

Veracruz 1914

Mexican history of the 19th-20th century was violent and turbulent. The Habsburg Archduke Maximilian ended his days in front of a firing squad in 1867 and Benito Juárez returned to power until he died of heart failure in 1872. One of his closest allies, Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, took over but was thrown out of office by Porfirio Díaz in 1876. Thus began one of the longest presidential periods in modern Mexican history and it was not until 1910 the 80 year old dictator Díaz was overthrown in what is usually referred to as the start of the Mexican Revolution. Supported by generals Pascual Orozco, Pancho Villa and Emilio Zapata, Francisco Madero became the new president in 1911. However, the flames of the revolution were not extinguished, and in 1913 Madero was ousted from office and killed by the former supporter of Díaz, General Victoriano Huerta (supported by the U.S. ambassador Henry Lane Wilson but not by the US President Woodrow Wilson, who subsequently fired his Ambassador).

Even though there were huge US investments in Mexico, the US government policy was to just watch the revolutionary chaos, rather than to intervene. However, tension built up by the Huerta coup. President Wilson refused to recognise the “butcher” Huerta and he declared a complete arms embargo from the United States. His intention was to remove the Huerta government by any means, even contemplating a military intervention.

In Mexico the revolutionary period was not ended with Huerta taking over. Former follower of President Madero, General Venustiano Carranza, led what was called the Constitutionalist Army, which aimed to restore the 1857 Constitution of Mexico. Among his followers were Pancho Villa and Alvaro Obregón. In the autumn of 1913, Wilson sent the Atlantic fleet to the Mexican Gulf Coast to be prepared to protect US citizens and interests if threatened by the fighting between Huerta’s *Federales* and the Constitutionalist forces. Stationed outside the Mexican coast the U.S. Navy frequently used boats to deliver messages and ferry fleeing civilians. They also bought fuel from the shore and April 9, 1914, a US navy detail was sent ashore to bring fuel from the port of Tampico. The Huerta forces in Tampico had been skirmishing with Constitutionlists for several days, and was expecting an attack. Misunderstanding the mission of the US sailors the *Federales* arrested them and took them to the local headquarters. The issue was soon solved and the US sailors released. However, Rear Admiral Henry T. Mayo was furious and demanded that the Mexicans should hoist the US flag and fire a 21-gun salute as compensation for their mistake. Huerta offered an apology but refused to give a salute to a government that even did not recognise him as president. When the Americans received information that a German steamer named *Ypiranga*, loaded with 200 machine guns and 15.000.000 rounds of ammunition, was heading for Veracruz, the conflict escalated. They could not let this massive firepower arrive in Huerta’s hands. After a flood of urgent messages between Washington and the Atlantic Fleet, Rear Admiral Frank K. Fletcher, commander of the US Naval Forces outside Veracruz, was ordered to seize the customs house of Veracruz and the arms cargo of the *Ypiranga*. Plans for the landing were already made and only hours after receiving the order on April 21, 1914, the American landing force was on the way to land on Mexican soil. The landing party consisted of 502 Marines



under Lt Col Neville and 285 seamen under Lt Commander Buchanan. The Marines wore khaki fatigues with canvas leggings, broad brimmed hats and huge ACW style knapsack rolls while the seamen had white uniform and canvas leggings. They were armed with long barrelled bolt action Springfield 03 rifles. The landing went smooth and no resistance was encountered. Civilian on-lookers gathered curiously and wondered what was happening along the waterfront.

Landing party from the battleship Michigan

Meanwhile, the military commander of Veracruz, General Gustavo Maas, received a phone call from the American Consul William Canada, explaining the American intention to seize the Customs house and apprehend the *Ypiranga*. Maas was in shock and hung up. The handsome, somewhat theatrical, General with his imperial moustache, did not intend to sacrifice the national honour of Mexico by not resisting this *Yanqui* invasion. After sending a telegram to his superiors in Mexico City asking for instructions, Maas hurried to the Military barracks where his command of 600 blue coated infantry regulars of the 18th and 19th infantry battalions were billeted. Here he ordered Lt Col Cerrillo to take 100 men from the 19th battalion down to the harbour to “repel the invasion”. He also ordered to release all prisoners, the so called *rayados*, from the military prison La Galera. *Rayados* means “stripers”, referring to the blue and white striped prison uniform.



Rayado together with soldier from the 19th Battalion

He also decided to distribute the contents of his armory, 450 Winchester and Mauser rifles, to the prisoners and citizens of Veracruz. There was an established militia program in Mexico at the time. The “Society of Defenders of the Port of Veracruz” numbered more than 800 members. The commander of the militia, Lt Col Manuel Contreras led the armed citizens and prisoners towards the harbour. Another force to reckon with was the young Naval Cadets of the Naval Academy, led by Commodore Manuel Azueta. There were also a white dressed Police force in Veracruz that were armed and ready to join the defence of the city.

