



RIVALS
PANCHO VILLA/JOHN PERSHING

The Discovery Channel 1995
Terry FitzPatrick, Writer/Producer/Director

Opening Introduction

Villa photo and footage

Narrator He was history's most notorious bandit: Pancho Villa. A hero to the poor. A villain to those whose wealth he plundered.

Pershing photo and footage

The man sent to bring Villa to justice: General John J. Pershing. Cool. Calculating. A commanding presence on horseback.

cavalry footage

In 1916, Pershing would lead the world's largest posse, to catch America's most wanted man, dead or alive.

Villa wanted poster

Up next on Rivals: a tale of murder, betrayal, and political intrigue.

footage of a firing squad & US Capitol

Pancho Villa & John Pershing, in the last great cavalry chase of the West.

Rivals Series Open

ACT ONE

Host enters studio holding bandolier

Host on Camera Hello, I'm Gerald MacRaney. Imagine the terror of standing at gun point--your hands in the air--before a bandit with dozens of bullets strapped across his chest. That was the horrifying experience for men who were unlucky enough to meet the legendary Pancho Villa.

To poor Mexican peasants, Villa was a mythic hero--a Robin Hood, who could gallop his horse a hundred miles without stopping--then, kill a hundred wealthy men without remorse.

But to General John Pershing of the U.S. Cavalry, Pancho Villa was a cold-blooded desperado whose deadly raids on Americans had to be stopped.

Pershing had spent his entire career learning the craft of war. His record was flawless. But the hunt for Villa would become an obsession--against an adversary unlike any he would ever face.

dip to black

Sunrise montage with trains

Host Narrating By the early 1900s, the Western United States is a peaceful land of law and order. The days of wagon trains are over.

men building log cabin

Americans are busy building--transforming the rugged landscape into homes.

still of main street

On the dusty plains of the desert Southwest, the tiny town of Columbus, New Mexico is booming.

childhood photo of Thompson

Jesse Thompson is one of the town's youngest residents.

Jessie Thompson

Columbus, NM Resident

Map graphic

white flash and villa still photo

footage of downed barbed-wire fence

stills of Villa soldiers shooting, sounds of
gunshots, white flashes

still of Slocum

villa still

three quick gunshots...wide, medium close
shots of grandfather still photo

Thompson "In that day and time, there was a lot of mining going on, and speculation. There was even oil speculation, land speculation. The main thing I think was the cattle from Mexico. There were millions, literally millions of head of cattle running cross here."

Narrator Located just north of the Mexican border--about 70-miles west of El Paso, Texas--Columbus is a perfect place for international trade.

Perfect, that is, until March 9th, 1916. The day Pancho Villa attacks.

They come before dawn: 500 members of Villa's gang cut the barbed-wire border separating Mexico from the United States.

They pour into Columbus, guns blazing.

Thompson "There were bandits on foot and there were bandits on horses riding up and down, doing the same thing: shooting and yelling '*muerto los gringos*' and '*viva Villa*' and all these things."

Narrator The commander of the Columbus garrison--Colonel Herbert Slocum--is caught by surprise. All his soldiers, 348 men, are asleep.

Townsfolk are at the mercy of Villa's marauders.

Thompson "They came up into the hotel, they snatched a locket off my grandmother. They stripped the rings off their fingers. Then they marched my grandfather and three of his guests down the steps and shot them in the street below."

footage of army spotters on Columbus rooftop

Narrator The U.S. army eventually drives Villa's bandits back into Mexico. But by then, the Columbus hotel is in ashes and 17 Americans lay dead.

footage, picking through rubble

To townsfolk, the reasons for Villa's raid are a mystery. But the attack will draw John Pershing into a deadly showdown with Villa. It will bring the U.S. and Mexico to the brink of war.

Pershing footage standing outside barracks

Pershing is the general in charge of the Mexican border. Villa's raid is both a mockery of American sovereignty, and a personal affront to Pershing's command.

Ray Sadler

Historian, New Mexico State University

Sadler "Villa has attacked a tiny border town, civilians had been shot down in cold blood. The town has been burned down. Cavalry troopers have been shot and killed, and the U.S. army has been embarrassed at Columbus. They were embarrassed by this."

