Soldiers Stationed in Harlingen, 1915-1917, and Some of Their Action

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In contending with non-conformist combatants in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. Military is in confrontations paralleling those the military faced in the Rio Grande Valley in the second decade of the 20th century. In that period those contending went by numerous names and acted for various ideologies. Some were poorly regulated militia involved in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Others were seditionists (Sediciosos) fomenting a rebellion with the goal of creating a new republic north of the U.S.–Mexico border. Still others were local residents, primarily ranchers, trying to protect themselves and their properties from loosely-controlled Texas Rangers, unscrupulous Valley lawmen, and others involved in vigilantism. Still more were simply thieves, robbers, and brigands.

When on October 19, 1915 the U.S. government under President Woodrow Wilson officially recognized Carranza as the head of Mexico it believed cross-border disturbances would cease. They didn't. Fortunately Gen. Frederick W. Funston, upon request, had in early August begun to receive sufficient military help to supplement his 300 troops at Fort Brown. Soon Funston dispersed 14,000 troops along the South Texas border. Additional National Guard units from various states would supplement these soldiers.

Briefly here is some information concerning the troops in Harlingen:

1/19/15 With the area still fairly quiet servicemen were able to arrange for an interservice football match. The 12th Cavalry at Harlingen played the Coast Artillery contingent from Brownsville to a 13:13 tie. Lt. Burwell was the Harlingen's team captain and quarterback. He played well as did W. Largent and lineman Gee.

2/19/15 Captain A.O.P. Anderson commanding Troop B of the 12th Cavalry thanks Lon C. Hill for suggesting willow poles for erection of a corral and then permitting the cutting of them from his property.

4/14/16 By this date additional troops are already being stationed in Harlingen, since Texas Governor Oscar Branch Colquitt has sent national guard units to the Valley to ease border tensions which have escalated.

5/18/16 It is reported in the newspapers that Brig. Gen. James Parker is to establish his headquarters in Brownsville. He is to command the three regiments of Texas militia being sent to the Valley. Two of these regiments will remain in the lower valley.

1915-17 Soldiers of the 6th U.S. Cavalry, 26th Infantry, and the 3rd Texas National Guard are stationed in Harlingen as part of efforts to quell border unrest. The 3rd Texas Infantry arrived on May 9, 1916 and remained in Harlingen (and Donna) until September 7, 1916. They even have several field hospitals for the minimum of 12 companies involved here. The muster of Texas National Guard officers (158) and enlisted men (3,572) had begun on May 16, 1916 after which they were mobilized at Fort Wilson near San Antonio. It is now Fort Sam Houston. Second and Third Regiments of Infantry and Field Hospital were stationed all along the Lower Rio Grande Valley from Harlingen to Roma. From about August 1914 Col. A. P. Blocksom was in charge of Valley forces but
upon arrival of the 26th Infantry between August 1 and September 15, 1915 Col. Robert Lee Bullard took charge of forces in Harlingen and to the west.

On 8/3/16 on the orders of Major A.R. Sholars, Companies K and L of the Third Texas Infantry are moved by truck from San Benito into Harlingen as the first step in consolidating all Texas troops into Harlingen. On August 6 the City Council orders a committee of three to consult with Texas State Adjutant General Hulen for plans of cooperation between the general and the City Council and the City Health Officer regarding the campsite. [Brigadier General John Augustus Hulen was later to organize and command the 36th Division in World War I. His profession was a railroad executive, but since joining the Third Texas Volunteer Infantry as a private in 1887 he had frequently been called back to active duty. He held the position of adjutant general from 1902 until his retirement in 1907. He was recalled in 1916 as commander of the Sixth Separate Brigade.] This month the city appoints a City Health Officer to overlook the soldiers. The city provides the camp with free water and lights.

The Sixth Cavalry Camp site covered what would now be several city blocks. It approximately encompassed the area between 3rd and 4th Streets and apparently ran north to south between East Jackson and Harrison Avenues. A goodly number of tents are lined up in orderly fashion. A large corral area is bordered by what are now 2nd and 3rd Streets and serves to pen the horses.

Under the Sixth Cavalry was a band consisting of 18 individuals. A rare Runyon postcard pictures these musicians.

One Robert Runyon photo is labeled "The Twelfth Cavalry Camp." It shows a modest number of tents adjacent to and on the west side of the rail tracks between where Adams and Washington Streets meet Commerce. This may have been only a temporary bivouac for this unit. The 12th Cavalry had arrived in the Valley on May 14, 1914 and left about a year later. Two other Runyon photos show troops embarking on a train near the first Harlingen depot.