The inhabitants of Veracruz were starting to understand that all these armed men could only mean trouble. Iron grilles went down over store fronts and children were called off the streets. While the scratch forces led by officers Cerrillo and Contreras were preparing for battle, Maas received orders from the Minister of War to evacuate his two battalions to Tejano, 10 miles inland.

Veracruz was a town of 40.000 inhabitants with the appearance of a colonial city. The buildings were 2-3 stories high built of brick and adobe with flat rooftops and wooden balconies towards the streets. Avenues and squares were lined with palm trees and small cantinas and squares were scattered across the city. Even if the city seemed idyllic at a distance, it was a filthy and foul smelling and very ill-kept place. The only waste disposal was handled by the big, black vultures, *zopilotes*, that flocked on the heaps of refusal around the city. The administration had even put a fine of 5 pesos on anyone harming the vultures in order to not make the garbage problem worse.

The Marines and Seamen were now moving in up from the pier to take control of the objectives needed to control the harbour area. The Marines could unopposed take possession of the Cable office



Society of Defenders of the Port of Veracruz

and the American Consulate while the Seamen approached the Customs house. A hand-drawn 3-inch gun was set up in the Terminal plaza, an open area outside the American Consulate.

At 11.55 the city was still calm and the streets were deserted and silent. However, countless unseen eyes had been watching the advance of the Americans. The soldiers, policemen, *rayados* and civilians had

deployed spontaneously in the buildings and on the rooftops closest to the harbour. One detachment even manhandled a one-pounder gun to the top of the harbour lighthouse. The only professional touch in the Mexican deployment was the machine guns that were set up to sweep some of the larger streets. It was a mystery that firing did not start earlier. It seemed as everyone were waiting for everyone else. Snipers were even deployed in several of the buildings that the American troops already had passed. Finally, when the seamen of the 1st Company of the *Florida* crossed the street called the *Calle Emparán*, a single shot rang out. It was fired by police gendarme Aurelio Monffort. This was the start



Police gendarme Aurelio Monffort

of a formidable rain of lead from all directions. After the initial shock, the white clad seamen fired back and Gendarme Monffort fell riddled with Springfield bullets.

The Naval Academy was situated along the waterfront. The commodore's son, Lieutenant José Azueta, had set up a machine gun outside the Academy and opened up on the seamen approaching the Customs Warehouse. Boatswain's Mate Joseph G Harner raised his Springfield and hit Azueta with 2 well aimed shots. Ignoring the wounds, Azueta ordered his men to continue firing. A third shot mortally wounded Azueta and his men retired into the Naval Academy carrying the lifeless body.

Heavy firing was now going on in the entire harbour area. Veracruz had the highest homicide rate in the whole of Mexico and its inhabitants were well armed and used to fire first and then ask questions. The vast majority of the defenders knew nothing of the *Ypiranga* or of the Tampico incident. They only needed to see foreign soldiers on the streets of their hometown to bring out their guns. One Marine observed a well dressed Mexican sitting reading a newspaper

on a second storey balcony. After a few minutes he saw him folding the newspaper, raising a revolver from his lap and coolly firing a few rounds towards the waterfront. The Mexican then unfolded his newspaper and continued reading. A bullet from the Marine knocked him out of the chair. When reaching the balcony the Marine recognised the dying man as a prominent local businessman that once had taken tea with Admiral Fletcher aboard the *Florida*.

Ensign George M. Lowry of the 1st Company of the *Florida* had set up a Colt machine gun in one of the street crossings and was taking heavy fire from the lighthouse and from snipers on the surrounding rooftops. Several seamen were hit and he requested fire support from the 3 inch gun outside the consulate. Six shells silenced the soldiers firing from the lighthouse but the rifle fire from the surrounding buildings continued.

Admiral Fletcher received a message "over one thousand men with machine guns and rifles opposing the landing. Send reinforcements". Fletcher ordered the *Utah* to land her battalion of 384 "bluejackets" (the Seamen from *Utah* wore the blue cold weather uniform instead of the tropical whites).

Around 12.30 the *Ypiranga* came into port. She was boarded by a detachment from the *Utah* and they found that their intelligence was correct. Aboard the ship were 1.333 crates of arms and ammunition. She was anchored under the guns of the *Utah*.

In the history of Mexico, there are no greater heroes than the Chapultec cadets of 1847 who rather threw themselves of a cliff than surrender, when the Americans broke through their lines. In the same tradition were now the cadets and personnel of the Naval Academy preparing to repel the invaders. After a short address by Commodore Azueta they buttressed the walls with mattresses and furniture and joined by soldiers from the barracks they brought several small cannon from the Artillery Barracks across the street. During the next hour they maintained a steady fire towards the harbour. Beachmaster Chief Boatswain John McCloy led three steam launches, each armed with a one-pound gun at its bow, along the waterfront, firing at the Naval Academy. However, their salvo did little damage. Instead it drew the attention of both the Cadets as well as other snipers in the buildings facing

the harbour. The three launches were peppered with cannon and rifle fire and were shot to pieces. Despite the casualties, the manoeuvre had made the Mexicans to reveal their positions and soon 3 inch shells from the *Prairie* crashed into, the Naval Academy and surrounding buildings.

