

# On the Border: The National Guard Mobilizes for War in 1916

■ By Alexander F. Barnes



**P**resident Woodrow Wilson had a deeply concerned look on his face. The chief of staff of the Army had just updated him in the Oval Office, and the news had not been good. Turning now to his senior defense adviser, Secretary of War Newton Baker, the president said, "With the Regular Army stretched so thin, I'm not sure we have any other options but to mobilize the National Guard."

Baker nodded but cautioned, "Sir, you

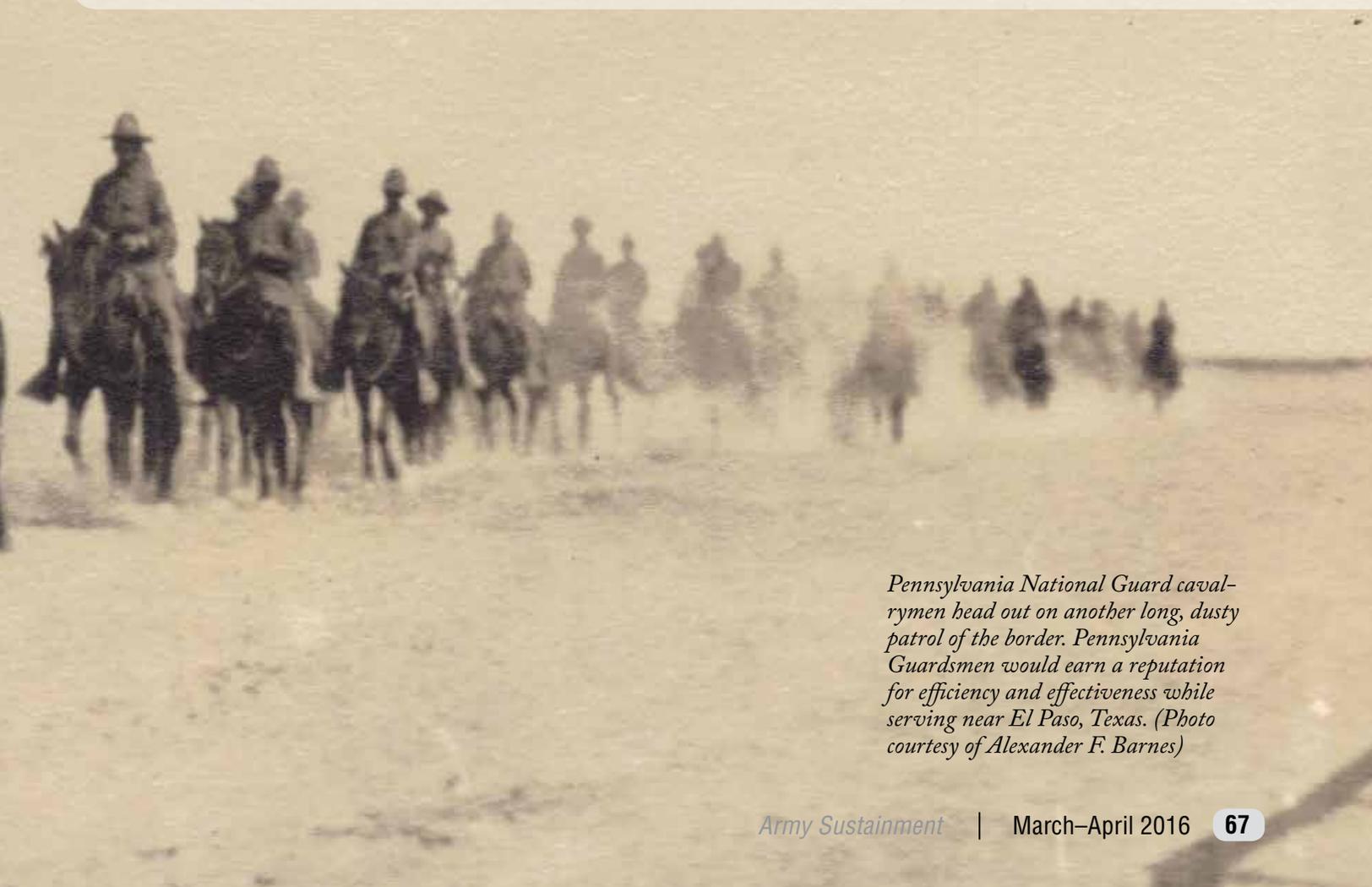
know we just reorganized them, and most are still trying to figure out what their units are supposed to look like."

