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Por la Nación: U.S.-México Collaboration during World War II
and the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201

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Introduction

World War II was a turning point for the world. The U.S. realized its potential as an industrialized nation and the world recognized that international alliances were essential for the progress of humanity. Two nations that experienced this at a closer level were the United States and México. By 1940, events in Europe ensured U.S. involvement in World War II. In spite of stated policies of neutrality, México too realized that collaboration with the United States was unavoidable; México was forced to declare war on the Axis in May 1942.

The 1930s proved to be years of crisis for many countries. The United States as well as many Latin American countries faced a threatening economic depression and the possibility of war. By the end of the decade, events in Europe such as Germany's invasion of Poland almost ensured U.S. involvement in World War II. Alliances and not simple imperialistic relationships were eminent for the United States. With the threat of Axis influence over Latin America, the United States secured its relationship with México early in the 1940s.

Changes in Mexican politics and presidential ideologies promoted more cooperation with the United States. Under the leadership of President Camacho (1940-1946), México was also able to define its position in the war and broaden its relationship with the United States. Ill sentiments left by President Cárdenas' nationalistic policies were set aside, the U.S. now saw México as an essential trading partner and ally. This relationship culminated in the formation of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201, or as it is recognized by many, *Escuadrón 201*.

This essay shows the bilateral collaboration between the United States and México during World War II and pays particular attention to the formation of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201 or as recognized by many, *el Escuadrón 201*. The information presented is supported by an interview of squadron veteran, Reynaldo Pérez Gallardo. Subsequently, the essay incorporates a

brief overview of the Pan-Americanism campaign launched by the Office of Inter-American Affairs and Nelson Rockefeller in the 1940s. This pro-war propaganda (mainly in the form of periodicals) created sympathy for the United States in México, and such feelings turned into sentiments of support.

World War II was the event that forever changed the relationship between the United States and México. For México it was a matter of national and fiscal security, and national pride. The Mexican Fighter Squadron 201 is recognized as the only Mexican fighter group to take part in overseas combat and this demonstrates the transnational effects of World War II. The propaganda reviewed proved that México too experienced the social and economic hardships of war. This paper contributes to the growing analysis of U.S.-México relations during World War II, a topic often left out of military history research.

Literature Review

Previous research on U.S.-México Collaboration during World War II is scarce but available. The sources used provide a well-rounded analysis of the war affair between these essentially very different countries. Sources include monographs, dissertations, and scholarly articles as well as primary sources and ethnographical data. While some sources cover the topic in a more general manner others are specifically about the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201.

Friedrich E. Schuller in *MÉXICO Between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934-1940* presents a detailed analysis of *Cardenismo* and shows the unstable relationship that México had with the United States prior to World War II. His work contains a vast amount of background information.

He explains that although the United States was México's most important trading partner in 1934, President Cárdenas' nationalistic agenda deeply impacted bilateral relations between the two countries. Most importantly, Schuller's work allows us to better understand what México was experiencing during critical moments of history such as the Great Depression and the place that it had in international politics.

Another author that examines the last years of the Cardenas administration and America's response to his policies is Stephen Niblo. In *War, Diplomacy and Development: The United States and México 1938-1954*, Niblo discusses the presidential transition that made a better relationship possible. He notes that although unresolved problems resulting from the nationalization of the oil companies still existed in 1940, the United States and México opted to compromise specifically because of the threat of war (Niblo, 52). Stephen Niblo also looks at the relationship during México's next presidential administration (1949-1946). He analyses México's entry to war in detail and allows us to realize México's vast contribution to the war effort. Niblo focuses on the impact made by President Manuel Ávila Camacho during his term (1940-1946) and emphasizes that this new president worked hard to improve relations with the United States.

Although Niblo gives us a concise account of the years prior and following World War II, other researchers such as Maria Emilia Paz and Carmela Santoro, provide us with a detailed description of México's early support for the Axis, the reasons for their declaration of war, México's economic situation and Axis intelligence activities in México.

Paz' work states that México was forced to declare war on the Axis on May 22, 1942, after Germany bombed two of its oil tankers, *Potrero del Llano* (Colt of the Plains) and *Faja de Oro* (Golden Belt) in the Gulf of México. Paz also looks into the intelligence operations of both

the United States and Germany in México during the war. In *Strategy, Security, and Spies: México and the United States as Allies in World War II*, Paz devotes two chapters to the intelligence operations. She explains that several espionage agencies such as the Abwehr were active in México.