At 1.40 the 4 companies of bluejackets from the *Utah* landed, bringing 4 Colt machine guns. After a brisk firefight they were able to secure the Customs Warehouse. Seamen and Marines now started to enter the buildings along the harbour to clean out the snipers. After clearing floor by floor a fierce gun-battle was fought between the rooftops. As it was hard to identify friend from foe many innocent

Mexicans were killed as the Americans charged in.

Out at sea the next wave of bluejackets were being organised. The men were permitted to swap in, or out, of the landing battalion if they could find a volunteer willing to exchange. Ordinary seaman E.H. Frohlichstein, a young Jewish sailor from Alabama, could not find anyone to take his place in the battalion. Convinced that he would be killed if he went ashore, he wrote a letter to his parents, telling them that this letter would be his last.

The firing died down around 3 PM in the afternoon. The Americans had reached their objectives, securing both the customs house, the harbour area and the *Ypiranga*. The question was what to do next. Fletcher sent messengers trying to find General Maas to arrange a cease-fire, but he could not be found. As



Lieutenant José Azueta and a naval cadet manning a machine gun outside the Naval Academy

darkness fell over the city, the Americans bivouacked in the harbour area. The streets were empty but the *rayados*, drunk on rum they looted from the local cantinas, went on a rampage. Robbery, killing and raping continued throughout the night.

Taking advantage of the darkness, Admiral Fletcher landed a third wave of troops in the harbour. 125 sailors from the *San Francisco* and 137 seamen together with 88 Marines from the *Chester* went ashore. Since no cease-fire had been established, the Americans planned to take control of the entire city in order to stop the firing which endangered the life of civilians and foreign inhabitants. Each detachment were given a section of the city to conquer.



American forces in Veracruz: Seamen, Marines and Bluejackets

Commodore Azueta in the Naval Academy was reached by the order to evacuate during the night. The majority of the cadets left the city together with a column of

Contreras militia. The retreat did however not put an end to the resistance. The *rayados*, civilian snipers and a number of headstrong soldiers and cadets remained in hiding, determined to resist the American advance into the city.

When the sun went up on April 22 the Americans advanced from the harbour into the city streets. Marines in khaki were mixed with seamen in white uniforms, blue uniforms and in strange coloured sand-brownish coloured uniforms. In order to make them less obvious targets the men had dyed their white uniforms with what they had available, iron rust, iodine or even coffee.

The seamen and marines went forward in neat columns, but when they came into view from the Naval Academy they were met by a terrific fire from rifles, machine guns and artillery. The Americans withdrew in confusion and again the 3 and 5 inch guns of the *Chester* had to silence the defenders. After more than 40 rounds had slammed into the building, the firing ceased. The Americans now resumed their advance, but more cautiously with one column on each sidewalk, covering the rooftops and windows of the opposite side of the street. Snipers opened up a heavy fire as the Americans came in sight. Seaman George J. Smith found that the short legs of the bipod of his Benet-Mercier machine gun were unsuited to the cobblestone streets which threw the gun off level as he covered the advance of his comrades. Smith finally stood up, grasping the gun by the barrel and butt and began firing from the hip.

Every house was an ambush and every church tower was occupied by snipers. As the fighting spread into the heart of the city also women and youths took up arms to join the fight. Ensign Lowry saw a peculiar example of female resistance. In an open window a Mexican woman was standing with the back to the street firing a gun over her shoulder.



Americans searching houses for snipers

It was a tough job to advance through the city and several houses had to be shelled to silence the defenders. The firing did not stop until the morning the 23rd. Sniping continued during the day and did not cease until the Mexicans started to bury their dead on April 24. The Mexican losses were hard to determine but at least 200-300 hundred dead and at least as many wounded. The American casualties were 17 dead and 63 wounded. On the list of killed in action were young Frohlichstein, shot through the head during the advance on the Naval Academy.

To reduce the risk of continued resistance Admiral Fletcher ordered

all civilians to hand in their firearms. The Americans were amazed by the response. More than 11.000 guns and 133.000 rounds of ammunition were received. Veracruz had been a well armed city...

General Carranza and his Constitutionalist army defeated the *Federales* in June and Huerta went into exile. With the reason for the occupation removed, president Wilson informed Carranza that the Americans would withdraw. The last US soldier left Veracruz on November 23, 1914. By then the world was thrown into The Great War and the small incident of Veracruz was forgotten. But only two years later, USA again found reason to enter Mexico when Pancho Villas raided Columbus, New Mexico.