South Texas Lumber Company account records of early 1916-17 provide a record of some of the units stationed in Harlingen. These include Companies A, D, F, G, J, and L of the 26th Infantry and Companies C, E, F, and H of the 3rd Texas National Guard (and later K and L). These are supported by Field Hospital #5, Field Hospital #1 Texas National Guard, and Ambulance Company #5. In addition to the 6th U. S. Cavalry, there is also the 26th Infantry Band. The officers of the 26th Infantry have organized an Officers' Club.

In the greater Harlingen area, matters would be quite unsettled for a three-month period in mid-1915. The same held true for the remainder of the lower Valley. Frank Cushman Pierce, in his Texas' Last Frontier was, among others, to document a list of unlawful incidents. Those that were in the surrounds of Harlingen included the following: It was 7/17/15 that a band of riders, previously reported in the vicinity of the north county line, killed Bernard Boley, a young man. On 7/25/15 persons unknown set fire and burned a St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway railroad bridge just south of
Sebastian. On July 31, 1915 a bandit raid on the Los Indios Ranch had resulted in the death of one person, Joe Maria Benavides. On August 3, 1915 rangers and deputy sheriffs attacked a ranch near Paso Real and, because they were alleged to be bandits, killed unarmed Desiderio Flores, and one son who came to his defense. Returning the next day, the vengeful and errant lawmen killed a second son whom his eighteen year old sister, Josefina tried to hide. Two days later on 8/6, fourteen armed men robbed the Alexander Store in Sebastian, then at a nearby granary picked up A.L. Austin and his son Charlie. They were taken to their house which was then robbed. After assuring Mrs. Austin that her men would be safe, the robbers drove them away in a wagon manned by a young man named Elmer Millard. The Austins were then shot to death, but Millard was released. A day later Charles Jensen, a night watchman at the Lyford gin, is wounded by a band of Mexicans.

Because of these unsettled conditions Gen. Funston responded to raids in the area by assigning five-man guards of soldiers for trains running between Harlingen and Raymondville.

Caesar Kleburg, manager of the King Ranch, was becoming leery of the ranch being targeted despite its distance from the border. After a report of up to a party of 60 outlaws, later said to be led by Luis de la Rosa, being in the vicinity of the Las Norias station along the railroad line in the King Ranch, Adj. Gen. of Texas Henry Hutchings, State Ranger Captains J.M. Fox and Henry Ransom, other State Rangers, and Captain George J. Head were dispatched north from Brownsville in a special train to overtake them. The date was August 8, 1915. With their arms and ammunition D.P. Gay, Marcus Hinds and Joe Taylor, mounted Custom Inspectors, and Gordon Hill, Deputy Sheriff of Cameron County, boarded the next regular train headed north. Eight U.S. Soldiers, who were stationed in Harlingen with the cavalry, were posted at the Las Norias division headquarters while the remainder of the first party took off toward Sauz Ranch in a search operation. At the ranch house were two Mexican cowboys, the Mexican ranch carpenter and his wife, the Negro ranch cook and his wife and two Mexican women. After their evening meal most of the defenders had positioned themselves behind the railroad embankment in anticipation of any bandits. They were soon in a confrontation, for the bandits approached the premise unaware that it was manned. In this action 70 miles north of Brownsville, some of the bandits slipped into the house where one older woman was soon killed by the bandits after an angry confrontation. Ranch foreman Frank Martin, an old ranger, was badly wounded in the 2 1/2 hour battle, but Lauro Cavazos, another ranch hand escaped injury. The ranch carpenter was shot through a lung and one of the soldiers, who had been wounded and taken out of action, was again shot, this time in a leg as he lay on a cot. Five attackers were killed in the firefight and later two others who were badly wounded were captured. Unbeknownst to one another, both sides were running low on ammunition. The wounding of a bandit leader may also have dampened the morale of the attackers and precipitated their withdrawal. After midnight two dozen dismounted cavalymen, several civilian officers, Sheriffs Vann and Baker, Lamar Gill, and Lon C. Hill arrived at the scene long after the action with the Sedicsos had concluded. Striking photos were taken the next day. They showed mounted lawmen lauding it over the dead bodies of the bandits. The bodies were lassoed and appeared to
be ready to be dragged to a burial site. Six more said to have died after crossing into Mexico. A later report put the number of bandits at 79. They were well armed, some with 7mm Mousers, and had good ammunition.