Carmela Santoro's dissertation titled, *United States and Mexican Relations during World War II*, is the essential secondary source and it is considered to be the first book-length account of the wartime relations between the United States and México. She explains how "two countries, which had disagreed on many things in the past and had looked upon each other with suspicion and distrust, formed a new partnership." (Santoro, V) Her work provides us with a general look at this topic, although she tends to focus on how the war affected México economically.

In earlier years, books about this topic failed to give much attention to the existence of the Mexican Fighter 201. Nonetheless, recent work has taken notice and at least two publications (on this specific topic) exist. The most in-depth analysis is provided by William Tudor in his Ph.D. dissertation (1997). He combines archival research with oral history and tells us the story of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201 and sheds new light on the extent of México's contributions to war. Tudor explains that with great encouragement from President Camacho, the Mexican government evaluated a plan to provide troops for the war. Tudor follows the squadron's trail from México to the Philippines. Also known as *las Aguilas Aztecas* (the Aztec Eagles), the squadron arrived in Manila Bay on April 30, 1945. Tudor provides a list of all 300 men that were part of the force and mission reports obtained from U.S. military records.

In a more current analysis, Stephen I. Schwab describes the role of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force as "limited but symbolically significant." This article gathers

information from Paz's and Tudor's work, so it is essentially a summary of what they have already written. He includes basic themes such as the goal for the United States to join México as collaborator. He also talks about President Camacho's perseverance in sending Mexican troops to the Pacific Theater. México and Brazil were the only Latin American countries to provide combat troops in World War II and this had a symbolic effect, especially in the case of México.

World War II and a New Form of Pan-Americanism

President Roosevelt had attempted to improve relations with Latin America by implementing policies such as the Good Neighbor policy as early as 1933. This policy stated that the United States would be a "good neighbor" to the Americas and would not impose their power over any Latin American country. President Roosevelt pushed to erase the notions of United States imperialism by calling this new campaign: Inter-Americanism. The United States would serve as aid to these countries if necessary and Latin American leaders would be recognized and welcomed in Washington.¹ This created great acceptance for President Roosevelt in Latin America, and the relationship between the United States and México strengthened.²

This campaign of politics and diplomacy soon became a cultural and propaganda endorsement. The United States intended to introduce propaganda that cultivated a positive image of the United States in Latin America. Private organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Institute of International Education focused became important philanthropic groups in Latin America. In 1940, the Office

¹ John Edwin Fagg, *Latin America: A General History* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 766-767.

² John Edwin Fagg, *Pan Americanism* (Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1982), 61-63.

of Inter-American Affairs was established under the direction of Nelson Rockefeller. The Rockefeller family was well respected in Latin America for its many charity efforts and genuine concern for the living conditions of these countries.

In the case of México, United States media flooded the country. Films, radio programs, art, and music created more than wartime collaboration between these two countries; it became an intellectual and cultural exchange. Radio programs often exerted support for Allied forces, films often included bi-national characters, friendships, and love affairs, and music often talked about the hardships of war. The most intensive campaign was launched via Mexico's prominent newspapers and magazines.

The United States also provided subsidies for all periodicals in Latin America that supported the United States and the Allies. This pushed many newspapers to leave their neutrality discourse and actively support the Allied to avoid paper rations implemented during this time. Newspapers such as *El Universal*, *Excélsior* and magazines such as *Hoy* and *Tiempo* reflected the new rhetoric with a new focus on war news and advertisements that called for the Mexican people to become part of the war effort. Larger transitions in stories presented in these newspapers happened from 1940 to 1943. In 1940, special Sunday editions focused primarily on local, regional, or national headlines. By 1943, however, both papers featured international reports. *El Universal* and *Excélsior* published a section in English. Commercial advertisements also pushed for local products rather than those imported from Germany or Italy. Magazines such as *Hoy* and *Tiempo* began to follow the writing styles of United States publications *Life* and *Time*. These changes were enforced as early as 1941 and México had yet not entered World War II.³

³ Michelle Nelson Miller, *Red, White, and Green: The Maturing of Mexicanidad, 1940- 1946* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1998), 75-76.