Newspaper headline & illustration

Narrator News of the sneak attack spreads with lightening speed. Villa has not only crossed the border and invaded U.S. soil; he has crossed the line of American tolerance for the ways of the old and lawless wild west.

fade to black

U.S. Capitol exterior & Congress footage

Narrator War drums sound in Washington just hours after Villa's raid on Columbus. Many congressmen call for an invasion of northern Mexico to secure the border.

footage of Wilson & Pershing

But President Woodrow Wilson has a different plan, and asks General Pershing to carry it out.

footage of U.S. soldiers

Wilson calls it a "Punitive Expedition." A quick-moving strike force to track-down Villa in Mexico.

Wilson signing papers footage

In public, President Wilson promises the expedition will capture Pancho Villa. Or at least, bust-up his gang. Privately, Pershing knows the president's orders mean more.

Sadler "There were some unwritten orders which were implicit. Not explicit, implicit. And Pershing really knew what those were. And his job was to kill Villa. Now, I know that Wilson didn't send word by word-of-mouth and the Army Chief of Staff and Secretary of War, they didn't say that. But Pershing knew that's what his job was--was to kill Villa."

still of villa

Narrator Killing Pancho Villa, one of the most savage and wily men in history. Not everyone is sure it can be done.

Footage of soldiers in gun and bayonet drill

American troops will have superior firepower, but daunting challenges lay ahead.

Footage of US soldiers surveying border

First, Pershing will be entering the Mexican state of Chihuahua without permission from the Mexican government. One misstep could spark war with Mexico.

villa footage

Next, Pershing will be hunting a man whom Mexicans adore. Pancho Villa was a hero of the Mexican revolution. In 1911, he helped overthrow a tyrant, improving life for millions of peasants. Catching Villa in his own backyard will not be easy.

Manuel Machado, Jr.

Machado "Pershing was leading an army who were wholly unprepared to deal with Mexico. Pershing had the preponderant position, except he didn't know the terrain, and he didn't have the passive support of the people of Chihuahua."

Historian, University of Montana

Narrator Still, if anyone can get Villa, it is John J. Pershing. He is a brilliant strategist, and Pershing knows that the raid on Columbus put Villa in a precarious position.

Pershing footage

Sadler "Villa himself considered the raid on Columbus to have been pretty disastrous. He lost some very good officers; some of his key officers were shot and killed. This was not a great triumph."

Photos and footage of dead Villa soldiers,
burning bodies, stacking rifles

Footage of US forces entering Mexico

more moving troops footage

fade to black

Narrator More than 100 of Villa's men perished in the raid on Columbus: 20-percent of his force, wiped out. Their bodies were doused with kerosene and set ablaze by American troops. Villa also lost vast quantities of arms and ammunition. The raid cost him dearly.

Pershing knows how vulnerable Villa is. So six days after the Columbus raid-- General Pershing begins the pursuit. On March 15th, 10-thousand men cross the border into Mexico--a force 20-times larger than Villa's.

Thompson "We had all the confidence in the world that he would catch Villa. I just had a feeling that Pershing would go down there and find this villain who had given all the little towns so much sorrow."

Narrator Pershing has every military advantage, but his pursuit of Villa is about to become one of the most contentious campaigns in U.S. military history. The expedition has begun, but no one could possibly have imagined how it is going to end.

ACT TWO

Host on Camera in studio

Host on Camera Pancho Villa and John Pershing came from vastly different worlds. But surprisingly, they faced similar issues when growing up. Both lived on farms, and each became responsible for his family at a very young age. Most importantly, both Villa and Pershing wanted desperately to escape to a better life.

dip to black

horse-drawn plow in fields

Host Narrating Farm life meant back-breaking chores for boys growing up in Missouri in the mid 1800s. To get ahead took strength and discipline--lessons that John Pershing learned at an early age.

family photos in book

Pershing's family was well off by Missouri standards. They owned a farm and a store. John was taught that success came from hard work, and unwavering devotion to the task at hand

civil war footage from film Birth of A Nation

As a young boy growing up during the Civil War, John Pershing also learned the meaning of terror. In 1864, confederate raiders ransacked Pershing's town--nearly killing his father. John was four years old.

Ray Sadler

Historian, New Mexico State University

Sadler "He was terribly frightened. The town was being shot up. People were shot down in the street and killed. His father's store was looted. It was a terrifying experience for a young boy."

dip to black

Mexican peasant scenes from film Que Viva Mexico & peasant still photos

Narrator Pancho Villa was born to a farm life that made Pershing's childhood look luxurious. Poverty in rural Mexico was especially severe in the late 1800's. No amount of hard work could get you ahead.

