

## Chapter 1

### Mexican Trophy Hunt

You are probably wondering if my conscience hurts me for killing a man [at home in front of his family]. It does not.<sup>1</sup>

—Patton, from letter to his wife, Beatrice, May 17, 1916

#### Namiquipa, Mexico, May 14, 1916<sup>2</sup>

Three Dodge open touring cars come speeding across the desert, raising clouds of dust in the afternoon heat. They arrive at the field headquarters of Brig. Gen. John J. “Black Jack” Pershing, the commanding officer of Fort Bliss, Texas. The sentry recognizes in the lead car 2nd Lt. George S. Patton Jr., one of the general’s acting aides, and he waves ahead the cars bristling with rifles and fifteen occupants. Strapped to the hood and fenders are three blood-soaked bodies punctured with bullet holes, looking for all the world like prize game trophies.<sup>3</sup>

Lieutenant Patton exits the convertible, enters General Pershing’s tent, and salutes smartly, reporting, “I know where we can get 2,000 bushels of corn and a hundred tons of hay. We also got three Mexican bandits.”

Pershing said, “What do you mean?”

Patton answered, “They’re on my car if you want to see them.”<sup>4</sup> One of the three bodies belonged to Col. Julio Cárdenas, second in

command to the primary target of US troops in Mexico, the revolutionary General



Gen. Pancho Villa and Gen. John Pershing near Fort Bliss, Texas, 1914 (one year before Patton arrived.)  
(Library of Congress)

Francisco “Pancho” Villa. General Pershing’s pleasure at the military coup must have been tempered by the grisly sight and smell of the rapidly decomposing bodies. The corpses were soon buried after a mock funeral ceremony. Lieutenant Patton was allowed to keep Cárdenas’ saber, spurs, and silver-bedecked saddle.

Setting aside all conventions of war (e.g., Article 15 of the First Geneva Convention of 1864 forbidding the despoiling of the dead),<sup>5</sup> why would a man treat his fallen enemies with such utter contempt? Only two years earlier, Pancho Villa, a notorious bandit with a Robin Hood reputation, had been supported by the US government, was a darling of Hollywood filmmakers and a guest of General Pershing at Fort Bliss. When US policy changed, Villa was no longer able to purchase weapons from America for his revolution. In retaliation, Villa made the strategic error of pillaging military supplies from American border towns in 1915, resulting in the deaths of twenty or thirty American soldiers and civilians. In return, President Wilson dispatched 4,800 US troops called the “Punitive Expedition” to Mexico with the express purpose of capturing or killing Pancho Villa and his troops.<sup>6</sup>

Thirty-year-old 2nd Lt. George S. Patton Jr., almost seven years out of West Point, was a man with a mission and a flair for publicity—determined to make a name for himself. The purpose of bringing back the bodies was not for identification—already confirmed by eyewitnesses at the gun battle—but to flaunt the successful battle and to capture headlines. “As you have probably seen in the paper, I have at last succeeded at getting into a fight,” Patton wrote home



1915 Dodge touring car of type used in raid on Colonel Cárdenas (West Point Museum, photo courtesy of <http://www.williammaloney.com>)

exuberantly on May 14, 1916, to his wife, Beatrice. He had pestered General Pershing to be included as a special aide in Pershing’s latest raid in Mexico.<sup>7</sup> “George S. Patton Shoots Villista Captain,” blared the *Pasadena News*. “Patton the Bandit-Killer” became an instant celebrity across America. Frank Elser, a *New York Times* reporter befriended by Patton, wrote a flattering account, calling

the incident “one of the prettiest fights of the campaign.” Patton was quoted as saying, “Cárdenas had nerve, even if he was a Mexican.”<sup>8</sup>

Patton’s status as aide and protégé of General Pershing was now guaranteed. He was promoted to first lieutenant on May 23, 1916. Pershing too was promoted in 1916—to major general, no doubt aided by the minor victory and the ensuing publicity, despite the fact that the Punitive Expedition failed in its eleven-month campaign to eliminate Pancho Villa.