As part of the Allied effort against fascism, Mexico took its new role seriously. Fueled by ideas of nationalism, *Mexicanos* responded to its new relationship with the United States in a positive manner.

México- United States Pre- War Relations and Policy Changes

Elected in 1934, President Lázaro Cárdenas brought stability to México. He is described as a “President of the People;” a president who would often take the time to listen to the complaints and concerns of México’s peasant population.⁴ He was also a strong advocate of change and implemented numerous reforms. He envisioned a nation empowered by national identity, unity, and pride. These reforms created more benefits for México’s poor community. President Cárdenas worked hard to provide better educational programs as well as health and social benefits for workers. He is most credited for redistributing 49 million acres of land to the country’s peasant population.⁵

Nonetheless, problems such as inflation, national debt, and excessive spending persisted. The country’s relationship with the United States was affected by this crisis as well as other policies implemented by this country during this time. The Repatriation Movement exercised by various U.S. states during the 1930’s heightened tension between the two countries. This policy mandated that “all who looked Mexican,” be deported. Although the specific number of people deported is unknown, it is estimated that approximately 400,000 Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans were repatriated during 1929-1935.⁶ President Cárdenas responded to this crisis by

⁴ Enrique Krauze, *MÉXICO: Biography of Power, 1810-1996* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997), 457.

⁵ Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 577-578

⁶ Manuel G. González, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), 148.

setting up resettlement camps in states such as Guerrero, Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Tamaulipas.⁷ The Cardenas Administration distrusted the United States and in 1937 asked Germany for help with Mexico's trade program and economic infrastructure. A German attaché arrived in Mexico early that year and Germany began to have an active role in Mexico's industrialization efforts. Cardenas' advisors felt that "Germany was the only country in the world, which, because of its enormous needs for raw materials, could offer such as market and guarantee the total acquisition of the Mexican surplus production."⁸ This relationship strengthened during the late

Cárdenas strongly believed in the importance of unifying the working class and openly approved strikes. In an attempt to acquire better pay for México's oil workers and create national pride, President Cárdenas nationalized 17 United States owned oil companies in 1938.⁹

This relationship would change during México's next presidential administration. President Manuel Ávila Camacho came to office in 1940. As a more moderate reformer, President Camacho focused on cutting government spending, privatization, and on a more moderate union mentality. He wanted Mexicans to work together and help each other, as well as be less dependent on the government.¹⁰ A strong believer of progress, Camacho established irrigation, electrification, and public works projects throughout México. He instituted social entities such as México's social security system. He is most credited for his devotion to education. After implementing a literacy program called "Each one, Teach one," illiteracy dropped from 50 to 30

⁷ Himilce Novas, *Everything You Need to Know About Latino History* (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1998), 96.

⁸ Friedrich E. Schuler, *Mexico Between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 67-68.

⁹ Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 582.

¹⁰ Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 606.

percent during his administration.¹¹ With an agenda of internationalism, President Camacho worked hard to improve relations with the United States.

Under the leadership of President Camacho, México was also able to define its position in the war and broaden its relationship with the United States. Ill sentiments left by President Cárdenas' nationalistic policies were set aside, the U.S. now saw México as an essential trading partner and ally.

This relationship culminated in the formation of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201, or as it is recognized by many, *Escuadrón 201*. The service of these 300 Mexican soldiers forever changed how México was perceived by the world.

Wartime Relations and the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201

It was only a day after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, that México was once again forced to re-evaluate her European trading partners. México severed its relationship with Germany and Italy on December 11, 1941 and once more expressed full support to the Allies.¹² President Roosevelt congratulated México for this decision in a letter written to President Camacho and promoted that the country have a stronger stance in the war. The Mexican government took heavy security measures and a great effort was made to protect the railways, and the Gulf of México. México worked hard to ensure the safe transport of war materials to the United States. Raw materials such as zinc, copper, lead, mercury, and graphite were shipped to the United States. México also agreed to set price controls on their products during the duration of the war.¹³ México's opposition for the Axis culminated in the deportation

¹¹ John Edwin Fagg, *Latin America: A General History* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 554.

¹² Stephen R. Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and México 1938-1954* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1995), 77.