Diaz portrait & troops with piles of dead peasant revels

Mexico was ruled by a dictatorial president, Porfirio Diaz, who helped only wealthy landowners and foreign investors. Reprisals were swift for those who dared challenge the system.

Manuel Machado, Jr.

Historian, University of Montana

Machado "Villa was born into a society that was hierarchic. He was born to sharecropper parents, which meant they had some mobility as opposed to peasants or peons who had no mobility. Yet the prospect of his doing more than smelling the back end of a mule for the rest of his life were pretty minimal."

Vill still

Narrator Villa's entire life would become a struggle against authority and oppression. He never went to school, and barely learned to read. But Villa's innate sense of justice sparked a personal rebellion against the Mexican upper class.

footage from film Que Viva Mexico

It began at age 16. One day, Villa returned from tilling the fields to discover his landlord was about to rape Villa's sister. It was common for the rich to assume they owned everything--and everyone--upon their property. But Villa grabbed a gun, shot the landowner, and took to the hills.

Machado "By attacking the land holder, what Villa did in effect was brand himself as a malcontent. And as one willing to flaunt authority."

layer villa still with mountain footage

Narrator At age 16, Pancho Villa was a marked man. His survival in the mountains would require cunning and determination. Skills of a guerrilla fighter. Skills that will ultimately confound John Pershing's pursuit of Villa in the desert.

dip to black

Old footage and stills of West Point cadets

Narrator West Point, the American military academy. This is where John Pershing came of age. The regimen was exhausting. And the quarters were spare. But Pershing flourished.

Sadler "What West Point tries to do to its cadets--they have a three-way motto: Duty, Honor Country. They want you to learn to obey orders without question. They embed it in your soul. Some people like that, some people don't. Pershing loved it. He loved it."

Old West Point classroom footage and stills

Narrator West Point was Pershing's only chance of getting a college education. His family had lost everything in a depression that followed the Civil War, which forced Pershing to work on the railroad to bring in money. West Point offered escape: a free education.

Pershing's West Point portrait

Pershing was so eager to get accepted, that he lied on his application. Technically, at age 22, he was nine months too old for admission. But once inside the academy, John Pershing blossomed.

Sadler "This was the kind of life he wanted to lead. If you've been a farmer, if you've worked on a section gang--to be an officer in the army is a heck of a step up."

West Point stills & battle exercise footage

Narrator Pershing was not a gifted student--he finished 30th in a class of 77 men. But on the drill field, Pershing was a natural commander. Fellow cadets snapped-to when he spoke. Pershing was elected first captain of the class.

Dip to black

mountain footage & villa still

Narrator Thousands of miles from West Point, in the hills of Northern Mexico, Pancho Villa honed his skills as a different kind of warrior. Villa learned to live off the land, and stay one step ahead of the law.

Narrator "It was simply what he had to do to survive. And he learned survival tactics in the deserts and the mountains that kept him going for the whole time. I mean this is what made him so formidable. Especially as a guerrilla fighter."

cattle footage & peasant footage

Narrator Villa stayed alive by rustling livestock from wealthy cattle ranches. Once he stocked-up with meat, Villa shared the wealth with local peasants. This won him the admiration of men who'd eventually join his band. Men like Enrique Alférez.

Enrique Alférez

Alférez "Well, the people in the country, they like him because he was very generous with everything he stole from somebody else you see. He gave everything. The Americans called him the Robin Hood. He was Robin hood, yes, because anything he couldn't eat, he gave."

footage of Villa in hideout

Narrator Years on the run, living in isolated hideouts, hardened Pancho Villa's outlook on life. To confuse local lawmen, he abandoned his real name: Doreteo Arongo. "Francisco Pancho Villa," was a name he made up. Those who met Villa say he had the morals of a wolf. His eyes, they said, were full of energy, intelligence, and brutality.

Villa's wedding still

Narrator Villa did try to settle down once. He got married and opened a butcher shop. But the law caught up, putting Villa back on the run. It was a tiring life he came to dislike.

cavalry charging footage and fighting Indians

Machado "Part of it, I think, was the unsettled nature and what he had to do. He didn't object to putting a gun to somebody's head: 'Your Money or Your Life.' This didn't bother him. This was a--this was a moral glitch, you know you don't worry about it. But just simply the instability of it. It really was unstable, it was an unstable lifestyle."