What actually happened during the fifteen-minute gun battle? As in later episodes of personal combat in World War I, Patton wrote several versions of the event, but here is the most probable chronology: Twelve days before the shootout, Patton and his men came to Cárdenas’ hacienda in San Miguelito near the Villa stronghold of Rubio. Cárdenas escaped, but they found his uncle and tortured him by repeatedly hanging him up by his arms. The man fainted several times before he cooperated. Patton wrote, “The uncle was a very brave man and nearly died before he would tell me anything.”

At high noon of May 14, 1916, Patton, along with ten soldiers, two civilian guides, and two chauffeurs, returned in three automobiles to Cárdenas’ hacienda. Cárdenas was home that day with his wife, baby, mother, and grandparents. Knowing the layout, the Americans blocked all exits from the hacienda and entered. A fierce gun battle erupted. Three Mexican men tried to escape on horseback. Patton was credited with a pistol shot that felled the horse of Pvt. Juan Gaza, who was then killed by multiple rifle shots. Patton was also one of several who shot rifles, killing Capt. Isador Lopez. Cárdenas himself had been shot several times on horseback but took off on foot and was finally dispatched by the civilian guide, E. L. Holmdahl, an ex-Villista. Cárdenas had faked surrender and then opened fire on Holmdahl, who won the face-to-face gunfight.<sup>9</sup>

With so many Americans shooting simultaneously, it is likely that Patton had a hand in wounding Cárdenas and wounding or killing the other two. He killed one horse but is hardly entitled to claim credit for killing all three Mexicans. In a letter to General Pershing on September 24, 1920, then Major Patton wrote the following: “I trust you will excuse the personal vanity which emboldens me to intrude this upon your valuable time. But as I am one of the few officers who has ever registered hits on a human target I am very anxious to have that fact on my record.” Patton enclosed his own recounting of the “Rubio Affair.” Pershing forwarded it to the adjutant general, and Patton was rewarded with a Silver Star decoration for his part in the event.<sup>10</sup> The Silver Star is supposed to be for acts of gallantry performed with

marked distinction, displaying exceptional valor while engaged in military combat operations against an enemy force.

The incident raised the question of how Patton felt killing a man at home in the presence of his mother, wife, and baby, “even if he was a Mexican,” in Patton’s words. His answer came in a letter to Bea on May 17: “You are probably wondering if my conscience hurts me for killing a man. It does not. I feel about it just as I did when I got my sword fish [*sic*], surprised at my luck.”<sup>11</sup> This remarkably unfeeling response was preceded by a letter to Bea on April 13, 1916, in which Patton expressed his contempt for the Villista Mexicans. “They are much lower than the Indians...They have absolutely no morals and there have been no marriages for five years. Imagine that any woman would sell what elsewhere would be called her virtue for a peso or less and a girl could be bought for about 20 pesos.”<sup>12</sup>

In World Wars I and II, Patton would show more respect for his Aryan-blooded German enemies than for his Mexican opponents in 1916. Yet estimates are that more than 500,000 Hispanic Americans served in uniform in World War II and, unlike African Americans, were fully integrated with other soldiers. Like other American soldiers, they fought and died, earning every decoration, including thirteen Medals of Honor.<sup>13</sup>

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1. MB1, 336.

2. Frank B. Elser, “Cardenas’ Family Saw Him Die at Bay; Shot Four Times.” *New York Times*, May 23, 1916.

3. MB1, 328–338; CDE, 172–178; SPH, 73–78.

4. SPH, 77.

5. L. A. Horvitz and C. Catherwood, *Encyclopedia of War Crimes and Genocide* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 471.

6. James W. Hurst, *Pancho Villa and Black Jack Pershing: The Punitive Expedition in Mexico* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008).

7. “He parked himself on a chair outside Pershing’s office for almost forty continuous hours,” waiting for Pershing to notice him. (EFP, 199).

8. Elser, *New York Times*, May 23, 1916.

9. SPH, 76.

10. MB1, 744.

11. *Ibid.*, 336.

12. SPH, 74.

13. List of Medal of Honor Recipients, Wikipedia,

[https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Hispanic\\_Medal\\_of\\_Honor\\_recipients#World\\_War\\_II](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Hispanic_Medal_of_Honor_recipients#World_War_II)