¹³ Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 609.

of Italian, German, and Japanese diplomats. The United States and México signed a series of agreements in 1941 and 1942, which would be essential for the war effort.

Agreements such as the Douglas-Weichers agreement of 1941 mandated that México sell important raw material to the United States.¹⁴ The Lend-lease program was signed on March 28, 1942. This settlement allowed the United States to ship war supplies to México. These supplies would later provide equipment for the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201.¹⁵

Other 1942 agreements allowed the conscription of Mexican citizens living in the United States. Signed in December 1942, these agreements drafted more than 250,000 Mexican citizens.¹⁶ The Bracero Program brought approximately 250,000 Mexican laborers to work the fields and railways in order to alleviate America's manual labor shortage.¹⁷ This agreement had specified terms that included benefits such as free transportation for workers, set wages (.46 per hour), and routine inspections by Mexican officials.¹⁸ This first Bracero Program ended in December 1947.¹⁹

This little-known squadron was made up of 300 Mexican volunteers, including 38 experienced pilots such as Mr. Pérez Gallardo, who fought the Japanese in the Philippines. As the son of a Mexican Army general, and an aficionado of airplanes since childhood, Reynaldo Pérez Gallardo was a perfect candidate to join México's Fighter Squadron 201, the only combat unit from that country to be trained for overseas combat and actively participate in World War II.

Born and raised in San Luis Potosí, (his father was governor of the State of San

¹⁴ Barbara Driscoll, *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 36.

¹⁵ Tudor, "Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force", 19.

¹⁶ Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and México 1938-1954*, 98.

¹⁷ Himilce Novas, *Everything You Need to Know About Latino History* (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1998), 97-99.

¹⁸ Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 611.

¹⁹ Himilce Novas, *Everything You Need to Know About Latino History*, 97-99.

Luis Potosi in the 1940s) in central México, Mr. Gallardo enjoyed an adventurous childhood. His love for flying was obvious since the age of 14. Mr. Gallardo remembers those days vividly.

“Instead of going to school, I would go to an aviation camp in San Luis Potosí. The airplanes of that time would get dirty from the bottom, from their body. They would get dirty with oil and I would volunteer to clean them in return that at the end of day, they would give me a small trip, a ride around the airport in one of those airplanes,” he recalls. “Since then, [I] already wanted to fly.”²⁰

That passion for aviation served Mr. Pérez Gallardo well as part of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201. Mexican president Manuel Ávila Camacho formed the squadron on July 10, 1944. After training in American bases such as Pocatello Army Air Base in Pocatello, Idaho, and Majors Field in Greenville, Texas, the men were ready for their war assignment as part of the 58th fighter group of the U.S. Fifth Air Force stationed in the Philippines.

Mr. Gallardo feels extremely proud of being part of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201. Although he was not truly aware of the politics behind the war, he felt it was his responsibility to answer his nation’s call.

“I had only been an aviation instructor at the Military Aviation School in Guadalajara for about four or five months when they called for volunteers to form a squadron and participate in war, in World War II, he says. “As it was expected, I was one of the first ones to volunteer.”²¹

Mr. Gallardo, who joined the Mexican military at the age of 16, said he was influenced greatly by his father’s position in the military. After joining the Cavalry unit of the Mexican

²⁰ Reynaldo Pérez Gallardo, interview by Lucy Guevara, Austin, Tx., 9 March 2000

²¹ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

military, he also received training at the prestigious Military College of México in México City and at the Military Aviation School in Guadalajara, Jalisco, México.²²

It was also during this time that México began to play a more active role in the war. Initially, México had supported the Axis powers during the first years of the war, by trading with the Axis. This support ended when Germany and Russia broke the Non-Aggression Pact of 1939. Germany invaded Russia in 1941 and México now pledged support for the Allies.