Narrator Surprisingly, John Pershing also grew to doubt the path he had chosen. Like most West Point graduates, Pershing applied for the most exciting duty he could think of: Indian Wars.

portrait of Geronimo

He was assigned to help capture one of the last unconquered Apaches: Geronimo. But Geronimo surrendered just weeks before Pershing reported for duty.

cavalry patrol footage

So Pershing spent his early career supervising Indian reservations. Pershing did not oppose what the Army had done during the Indian wars, but he disliked the Army's heavy-handed approach to patrolling the reservations.

Pershing still on horseback

Sadler "I don't think that John J. Pershing ever had a doubt about what the United States Army was called upon to do in the world. But I think he felt that there were army officers who did not treat these people well, and it really upset him."

Apache scout stills

Narrator Pershing settled Indian disputes with diplomacy, not gunfire. He showed uncommon respect for people of other races.

black soldiers stills

Pershing learned to speak Indian languages, from scouts under his command.

Pershing still

Pershing also commanded a troop of black soldiers--the 10th Cavalry. This earned him the nickname "black-jack," a name he liked.

slow zoom into antique desk at museum

Still, policing the reservations made Lieutenant Pershing restless. Letters to home were sour.

patrolling footage

Actor's Voice "Damn the service. I am disgusted with the Army and the way it is treated. I don't know whether you expect me to stay in the Army or not, but there's nothing in it--but hope deferred."

Villa still

Narrator What Pershing didn't know, is that his chance for glory is coming.

Fade to black

And the same is true for Villa.

In short order, each man will become a national hero.

ACT THREE

Mexican civil war footage and villa still

Narrator The rivalry between Pancho Villa and John Pershing had its roots in the deadly complexities of the Mexican civil war. In the fall of 1910, Mexicans rose up in anger at the oppressive regime of dictator Porfirio Diaz. To some, it was a fight for land reform. To others, a battle for organized labor. To Villa, it was a fight for dignity. He didn't start the revolution, but he quickly became its champion.

Manuel Machado

Historian, University of Montana

footage of Villa supporters walking in street

Machado "Villa is the star of the revolution because he is the only one that is unafraid to say what he thinks. He could get up there and just rip off these wonderful phrases in Spanish and they would just roll and people would just go nuts."

still of villa

Narrator Although Villa had no formal education, his words to supporters were supremely eloquent.

Villa on horse

Actor's Voice "Fellow citizens: all peoples of the earth are capable of the greatest sacrifices when their rights as freemen are trampled underfoot. Victory will crown our efforts, do not doubt it. For just causes always triumph. And if destiny is adverse to us, we shall fall in the arena with our faces to the sky."

song in Spanish with English subtitles

Narrator In the Mexican revolution, Pancho Villa found his voice and his purpose. Folk songs celebrated Mexico's legendary "freedom fighter on horseback."

Mexican revolution stills

Song lyrics "Francisco Villa was born, with Mexican courage. In order to help the poor people, cast off the yoke of the tyrants."

folksong music

Narrator 50-thousand men joined Villa's army, one of several independent forces fighting the Diaz regime. All you needed was a horse, and a gun.

still of Villa army marching into Juarez

Enrique Alférez

Villa Soldier

footage of Villa army

still of hanged Villa soldiers

villa still

still of women with rifles

footage of marching into *Zocalo*

Villa in president chair

footage of Villa eating

dip to black

Alférez "The gun was the only thing that could talk in those days, you see. So I became a rebel, you see. I became a revolutionist."

Song lyrics "The poor federal soldiers, who defended the town Torreon. Fighting the forces of Villa, was like trying to stop a cyclone."

Narrator The risks to joining Villa were tremendous. Death came swiftly to any rebel caught by authorities.

But Villa's charisma was irresistible. People believed in his struggle.

Machado "The people he wants to help are the people with guts enough to fight for what they want. The poor little peasant sitting out there in the field who says 'hay senor, no *puedo*--you know, I can't'? To hell with it--let him starve because he doesn't have the guts to fight against that which oppresses him."

Narrator People from all walks of life were drawn to Villa. Including women. He married at least 24 times.

Villa's finest hour came in 1914, when he captured Mexico City, the capital.

Here was Villa, posing for photographers in the president's chair.

However, Pancho Villa's glory was short lived. The United States government, terrified a bandit might actually become president of Mexico, will soon intervene.

still of Pershing

cannon fire

footage: Roosevelt in rough rider garb
rough riders on horseback in Cuba

Pershing portrait

Footage of troops disembarking

footage: San Juan hill battle reenactment

footage of raising U.S. flag

spear fight still photo & still of pershing with
morros

Narrator John Pershing had become a hero long before the Mexican revolution began. His path to glory came during the Spanish-American War of 1898, a battle between the United States and Spain for control of Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and Pacific.