"I know, I know," the president said slowly. "But these latest cross-border attacks have forced our hand."

Baker nodded his head again and said, "Yes, sir. It'll be painful for everyone, but the Guard can make a difference." He paused and then said, "If there's a positive side to this, at least now we can inform the states electronically. I'll have my staff

send out the telegrams to each governor this afternoon."

Wilson quickly shook Baker's hand and turned back to the other report on his desk: a German submarine campaign was sinking British and French ships faster than they could be made. Eventually the United States would have to take a side in the war, but for now, the problem on the Mexican border was his biggest concern. The nation had been attacked, and something had to be done about it.



*Pennsylvania National Guard cavalrymen head out on another long, dusty patrol of the border. Pennsylvania Guardsmen would earn a reputation for efficiency and effectiveness while serving near El Paso, Texas. (Photo courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes)*

## HISTORY

The mobilization of National Guard units in response to Pancho Villa's raid on the United States led to the development of a well-trained National Guard force.

Pancho Villa's attack on the United States in March 1916 drew a surprisingly fast military reaction. The U.S. government was determined to bring the raider to justice. Unfortunately, although Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing led a horse-mounted column of Regular Army Soldiers across the U.S. border into Mexico less than a week after the attack, Villa proved to be elusive.

Although U.S. Soldiers succeeded in defeating some of his followers, Villa himself remained an uncatchable shadow. As Pershing plunged deeper and deeper into Mexico, other Regular Army units guarding the 1,200-mile border were forced to leave their positions and follow him southward to secure the supply line. Very quickly, what once had been a very thin line of defense between the United States and border raiders became no line at all.

### Mobilizing the Guard

In early May 1916, other Mexican raiders hit the Texas towns of Glen Springs and Boquillas. Because of these attacks, President Woodrow Wilson decided that the only way to maintain security on the border was to activate National Guard units from Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. He federalized them into national service on May 8.

Unfortunately, none of these states had very large units. Together the states could raise only about 5,000 Soldiers, and most of them were infantrymen. They had very few badly needed cavalrymen, and it was obvious that many more Soldiers were necessary.

By mid-June, Wilson decided to mobilize an additional 110,000 National Guard Soldiers for border service. This expansion included National Guard units from every state except Nevada, which had no National Guard.

According to Herbert M. Mason's book *The Great Pursuit*, the call-up brought onto active duty "three regiments, 13 separate squadrons, and 22 separate troops of cavalry ... 108 regiments and seven battalions of infan-

try, and six regiments, 12 battalions, and 17 batteries of field artillery."

The method used to announce the call-up was simple. On June 18, Secretary of War Newton Baker sent telegrams to the governors of all 47 states that had National Guard units and the District of Columbia. He informed them that their military units were now needed by the federal government. As a result, all across the country, unit commanders and state adjutant generals began the process of notifying their Soldiers to begin mobilization.

However, mobilizing the force was much easier said than done. The National Defense Act of 1916 had been implemented just two weeks earlier, and many of the state adjutant generals had not expected to have to comply with it so soon. The provisions of this act established uniformity in periods of enlistment and conformity with federal regulations for the Regular Army and National Guard.

The legislation also called for a standard pay scale. Under these guidelines, generals received \$16.67 a day while second lieutenants, the lowest ranking officers, received \$4.72. Among the enlisted ranks, a private received 60 cents a day and the sergeants earned a full dollar.

There were, however, many things that the act did not cover, such as an integrated plan for moving Soldiers from the different states across the country by rail. With the fear that a full-scale war with Mexico was just around the corner, each state was left to its own devices to arrange transportation for its Soldiers to the border.