México was forced to declare war on the Axis on May 22, 1942, after Germany bombed two of its oil tankers, *Potrero del Llano* (Colt of the Plains) and *Faja de Oro* (Golden Belt) in the Gulf of México. After the first tanker, *Potrero del Llano*, was attacked on May 13, 1942, German propaganda alleged that the United States was the party responsible for the aggression. Although extensive propaganda was launched in an effort to incriminate the United States, Mexican officials demanded full compensation and an apology from the German government. Germany responded to this complaint by sinking another tanker, *Faja de Oro*, on May 22, 1942. It was inevitable that México would soon have to more actively participate in the war. The Mexican Senate and Chamber of Deputies made México's entry into the war official on May 30, 1942.²³

With great encouragement from President Camacho, the Mexican government evaluated a plan to provide troops for the war. After realizing that México lacked the resources to do this, President Camacho turned to the United States for help to prepare soldiers for combat. In an effort to have these men ready by 1943, President Camacho presented his proposal to President Roosevelt in a meeting held in Monterrey, Nuevo León, México, in April 1943. Although both nations evaluated the idea extensively and held numerous negotiations, México accepted

²² Pérez Gallardo, interview.

²³ Tudor, "Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force", 26.

Roosevelt's proposal on March 14, 1944. President Roosevelt agreed to accept the participation of one or two Mexican air squadrons.²⁴

Mr. Gallardo proudly explained how much the squadron's participation in the war meant for México. He explains, "Throughout history, Mexicans have failed to provide encouragement for their own. For them to hear that the United States gave us merit for our work brought a lot of pride to them, we felt very proud."²⁵

He says, "The intention was to form a fighter group, four squadrons." "But they organized the first one and that's the one I joined...to receive training in the United States."²⁶

Measures for the development of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201 were soon taken by both nations. After meetings between President Camacho and U.S. Deputy Chief of Air Staff, General William E. Hall, and Mexican Air Force Chief, General Salinas, specifications for the participation of the squadron were established. The Mexican Fighter Squadron 201 would receive training in an American air base for a minimum of five months. After completing training on the P-47 fighter plane, they would be given a war assignment.²⁷

México's National Defense Secretary and family members held a modest going away ceremony for the young men in México City. They left México by train and arrived in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, México, on July 25, 1944. They received a warm welcome from the people of Nuevo Laredo and were cheered as they marched through the town. However, across the border in Laredo, Texas, the squadron received little attention.

²⁴ Tudor, "Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force", 41-42

²⁵ KMVA: Cotorreando, hosted by Ricardo Garza, Dec. 2, 1999.

²⁶ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

²⁷ Tudor, "Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force", 43.

“On the North American side, we felt ignored,” he said. “Few people attended, even if only out of curiosity.”²⁸

From registration at Randolph Field in San Antonio, they continued to Pocatello Army Air Base in Pocatello, Idaho. The first weeks of training included instruction in armament, intelligence, and communications, among other important sections. Pilots received special training in air and combat tactics. These included fighter formation, low altitude gunnery, and night flying. Pocatello was also the training site for America’s Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS). The men of the squadron were astonished to see this group of skilled women pilots perform air tactics on the P-47. The men also received English lessons provided by the women of the WAC, the Women Army Corps. Spanish lessons were provided for the American instructors in charge of the Mexican squadron. Measures were taken to accommodate the Mexican soldiers in Pocatello. Pocatello Air Base theaters featured Spanish-language movies, and the men were allowed to celebrate Mexican holidays.²⁹

The men left Pocatello for Majors Field in Greenville, Texas, on November 27, 1944. Bad weather forced officials to seek a warmer place to complete training. Majors Field in Greenville, Texas, a 45-minute drive northeast of Dallas, was designated as the new training site. The Mexican Fighter Squadron 201, many accompanied by their wives, faced strong biases from the people of Greenville. Greenville, a town that has described itself as “The Blackest Land and the Whitest People,” demonstrated their dislike for the squadron’s presence by not renting apartments to the men’s wives.³⁰ Sentiments towards the men changed after Captain Miller, the officer in charge of the squadron’s training, clarified that these men came from good families.

²⁸ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

²⁹ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force”, 15.

²⁸ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force”, 109-110.

In Greenville, the men received combat aviation instruction: 120 hours that focused on formation flying, combat strategy, and gunnery. The training included both low and high altitude practice runs on the P-47 fighter airplane.³¹

Youth and an impulsive personality brought an abrupt change in Mr. Gallardo's assignment. Because he disobeyed orders and "buzzed" (flew over) over the city, Mr. Gallardo was restricted from flying and given a temporary assignment as the officer in charge of the squadron's mechanics. Mr. Gallardo remembers this experience.