Friends of Colonel Teddy Roosevelt called this conflict a "splendid little war." A chance for his rough riders to secure a place in history.

It was also John Pershing's moment of truth. Pershing had stuck with the military life--teaching cadets at West Point. When war broke out in the Spanish colonies, Pershing let friends know he was eager to fight.

Actor's Voice "I appreciate fully that it is fraught with danger. But I have existed all these years in the service for just this sort of thing."

Narrator Pershing's baptism of fire came in the Spanish colony of Cuba. During the famous battles of Santiago and San Juan Hill, Pershing was a standout among American field commanders. In the face of overwhelming enemy resistance, Pershing pressed forward. Superiors called him "the coolest man they'd ever seen under fire."

As America took control of the Spanish colonies, Pershing was assigned to a distant outpost in the Philippine Islands.

His job: make peace with native Morro tribesmen. Pershing called them "savage oriental barbarians." But as was his nature, Pershing employed diplomacy instead of force.

Sadler "He was a very though man, but he believed that you must give people their self-respect and their dignity. And all the people who served under Pershing always made the point, he was invariably polite--no matter who the person was."

US Capitol

Narrator Politeness paid off. Pershing was as successful waging peace as he was in war. Back in Washington, Pershing was a rising star--the talk of the town at military balls.

Wedding still

In 1905, Pershing married the daughter of an influential United States senator from Wyoming.

Roosevelt footage

One year later, Teddy Roosevelt--now President-- promoted John Pershing from captain to brigadier general. He jumped three ranks overnight, ahead of 800 men with more seniority.

dip to black

still photo of the meeting

Narrator Pancho Villa and John Pershing actually met before becoming military opponents. The year was 1914, a summit of Mexican revolutionaries. General Pershing had just been assigned to the border. Villa was not impressed with Pershing. But Pershing did like Villa.

Sadler "Here is a guy who's a real warrior. He's not some bloody politician. He's not some bloody diplomat. He's a real soldier who rides horses and who puts it all on the line. And Pershing kind of liked that, you know. This guy--he's real. "

villa footage

Narrator What Villa didn't know at the time was that United States officials were engineering his demise.

Mexican street scenes

After the fall of the Mexican government in 1911, a struggle for power raged among the various revolutionary factions.

firing squad footage

Rebel leaders were as brutal with one another as Mexico's dictator had been with them.

white house exterior footage

In Washington, officials were concerned that anarchy south of the border might drag the U.S. into a war with Mexico.

Wilson footage

So, President Woodrow Wilson, eager to end the conflict, decided to commit American support to one revolutionary commander.

villa still

Pancho Villa--uneducated and unpredictable--was not America's choice.

footage of Carranza

Instead, the U.S. backed Villa's sworn enemy: Venustiano Carranza. Then, the United States did something extraordinary.

stills of Mexicans on US trains

Carranza's troops were allowed to board American trains in El Paso, Texas.

Map graphic

They traveled 200 miles through American territory to outmaneuver Pancho Villa and catch his army by surprise in the Mexican town of Agua Prieta.

still of dead Villa soldiers

Villa's men were massacred. Villa was stunned.

Ray Sadler

Historian, New Mexico State University

Sadler "Here's a guy who six months before had commanded an army of 50,000 troops more or less, and now all of a sudden he is on a downhill skid. And it seems that some of the grease on that skid is being provided by the United States government. And it really made him mad."

wrecked train stills

Narrator Villa and his remaining men went on a rampage. 17 American miners shot dead in a train hold-up near the Mexican town of Santa Isabel.

post-raid still

Then 17 more American deaths in the raid on the U.S. town of Columbus. The vengeance of a man incapable of conceding defeat.

Machado "Villa's own ego impels him to make the raid on Columbus. You are dealing with a massive, one of the most egomaniacal characters in the history of Mexico."

Mexican street footage

Narrator Villa's strikes at Americans were popular among the Mexican public.

field hospital footage

But Americans who lost relatives in the Columbus raid, want Villa dead.

Jessie Thompson

Columbus, NM resident

Footage of cavalry on the march

Villa wanted poster

Fade to black

Thompson "He was not a hero. This man was as base as they make human beings. He raped, he raided, he killed, he murdered. Totally conscious-less."