Although major actions tapered off, incidents still took place into September. It was 9/2 when a raider band clashed with cavalry near Harlingen. On 9/10 residents near Lyford were attacked but repulsed the raiders, killing two of them. On 9/13 just before daybreak, the Galveston Ranch southwest of Harlingen was surrounded. Nine sleeping soldiers were fired upon. In the skirmish Pvt. Anthony Kraft of the 3rd U.S. Cavalry was killed and two other soldiers wounded, but the attackers were driven off. Later that day the soldiers apprehended five Mexican ethnics living at the ranch and arrested them. They were taken to San Benito and turned over to the deputy sheriff who jailed them. That night at about 9:30 pm the deputy sheriffs took three of the prisoners and started out on the road to Harlingen. The next morning the three Mexicans were found dead, having been summarily executed. The encompassing word for this is "lynched". At the end of the month on 9/28 a woman living near Harlingen was attacked by two and wounded in her forearm.

After an army contingent of 16 was attacked on October 21, 1915 at Ojo de Agua near Mission, three killed and eight wounded, Major General Frederick Funston, Commanding General Southern Department, "asked for another regiment of infantry to be placed in Harlingen to act as a guard so that the size of each cavalry patrol could be increased. The War Department complied by sending the 28th Infantry from Dallas.", this according to historian Charles Cumberland.

On 6/30/16 army engineers of the 2nd Division of the US Engineer Corps sent from Washington DC arrived in Harlingen together with a trainload of pontoons. These could be used to forge the Rio Grande should a large military expedition force cross into Mexico.

As time passed, the individuals responsible for the disturbances were greatly outnumbered by U.S. soldiers, therefore no set battles were instigated by raiding forces, which could range in size up to 60 to 80 men. The Federal military frowned upon vigilantism and eventually brought a semblance of order and moderation to the chaotic situation.

Historian Benjamin Heber Johnson tells us in his Revolution in Texas". "Although the identities of most raiders were usually completely unknown, army officers sometimes suspected former Sediciosos. This was the case in a December 1917 incident, when a cavalry unit near Harlingen shot at five men attempting to cross the Rio Grande. They killed one of the men who, an officer stated, 'may be one Mariano Casarez, wanted by civil authorities for charges of banditry...connected with de la Rosa and Pizaña in their raids of 1915.' "

One of the major area losses, said to be perpetrated by bandits, was that of Lon C. Hill's sugar mill. Located in what is now Lon C. Hill Park and the present site of the baseball
stadium, the uninsured wooden-clad mill and adjacent warehouse were burned to the ground on July 17, 1917. It had cost at least $125,000 to erect in 1911.

The 26th U.S. Infantry was under the command of Col. R.L. Bullard. The 3rd U.S. Cavalry was under the command of Col. A. P. Blocksom who had been commanding officer of the LRGV from June 1914. By the end of July 1916 the 2nd Texas Infantry in Harlingen was under the command of Col. B. F. Delameter and the 3rd Texas Infantry in Harlingen under Col. George P. Rains. One early AZO photo postcard shows a crude wooden structure about 16' by 12'. This appears to be the quarters for officers. Next to it is a tent of similar size with a fly to divert rain. In front of these is an open convertible car with an enlisted man driver. Standing beside it, as the label indicates, is Col. Gaston, 6th Cav., Harlingen, Tex. This is Joseph A. Gaston who arrived on August 14, 1915 and departed on April 20, 1916.

Accounts with the South Texas Lumber Company indicate the names of some of the soldiers stationed in Harlingen during the Border Trouble period. These include:

Major A.R. Sholars                              Lieutenant Purcell
Major J.G. Jenning                               Lieutenant J.L. Redmond
Captain O.P. Storm of Dallas                     Lieutenant W.R. Wheeler
Captain John B. Chambers                         Lieutenant Malony
Captain W. B. Breedlove                          Sergeant Furman
Captain B. Compton                                Sergeant Vincent
Captain Everett Hughes                           Sergeant G.M. Roper
For a time Capt. Charles J. Nelson was in charge of the quartermaster depot at Harlingen.

When the U.S. began to prepare for its entrance into the Great War (World War II) troops stationed in the Valley began to be withdrawn. This accelerated when the country joined the war in April 1917. Even so the border remained in an unsettled state of fear and suspicion.