"This was helpful to me because I was able to learn a lot," he says. "I was in charge of the ground services. I felt very sad, but I know that I would one day fly again and I did."³²

President Camacho was extremely influential in the negotiations that designated the war assignment for the Mexican Squadron 201. After expressing his admiration for General MacArthur and his desire that the squadron be assigned to the Pacific Theater, U.S. Ambassador to México, George Messersmith, related the notion to President Roosevelt. After receiving approval from both the Mexican Senate and General MacArthur, preparations for departure began early 1945.³³

The men received further air combat training in Brownsville, Texas, in February 1945. The men had now completed every face of their training. A graduation ceremony was held on

³¹ Tudor, "Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force", 109.

³⁰ Pérez Gallardo, interview

February 22, 1945. General Francisco Urquiza, México's Under Secretary of National Defense, presented the men with the battle flag. After further training in aerial gunnery and individual combat missions, the squadron left Greenville on March 18, 1945. The trip to the Philippines was long and exhausting. They first traveled to Camp Stoneman in Pittsburgh, California. After six days of instructions, physical examinations, and guidelines, the men left for the Philippines on the Liberty ship, Fairisle, on March 27, 1945.³⁴

During the trip, the men were under the same orders followed by the other 2,300 American soldiers on board. They were expected to perform the military duties assigned and received current war information daily. They learned about the advancements made by the Allied forces in Europe and the Pacific Theater. After a short stop in New Guinea, the Fairisle joined a larger convoy headed for the Philippines.

“We traveled mainly during the night, they took many precautions during the day because of the submarine threat that was present in the coast of California,” he says. “We spent something like 30 days at sea.”³⁵

Also known as *las Aguilas Aztecas* (the Aztec Eagles), the squadron arrived in Manila Bay on April 30, 1945. The men were welcomed warmly by the Philippine General Consul for México, Alfredo Carmelo. The welcome included Mexican costumes and music.

Mr. Gallardo remembers this with great enthusiasm.

“We were welcomed with Mexican music and cheers. They yelled ‘Viva México!’ It was a heart-warming experience. It made us feel very proud; I felt very proud.”³⁶

³³ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force”, 138.

³⁴ Ibid., 147.

³³ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

³⁶ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

In the Philippines, the men were assigned to camp in Porac Field, as part of the 58th Fighter Group of the U.S. Fifth Air Force. On June 7, 1945, after a month long orientation, “el Escuadrón 201,” began to participate in flight missions. Although many voiced their concerns about the quality of the squadron, the men participated in 52 missions during the month of June.³⁷

Mr. Gallardo remembers the importance of America’s return to the Philippines and the great sense of responsibility that he felt.

“General MacArthur had been in the island and had left in very bad terms. Returning to the Philippines was a great commitment. In which the United States, not only MacArthur, but the United States had on coming back. They had to return. It was very important, not only in a strategic sense, but also because of global and political prestige.”³⁸

Combat missions included bombings over areas such as Antipolo and the Malavite Mountains. Although only in the Philippines for six months, the squadron actively participated in 59 combat missions totaling over 1,290 hours of flight.³⁹ They successfully participated in the Allied effort to bomb Luzón and Formosa in an attempt to push the Japanese out of the islands. The squadron also provided ground support for the American soldiers after the aerial threat from Japan weakened.

He recalls feelings of distrust towards the Mexican fighter pilots, from the men of the 58th Fighter group. But, he says, these sentiments ended after the men of Squadron 201 began to successfully complete missions.

³⁵ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force”, 164-165

³⁸ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

³⁷ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican Expeditionary Air Force”, 303.

³⁸ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

“I remember one, which in my opinion was of great importance,” he says. “The American Air Force had decided to destroy the bridge over the Marikina River. This would stop the progress of Japanese Forces across the island. So we went to try to destroy it. As it was expected, the Japanese put a great effort into defending it. Maybe it was luck, or maybe fate that gave me the opportunity to drop a bomb over it.”⁴⁰

The men of the squadron participated in numerous missions, slowly gaining the confidence of the American pilots. Mr. Gallardo remembers an incident.