### Physical Exams

Just getting the troops clothed and ready to deploy proved challenging. When Soldiers and units arrived at their mobilization stations, a number of critical events had to take place in addition to issuing weapons and equipment. First among these was the individual Soldier physical examination.

New York's original policy on physical examinations had decreed that a Soldier would not receive a physical

until he was actually activated and brought on duty. This proved to be ineffective because of the scarcity of military doctors; it would have taken New York's units more than a year just to mobilize and deploy.

Across the nation, the sheer number of Soldiers that had to be examined created a problem. Equally troublesome, the number of prospective Soldiers that failed the rudimentary physical was staggering. The reasons were varied and included venereal disease, defective vision, hernias, bad teeth, obesity, overall poor physique (underweight or under height), amputations, or deformities.

When the final mobilization records were tallied, the state that had the lowest rate of rejections was Colorado with 10.3 percent while Ohio topped the list with 25.2 percent. Arkansas' similar rejection of 870 out of the 2,078 that were examined at the Little Rock mobilization site proved that Ohio was not alone in this shortcoming.

For the fourteen Midwest states that made up the Army's Central Department, the average number of rejections was over 15 percent. The New York adjutant general, Gen. John O'Ryan, would later point out the basic fallacy in the system: physical exams should take place before an enlistee joins the unit, not while he is getting ready to deploy.

## States Prepare

In each state, the problems were fairly uniform; the major difference was the number of Guardsmen being mobilized. The smaller states, such as Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Delaware, had an advantage by having fewer troops and all their facilities located fairly close together. For larger states with big populations, such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York, the scope of the problem was obvious.

A New York National Guard staff officer pointed out that the horses and mules of the command required no less than 320,000 gallons of water a day during mobilization.

According to a June 20, 1916, article from *The New York Times*, the New York Guard put in a requisition for "150,000 pounds of beef (75 tons), 200,000 pounds of flour (100 tons), 150,000 pounds of potatoes (75 tons), 35,000 pounds of sugar (17 ½ tons), 20,000 dozen eggs, 40,000 pounds of bacon (20 tons), 30,000 pounds of mutton (15 tons), 12,000 pounds

the clock, it was able to dispatch a regiment each day to the border. Using this method, the state deployed a total of 11,749 troops between June 28 and July 9.

The Utah National Guard was also pressing to put its best foot forward. Having been a state for only some 20 years, the citizens wanted to prove they were equal to the task. When



*National Guardsmen board the train that will carry them across the country to the Mexican border in 1916. (Photo courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes)*

of butter (6 tons), 12,000 pounds of beans (6 tons), 10,000 pounds of dried fish (5 tons), and 25,000 pounds of onions."

It was noted that this would feed the New York Soldiers for just two weeks, after which time the entire order would have to be repeated.

While the New York Guard was mobilizing, the state's citizens showed their support by gathering outside the armories and offering help and encouragement. With all of this support, the units hurried to complete their preparations and depart for mobilization camps near Poughkeepsie.

The Pennsylvania National Guard was equally busy. By conducting Soldiers' physical examinations around

the Utah National Guard received its mobilization orders on June 18, 1916, the state could provide two desperately needed cavalry squadrons, a field artillery battery, and a field hospital. Altogether these units totaled 800 Soldiers.

The first Utah Guardsmen arrived in Nogales, Arizona, just 11 days after the mobilization order was received and were noted for their competence and reliability. They were soon joined by Guardsmen from Idaho, Connecticut, and California.

California's governor, Hiram W. Johnson, had likewise jumped on the mobilization process and directed the officers and men of his state's National Guard to assemble at the



*No longer looking confused or out of place, these New York cavalrymen show the leaner, more mature look of Soldiers who have completed six months of training in the desert. (Photo courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes)*

armories immediately.

In spite of the short notice, most of his units were ready to deploy within 12 hours of the scheduled times. The entire operation of mustering and transporting the California National Guard to defensive positions on the California-Mexico border was accomplished within two weeks.

