texas and Mexico. Along the river were a series of outposts and outguards that the 23rd would man in case of any further raids into American territory. It was Congdon’s job to inspect these fortifications periodically. There were many adventures had along the Rio. On several occasions the men would come into face to face contact with coyotes and wild-cats during reconnaissance missions. Sentinels standing guard would often hear strange noises by night. One particular night the Number Three outguard reported hearing, on the opposite bank of the Rio, a woman screaming followed by the sound of a gunshot and finally a deep silence.³

Perhaps the most intriguing event during the border patrols was the mystery of a particular house in the area nearby the Rio outposts. When making his inspections of the men along the Rio, Herbert Congdon often took alternate routes to keep them on their toes. During these trips Congdon often passed a seemingly deserted house that was unusually well built

² Congdon, New York Division National Guard War Record pp. 92, 93, 95; Herbert W. Congdon Special Papers Collection, Special Collections, University of Vermont Library

³ Congdon, New York Division National Guard War Record pp. 95; Herbert W. Congdon Special Papers Collection

compared to the other houses in the area. This one had a shingled roof, railed piazza, a small barn, and was located directly under two lofty palm trees. Opposite the house was a large oak tree which had two crosses carved into its bark right underneath a thick horizontal limb.

According to Congdon the house's appearance looked more like the owner had just recently went out of town for a few days instead of completely abandoning it. After time Congdon began noticing vines and mould growing along the house signifying that the elusive owner had still not returned from where ever he had gone. With some free time on one of his inspections Congdon's curiosity got the better of him and he decided to walk up the steps of the house to investigate. Inside the house the characteristics of a struggle taking place were everywhere. The table was still set with the remains of an old and moldy meal. Chairs were scattered and broken. Most telling of all however, was the large stain on floor of what appeared to be blood. This scene of chaos, coupled with the nearby tree with crucifixes carved in, and a distinctive tree branch capable of supporting a child's swing or something much grimmer led to this house being dubbed, "the haunted house." Sometime later Congdon, leading a Support group who had gotten lost in the night, once again came upon the "haunted house" which was surrounded by dark figures. The figures turned out to be only wild cattle, which Congdon suspected may have had something to do with the house, but the event made Congdon's, "hair stand on end."⁴

Another note worthy event included the bayonet charge of an intoxicated, and naked, Southern soldier of a neighboring division directed at one of Congdon's own sentries manning his post. The naked man, while charging, was shouting various slurs including, apparently, his yearning of the blood of a damn Yankee. The naked man was quickly subdued by blow to the chest and under the chin with the butt of the sentry's rifle. The naked man, now unconscious, was promptly taken away and tied down to a cot with a wet sponge. When the man finally

⁴ Congdon, New York Division National Guard War Record pp. 95; Herbert W. Congdon Special Papers Collection

Bryan McGrath

awoke Congdon went to question the man. Embarrassed and apologetic the man answered. “Cap’n, I’ve been a drinkin’ man since I wuz seven yeahs old but I ain’t never had any likker like this. I got some o’ this Mexican pulque, and didn’t have much, but Cap’n, I shore do believe that if a Rabbit drank a teaspoonful of it, he’d spit in a Haound’s eye.” After communicating with the man’s Regiment a stretcher and a blanket, to cover his nakedness, were sent. No such incidents like this occurred within the 23rd who were forbidden under the famous G.O. 7, prohibition of alcohol for members of the 27th Division, to try the local “likker.”⁵

Besides these adventures along the outgaurds of the Rio Grande regular military life within the Pharr camp mainly consisted of drills that, as time went by, would progressively become more difficult. Non-commissioned officer also received the chance to drill the companies to which they belonged and were graded by officer standing by. Saturday afternoons and Sundays were usually days of rest where soldiers could attend a church service, visit camps of other units or simply relax. Other highlights included the practice marches in up to 130 degree heat, trying to vote on Election Day with each ballot measuring up to eight feet long, Thanksgiving Dinner which was the first real meal any of the men had had in months, as well as visits from Major General John F. O’Ryan who made periodic inspections every six weeks.⁶

Finally on January 9th, 1917 the 23rd the tour of duty had ended. The camps were broken down quickly and the train home was on its way. Herbert Congdon, due to poor health, had left Texas earlier on sick leave which was supposed to last a month. After he was informed that the 23rd was ordered home he proceeded to rejoin his men again as soon as he could, which ended up being a train stop in Utica, New York. Upon reuniting with his surprised comrades he received a hearty welcome. Once the 23rd had reached their home in Brooklyn they were greeted with

⁵ Congdon, New York Division National Guard War Record pp. 93; Herbert W. Congdon Special Papers Collection

⁶ Congdon, New York Division National Guard War Record pp. 93,94,96; Herbert W. Congdon Special Papers Collection

Bryan McGrath

cheering patriotic crowds including the mayor and governor. Soon the men would be reunited with their families but new challenges awaited as the United States was being drawn closer and closer to the Great War that had been raging in Europe for several years by this point.⁷

⁷ Congdon, New York Division National Guard War Record pp. 96; Herbert W. Congdon Special Papers Collection

Bryan McGrath

Bibliography

Congdon, Capt. Herbert C. "Twenty-third Infantry." In *New York Division National Guard War*

Record, edited by Capt. Henry Hagaman Burdick. New York: Burdick & King, 1917

Congdon, Herbert. *Herbert Congdon Collection*. New York State Military Museum.

O’Ryan, Major General John F. *The Story of the 27th Division*. New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck

Crawford Co.