“The North Americans used to call us the ‘White Noses’ because our mechanics had painted the nose of our airplanes white. ... We became very popular. On one occasion, I was in the hospital getting treated for little things that happen to us over there when a wounded soldier that was next to me noticed that I wasn’t North American. He was very injured, but got up and came to the bed where I was lying. He asked me, ‘Do you fly a white nose?’ and I said ‘yes.’ He embraced me and said, ‘You can’t imagine how much we love you, because you have helped us so much.’”⁴¹

The squadron was also referred to as “Los Pancho Pistolas”, after a Walt Disney cartoon character of the time. Dressed in Mexican costume, this rooster was aggressive and impulsive. The squadron often painted this character on their aircrafts and campsite.⁴²

The squadron lost its first pilot in combat in June 1, 1945. Lieutenant Fausto Vega Santander died while participating in a combat mission near Vigan, a town on the West Coast of Luzón. Three other members lost their lives before the end of the war.⁴³

³⁹ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

⁴⁰ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican expeditionary Air Force”, 201.

⁴¹ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

The war ended with the surrender of Japan on August 10, 1945. Mr. Gallardo distinctly remembers the end of the war.

“We were watching a movie when it was abruptly suspended by an officer. With great emotion the officer told us that the most modern bomb in existence had been dropped on the Japanese Empire for the second time today and they [the Japanese] are asking to be allowed to surrender. We couldn’t believe it,” he recalls.⁴⁴

After a year of training and six months of active duty, *el Escuadrón 201* (Squadron 201) was able to return home. Although the men were advised to proceed with caution, they knew that they would soon return home. Before returning to México, and with the help of Consul Alfredo Carmelo, the men of the squadron found resources to build a monument in honor of the seven members of their group killed.⁴⁵

México greeted them with a hero’s welcome on November 18, 1945. They paraded down Madero Avenue and met with President Camacho at the Zocalo, México’s national palace.⁴⁶

“México City, all of México City, which is very big, was standing along the streets,” he says.

“They were excited and anxious to see us. They were proud and happy to see us return. We felt very proud.”⁴⁷

Twenty men of the Mexican Fighter Squadron 201 received U.S. Air Medals as well as the Philippine Presidential Unit Citation in 1952. Other medals awarded were the Mexican Medal of Valor and World War II Victory medals.⁴⁸

⁴² Pérez Gallardo, interview.

⁴³ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

⁴⁶ México’s Squadron/ KMBH-TV 60; produced, directed and written by Rick Leal.

⁴⁷ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

⁴⁸ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican expeditionary Air Force”, 288.

Mr. Gallardo received the U.S. Air Medal as well as the Mexican Medal of Merit and one for his service in the Far East.

Monuments honoring “el Escuadrón 201” can be found throughout México and its members are still honored and respected today. The men were honored with a 50th Anniversary celebration on July 25, 1994 in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, México.⁴⁹

Mr. Gallardo returned to México feeling a strong sense of responsibility to share his experience and knowledge with others. After the war, he was responsible of choosing and training new aviators.

Mr. Gallardo married his wife Angelina in 1969; the couple had two children. He was an aviator for the government of Michoacan, México, during this time. He served as director of the security department of the Mexican Social Security offices and as a Civil Aeronautics Inspector in 1975.

After a long military and civil service career in México, Mr. Gallardo decided to move to the United States, making Austin, Texas, his home in 1984. He owns a business and divides his spare time between his family and hobbies such as sailing. He lives a peaceful life and is extremely proud of his accomplishments. Mr. Gallardo has advice for young people, based, he says either on his training or what his parents taught him.

“Maybe because of ...fate...we are Mexican. But because we are, we should feel responsible for what we are. A soldier behaves well because that’s what he was taught. A Mexican should behave well because he is Mexican. I want for Mexicans to be proud of their name, of their

⁴⁹ Tudor, “Flight of Eagles: The Mexican expeditionary Air Force”, 290.

nationality, and want them to try to better themselves,” he says. “In order for a country to progress, and individual must progress first.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

The Mexican Fighter Squadron 201 is recognized as the only Mexican fighter group to participate in overseas combat. Their valor and accomplishments will forever bring pride to the people of México. Not to mention the lesson that this has taught the world. We have learned that international alliances are important, and that the “War of the Century” was a success due to the effort of numerous countries (including 20 Latin American countries), and not solely because of the military greatness of the United States.

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⁵⁰ Pérez Gallardo, interview.

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