### **States Lag Behind**

Some other states were not pulling their weight. One member of the U.S. Senate pointed out that several of the southern states had not sent their required quota of troops. Henry Cabot Lodge, a Republican senator from Massachusetts, declared that only 7,000 to 8,000 southern Guardsmen were serving on the border.

Lodge further stated that even this number was inflated because that total included Soldiers from Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Virginia, and Maryland. It soon became apparent that most of the troops from North

Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida were still at their mobilization stations in their home states.

Alabama also had problems getting its Guard units out the door. Although the governor had received notification of the federalizing of his troops at the same time as the other states in July, it was October before he could report back that he had 182 officers and 3,194 enlisted men in training at Alabama's mobilization site.

Further discussions disclosed that there were still some 59,000 Guardsmen in mobilization camps nationwide awaiting either equipment, transportation, or both. The blame for equipment shortages was placed on the War Department for not having enough uniforms, weapons, and field gear to supply the newly activated Guard units.

Ohio also had problems getting its troops to the border. In fact, Ohio's struggles became so well-known and documented that both the War De-

partment and the Army's Central Department conducted investigations into why the state's Soldiers were not mobilizing at the same pace as most other states.

Guard units in Ohio were ready to move to their mobilization camps for final preparations, but the state had not yet decided where to locate those camps. As a result, the Soldiers remained at their home-station armories.

It did not take much digging to determine the cause. The problem actually had its roots in the Spanish-American War. During that conflict, many of the Ohio volunteer units were forced to stay at mobilization sites that had no billets or proper tents to protect the Soldiers from the elements.

In the following years, the Ohio state government looked into several possible locations for setting up a mobilization site to prevent this problem from reoccurring. As can often happen when work is conducted by committee, the location and requirements

for the site kept changing. When a site near Columbus, Ohio, was finally selected in 1914, nothing more was done.

With mobilization declared, the Ohio adjutant general started to build the camp using local labor, Soldiers, and even some convicts from a nearby prison. In spite of all of these efforts, the camp was not ready until June 27, 1916.

In effect, Ohio had lost 9 days in preparing its Soldiers. This had a ripple effect; the transportation assets that should have gone to move Ohio Soldiers were given instead to other states that had units ready to move.

In contrast, nearby Illinois, which also did not have a ready mobilization site, used its state fairgrounds as a mobilization site and quickly dispatched its units southward. In fact, Illinois would later boast that its 1st Infantry Regiment was the very first National Guard unit to reach the border near San Antonio, Texas.

Two other nearby states also struggled with mobilizing, although not to the same degree as Ohio. The Kentucky Guard's mobilization was delayed for five days as state officials twice changed the mobilization site's location.

West Virginia had a more unusual problem; its mobilization site had been previously changed, and everyone in the state knew the new location. Unfortunately, no one had bothered to tell the War Department.

As a result, the War Department promptly sent all of the much-needed unit equipment to the old site, which had been converted to serve as the state's tuberculosis sanitarium.

Another typical problem for many states was a tradition dating back to the Civil War: all administrative and personnel entries in the unit records had to be done by hand with no typewritten entries and had to be filled without using ditto marks.

## Equipment Shortages

One problem common to all of the states was a dramatic shortage of field equipment. Adding to all of its oth-

er mobilization woes, Ohio reported that its Soldiers were short 1,405 first aid packs and 13 first aid kits.

According to Cole C. Kingseed's master's degree thesis entitled, "A Test of Readiness: the Ohio National Guard and the Mexican Border Mobilization, 1916–1917," they were also short "32 pistols, 268 pistol

The inability of some Guard units to find the equipment that had been shipped to them is a familiar scenario even 100 years later.

magazines, 2 blacksmith sets, 177 entrenching shovels, 271 wire cutters ... 3,781 waist belts and 115 march kits."

After conducting an investigation into these shortages, the inspecting officer stated that the biggest problem was that the Army's depots simply did not have enough equipment to meet the state's demands. He also commented, however, that there had been problems in the invoice and requisition processes, such as an accidental shipment of materiel to the wrong destination and confusion among unit officers and quartermasters about what equipment was actually on hand for issue.