Narrator General Pershing's instructions, to punish Pancho Villa, are like nothing he'd been asked to do before. With American Indians or Morro tribes, Pershing had latitude to negotiate.

There'd be no negotiations with Villa. He's been branded an international outlaw. And Pershing's job is to see that justice is done.

ACT FOUR

expedition troop footage

Manuel Machado

Historian, University of Montana

Map graphic

troops riding footage

Ray Sadler

Historian, New Mexico State University

Villa footage in camp

expedition footage

Villa horsemen footage

Narrator As John Pershing mobilizes his troops, he develops a simple but brilliant plan to snare Pancho Villa in Mexico. He will use Villa's ego as a weapon. Pershing knows that bravado can cloud Villa's thinking.

Machado "See, Villa's biggest problem: he was not a grand strategist *per se*. Great tactician, but to think in chess terms--five, six moves ahead--not Villa.

Narrator Pershing's plan calls for two, fast-riding columns of elite cavalry. When they join ranks, Villa will be surrounded.

Pershing's troops ride hard from sunrise to sunset, more than 50 miles a day. Pershing is brimming with confidence.

Sadler "I think Pershing was the kind of general that: there was nothing he could not do. And he felt that if I'm given the resources I need, I will get him."

Narrator Pancho Villa feels the pressure of this cavalry blitz. But true-to-form, Villa has little respect for Pershing. Smoking with his men in their hideout, Villa shows little worry.

Machado "I don't think Villa could entertain the prospect of that wizened-up old prune capturing him. 'It's just not going to happen, not on my turf is it going to happen.' I don't think he entertained the prospect of it."

Narrator After five days in the saddle, Pershing's cavalry columns close ranks. The trap is set. But Pancho Villa is nowhere in sight.

Villa has scattered his force into several small groups that are hard to track and even harder to catch.

Enrique Alférez

Villa Soldier

Pershing still layered with antique desk in museum

Footage of terrain, Mexicans, column of soldiers

Map Graphic

footage of troops in canyon and in caves

Footage of sun and horse hooves in desert

Moon and campfire footage

still of Pershing

Alférez "The Americans didn't have a chance to catch Villa. Villa knew that part of the country too well. And he could sneak between their fingers."

Narrator Pershing's chance for a quick victory is gone. He underestimated Villa's talent for guerrilla tactics. In a communiqué to Washington, Pershing ponders the difficulties of mounting a protracted campaign.

Actor's Voice "The country through which our cavalry is operating is unfamiliar to every member of our command. Our forces have had to rely upon the uncertain information of frightened or unwilling natives. It is very probable that the objective of our mission can only be attained after an arduous campaign of considerable length."

Narrator Pershing does not give up hope, and keeps moving south on the heels of the retreating Pancho Villa. The American expedition presses 484 miles into Mexican territory. Along the way, there are skirmishes with small bands of Villa soldiers. But Villa himself has vanished.

Pershing's men scour the countryside looking for any sign of Pancho Villa. At times they come close, missing Villa by a matter of hours. But day after day the search proves fruitless.

Soon, the harsh realities of the desert begin to take their toll. American soldiers are unaccustomed to the searing Mexican sun, riding mile after mile without rest, without water, without success.

To Villa, desert hideouts are home. Keeping ahead of General Pershing is no problem.

During the Punitive Expedition, General Pershing's attitude toward Pancho Villa turns to disgust. He is deeply disturbed by tales of atrocities Villa committed during the Mexican revolution.

still of Pershing's family and newspaper headlines

villa still

dip to black

Wilson footage

Texas rangers on horseback footage

expedition footage of cannons and troops

Map graphic, field hospital footage, newspaper headlines

White House Exterior

Sadler "There were a number of incidents of massacres of innocent Mexican women and children who were just taken out and shot because Villa got mad. And so the more that Pershing learned about Villa, the less he liked him. Here's a man who's gone crazy."

Narrator The killing of women and children touches a nerve in General Pershing. His wife and three of his children had been killed in 1915 when their home in San Francisco caught fire. The tragedy left Pershing a grim man. He threw himself into his work with an angry vigor.

However, the pursuit of Pancho Villa is proving to be Pershing's toughest assignment ever. And it is about to get tougher.

Narrator When President Wilson ordered John Pershing to enter Mexican territory, he knew America's forces would be on shaky legal ground.

A treaty with the Mexican government allows the "hot pursuit" of bandits who had crossed the border.