Adding to the field-gear problem was an unusual War Department stipulation that in the event of call-ups, unit commanders were not to requisition needed equipment. Instead, the Army's depots, using lists of the units' projected "war strength," would determine the necessary amount and ship it to the appropriate state mobilization site.

Of this practice, Gen. O'Ryan wrote that "it would be difficult for the most cunning mind to devise a scheme better calculated to create confusion, indecision and disorganization at a time of national stress."

## On the Border

For better or for worse, the Nation-

al Guard was now alert and mobilized, all the while believing they were headed for a war. Ultimately, the war with Mexico never came about.

Instead of fighting their way to Mexico City as their forefathers had in the 1850s, the National Guard units settled into a cycle of border guard duty and rigorous training.

The desert proved a tough environment and, with the Soldiers adapting as best they could, most units were rounding into shape by December 1916.

In February 1917, when it was apparent to all that the Punitive Expedition had accomplished about all it was going to, Pershing was ordered to bring his command out of Mexico. The Guard units were likewise gradually withdrawn from the border and sent home.

It was just in time. President Wilson had reached the end of his patience with the Germans and was about to take his nation to war against them. Many of the Guard units returned home to find a new set of mobilization orders waiting for them to protect "key installations" from sabotage.

If the president was going to fight to make the world safe for democracy, the National Guard, now toughened after months of realistic training on the border in Texas, New Mexico, California, and Arizona, was going to be a key part of his force. It was no coincidence that three of the first five divisions sent to France were from the National Guard.

## Lessons Learned

Today's Soldiers can learn from the National Guard's experiences in 1916.



The organized confusion of deployment preparation is obvious in this July 7, 1916, photo of the 2nd New York Infantry Regiment preparing to depart for the Mexican border. (Photo courtesy of the New York Division of Military and Naval Affairs)

**Having the right equipment is important; even more important is knowing where it is.** The inability of some Guard units to find the equipment that had been shipped to them is a familiar scenario even 100 years later. During Operation Desert Storm and the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the loss of visibility caused a great deal of confusion and often required missing equipment to be reordered.

**The day you receive mobilization orders is not the day to start determining who is deployable.** Common sense would later prevail during the build-up for World War I, when individual physicals were conducted before Soldiers were assigned to units. During the Border Campaign, however, it remained a sticking point and delayed many units.

We often think of the people of the early 20th century as living a healthy and robust life, but the percentage of men rejected for service on account of physical problems proves that a false assumption.

**Nothing happens until something moves.** Despite the very large and excellent rail network that covered the country, the distances involved in moving large numbers of Soldiers from the Northeast states were

daunting. Many of the mobilization sites were not located near railheads, so Soldiers were forced to use other modes of transportation just to get to departure sites.

Taking notice of this problem, when the Army began constructing 32 division-sized training camps in 1917, a key consideration in camp location was proximity to rail. Most camps even had the railroad extended directly into the camp to simplify transportation.

**Having a mobilization plan is only good if everyone knows what it is.** Some states were not prepared to mobilize and others, although prepared, had not shared their mobilization plan with their Soldiers or with the War Department.

**Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.** Learn from mistakes. One of the most surprising aspects of Army training in the late 19th century and early 20th century was how little emphasis was placed on marksmanship and individual weapons training.

Fortunately, some officers recognized this deficiency and ensured that a great deal of time was spent on weapons training while they were on the border. Later, as the divisions were being trained at their stateside

camps, the emphasis remained and the one area in which the doughboys excelled was marksmanship.

An unforeseen byproduct of Pancho Villa's raid was the creation of a well-trained National Guard force just in time for the United States to enter into World War I. The 150,000 Guardsmen that served on the border received more valuable training during their time there than would have been possible in years of normal home-armory training. It also highlighted the growing importance of the National Guard in the U.S. military strategy.

As Pennsylvania's adjutant general later stated, "We heard a call for service; we went out and did our duty without complaint, and if we get a call next week we will do it over again."

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