But the scope of Pershing's "Punitive Expedition" goes well beyond what the treaty allows. Pershing's initial deployment for a quick battle with Villa near the border sparked a storm of diplomatic protests from Mexican leader Venustiano Carranza. But as Pershing drives his army nearly 500 miles into Mexico, Carranza responds with bullets.

The attacks come in the towns of Parral and Carrizal. Each time, Pershing field commanders are outgunned by the Mexicans. 14 Americans killed. 16 wounded. 24 taken prisoner.

The reaction in Washington is sharp and swift. America begins a massive mobilization.

troop mobilization footage

Units are activated throughout the United States. Trainloads of troops and equipment rush to the Mexican border. The size of the buildup is astounding. Three complete armies. 150-thousand troops poised for action.

Pershing still

The pressure on Pershing's men is incredible. One false move means war. Pershing is furious when instructions arrive from Washington. 'Sit tight,' he is told. Do not retaliate for the attacks by the Mexican army.

footage of Pershing and soldiers

Sadler "He was really enraged privately. Because he--one--thought it was terribly unfair. He had his troops killed and wounded and he is not allowed to respond. And so he was incredibly frustrated by April after the attack at Parral on his troops. I'm sure what Pershing wanted to do was to go into Parral and clean the place out."

dip to black

Narrator But suddenly, General Pershing finds himself on the defensive. His army is frightfully exposed. 10-thousand men deep in enemy territory without a fortified line of supply. And looming in Pershing's mind is Mexico's most notorious opportunist. Where is Villa? What will Villa do now?

ACT FIVE

Host on Camera in studio

Host on camera Pancho Villa and John Pershing became more than opposing military commanders. They'd become symbols of two nations on the brink of all-out war. As the Punitive Expedition presses on, enormous pressure is mounting on Pershing to get Villa quickly, or get out of Mexico.

dip to black

footage of troops conducting searches

Host narrates Mexican citizens are enraged by the way General Pershing is conducting his hunt for Pancho Villa. American soldiers resemble an army of occupation. House-to-house searches are common. Wherever soldiers go people are checked for weapons. Everyone is suspected of secretly assisting Villa. Even children.

Enrique Alférez

Alférez "They went around and abused everybody. So Americans were not very well liked anywhere they went."

Villa Soldier

troops marching and cannons firing

Narrator The size of Pershing's army makes Mexicans nervous. Why--they ask--does Pershing need so many men? Why the need for artillery in the search for a bandit on horseback?

Map graphic

Mexicans are suspicious because they lost half their nation to the United States in the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848--a war that began as a simple skirmish along the border.

Troop train footage

Now, America is back. This time, with a dizzying array of heavy equipment.

Alférez "We resented the fact that the Americans were in Mexican soil because it was an invasion."

cavalry patrol footage, tank footage, airplane footage

Narrator In fact, the Punitive Expedition is growing from a cavalry search for Pancho Villa into something more. It's becoming a golden opportunity for U. S. forces to field-test the newly-developed tools of mechanized war. 1916 is a crossroads of military history. Airplanes, for example, have never been used in battlefield conditions. General Pershing is gaining valuable experience in the logistics of mounting a modern military campaign. But there is still no sign of Villa.

Wilson speaking footage

By the fall of 1916, President Wilson is trying to diffuse the tension between the United States and Mexico. Pershing "sits tight," as ordered, while diplomatic talks drag on for months.

Ray Sadler

Historian, New Mexico State University

Sadler "He did this grudgingly, grudgingly. I mean, Pershing really was a winner. He wasn't a fool about winning, but he didn't like to lose. He really didn't like to lose."

men in camp still

Narrator Pershing's expedition is at a standstill, forbidden by President Wilson from moving farther south. Wilson does not want war with Mexico and is searching for an honorable way to withdraw. As far as the President is concerned, the quest for Villa is lost.

dip to black

villa still

Narrator Pancho Villa has dropped from sight--in part--because he is seriously wounded. It happened just days after the Punitive Expedition began.

Carranza forces footage

While scrambling to avoid General Pershing, Villa was trapped by the army of Mexican leader Venustiano Carranza. To Carranza forces, Villa is still a bitter political enemy who should be shot on sight. Villa avoided capture, but was hit in the leg by rifle-fire. It takes months in seclusion for the wound to heal.

US soldiers footage

American soldiers inquire endlessly about Villa. But seclusion makes him impossible to find. Villa's own men don't know where he is hiding.

Villa footage

By October, however, Pancho Villa is ready to fight once again. He taunts General Pershing by re-assembling troops just south of Pershing's position.

Manuel Machado

Historian, University of Montana

Machado "He was not going to take Pershing head-on, he was too smart for that. But he could sure raise hell and just make it very uncomfortable for Pershing."

still of Carranza

Narrator In fact, Villa avoids Pershing's camp all together. Instead, he attacks his old enemy: Carranza. Villa considers him a traitor for failing to block Pershing's expedition from the outset.

stills of villa soldiers

This is the break Pershing needs: Villa out in the open, Mexicans battling one another instead of American troops. Pershing writes to superiors for permission to strike.

Pershing still and troops still photos

Actor's Voice "A swift blow should be made at once against this pretender. Our own prestige in Mexico should receive consideration. The civilian element would welcome us. They now wonder at our inactivity."

white house exterior

Narrator But the answer from Washington is no. President Wilson will not risk war.

pistol and medicine bottles on antique desk in museum

Pershing decides there is a way to take one last shot at Villa. On his own initiative, he hires a team of secret agents to infiltrate Villa's camp and poison his food.

Sadler "Here he is, he's a man of action, it was his responsibility to carry out his mission and this was the only thing he could think of to do it. It's the only practical way he could do it."

villa footage & u.s. troops in camo

Narrator The plot to poison Villa fails. Nothing, it seems, can touch him. Pershing's troops spend Christmas in camp. 10 months in Mexico, and counting.

dip to black

Wilson footage & WWI footage

Narrator The Pershing expedition is becoming a dangerous liability for President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson's attention is now focused on Europe, not Mexico. World War One is raging out of control by the end of 1916. With every battle it looks more and more like America will get involved.

Pershing expedition troop footage

But 80-percent of the U.S. Army is bogged-down in the standoff with Mexico. What the U.S. needs is a face-saving opportunity to back down.

still of villa and Pershing footage

In January, Pancho Villa provides it. Villa, short on ammunition, is forced to retreat from his fight with Carranza. Villa's forces are badly beaten. President Wilson quickly declares Pancho Villa no longer a threat. He calls Pershing's army home.

footage of troops with "welcome home" banner

The American Punitive Expedition crosses back into the United States at the very point where it all began: the town of Columbus, New Mexico. After 11 months of hardship and frustration, Pershing's men are elated to be home. Pershing, however, does not share the enthusiasm. A letter to his father-in-law reveals Pershing's despair.

Pershing still and troop footage

Actor's Voice "Having dashed into Mexico with the intention of eating the Mexicans raw, we turn back at the very first repulse and are now sneaking home under cover like a whipped cur with his tail between his legs."

Troop withdrawal footage & Wilson on horseback with returning troops

Narrator Pershing considers his withdrawal from Mexico to be one of the darkest days ever for the U.S. Army. In this retreat, Pershing sees no honor. President Wilson, however, reviewing the returning troops, feels Pershing has done precisely what a seasoned general should do: Obey orders.

Sadler "I think in the back of his mind Pershing must have understood: look, we're going to get involved in Europe. If we get involved in a war in Mexico with the Carranza government, we're going to get bogged down. We'll have to commit all our troops and so forth--that's not a good idea."

villa still

Pershing footage with WWI troops

sunset shot in new Mexico

dip to black

Narrator What no one could have known at the time is that the Punitive Expedition is the end of Pancho Villa. After scattering his men to avoid General Pershing, Villa never fully recovers. He never again raids American territory.

And despite his despair, General Pershing's experience directing a modern, mechanized campaign makes him the most valuable man in the U.S. army. He is given command of American forces headed for Europe.

In essence, the rivalry between Villa and Pershing ended in a draw. Nobody won. But nobody lost.

ACT SIX

Host on camera in studio

Host on Camera Their rivalry in the Mexican desert may have been a draw, but both Pancho Villa and John Pershing eventually got what they wanted. Pershing soon became a national hero by commanding American forces in the allied victory of World War One. When Pershing died, at 87, thousands of people came to view his casket inside the U.S. Capitol rotunda.

And Villa? Villa finally lived the dream that drove the Mexican revolution. In a peace settlement with the government, Villa laid down his guns in exchange for a cattle ranch of his own.

However, Villa's peace did not last long. Just six years after he outfoxed General Pershing, Villa, at age 48, was gunned down in the street by political enemies. After Villa's death, five widows showed up to claim their inheritance.

I'm Gerald MacRaney. Thanks for joining us on Rivals.

closing credits