

The city of Zacatecas was the scene of one of the decisive battles of the Mexican Revolution. After the assassination of President Francisco I. Madero and Vice-President José María Pino Suárez, General Victoriano Huerta took power with the backing of U.S. Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson. But Huerta never had the public support needed to stay in command. Considered a traitor and usurper, his taking power prompted a reactivation in the struggle. Zacatecas was *huertismo's* last stronghold and when the revolutionaries took it, new roads were opened up in the fight for a constitutional government.

The Taking of Zacatecas¹

February 18, 1913, Victoriano Huerta and Félix Díaz signed the Pact of the Ciudadela (also called the “Embassy Pact” because of the role U.S. Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson played in the conspiracy), which put Huerta in the presidential seat. On February 22, President Francisco I. Madero and Vice-President José María Pino Suárez were assassinated.²

Many revolutionaries from Zacatecas, who after the signing of the Treaties of Ciudad Juárez³ had gone back to their normal lives, rose up in arms. A month later, with the exception of its capital, all of the state of Zacatecas was in the hands of the Revolution.

After destroying the main railway lines and isolating the garrisons in the North, General Pánfilo Natera, together with two other leaders, decided to attack the city. Faced with the rebel forces’ offensive, the Federal Chief of Zacatecas, General Jesús Aréchiga, with only 900 soldiers under his command distributed in garrisons throughout the state, asked for reinforcements. Alarmed, Huerta replaced Aréchiga with Colonel Miguel Rivero, who distributed 400 men and

four cannon in the city’s highest buildings and on the hills, particularly La Bufa Hill.⁴ Natera led 1,500 men against the flanks of La Bufa but was rebuffed and renewed the attack the next day.

Zacatecas was not in the hands of the revolutionaries very long: a force of 1,300 federal troops under the command of General José Delgado managed to recover the town. However, the city was besieged

for several months by the rebels in repeated attempts to take it back.

From June 10 to 13, 1914, Natera’s men attacked the surrounding hills, but were pushed back with heavy losses, particularly in Guadalupe,⁵ where *huertista* General Benjamín Argumedo, from San Luis Potosí, defeated them.

Meanwhile, another important rebel general, Francisco Villa, was racking up military victories at the head of the northern armies.⁶ His successes confirmed him as a triumphant leader feared by Carranza himself, the head of the constitutionalist army opposing Huerta.⁷ A little later, there was a break between them and Villa’s Division of the North moved into the war zone.⁸

On June 19, 20 and 21, revolutionary General Felipe Angeles, after reconnoitering and creating a reserve force of 5,000 men, surrounded the city with his troops. The *huertistas* held good positions: General Guillermo Rubio Navarrete and other artillery officers had fortified the area and their artillery, rifles and machine guns covered a radius of 6 kilometers.

At dawn on June 20, Villa’s Division of the North threatened several points; on



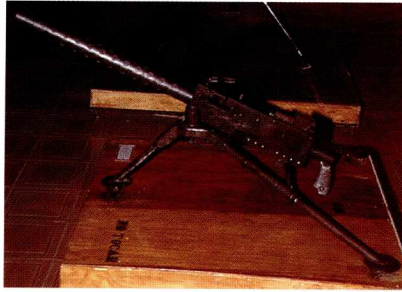
Photos by Dante Barrera

the 22nd Villa himself arrived, approved General Angeles' and Urbina's arrangements, and on the 23rd, ordered the attack.

THE BATTLE

Villa and Angeles based their plan of attack on simultaneously taking the hills surrounding the city where the *huertistas* were dug in. At 10 a.m., June 23, a single volley of the revolutionaries' cannon signalled the rest of the field batteries to open fire and cover the infantry's advance. The first objectives were the Loreto and Tierra Negra Hills. Twenty-five minutes after the attack began, the *villista* flag was flying atop Loreto Hill. The troops that took these hills then reinforced the infantry attack on the north of La Sierpe Hill with badly needed artillery support.

Both Villa and Angeles ordered a few pieces of artillery transferred immediate-



Gatting gun used in the battle.

ly so they could fire on La Sierpe Hill, which was taken a scant 15 minutes after the rebel cannon opened fire. To launch the attack on El Grillo Hill, the artillery had to be moved, an operation carried out under intense cannon fire from the federal troops, causing the revolutionaries many casualties.

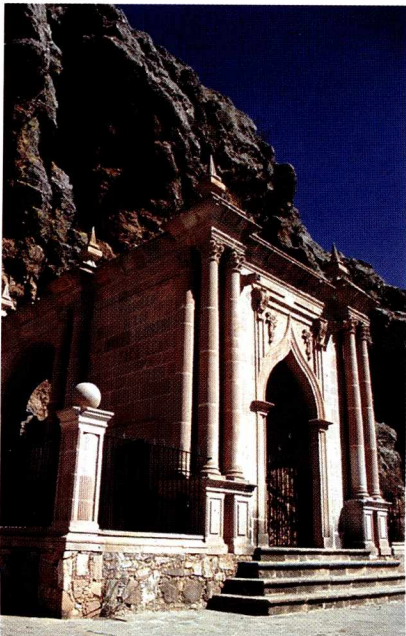
While the artillery on La Bufa Hill battered the troops besieging El Grillo Hill, the infantry captured the *huertista* positions on Santa Clara, and General Urbina's forces drove the federal troops back to the La Bufa Hill itself. Natera, meanwhile, launched the attack against

the Lomas del Refugio and Cerro de la Virgen Hills, while other commanders were doing the same against the train depot and Padre Hill.

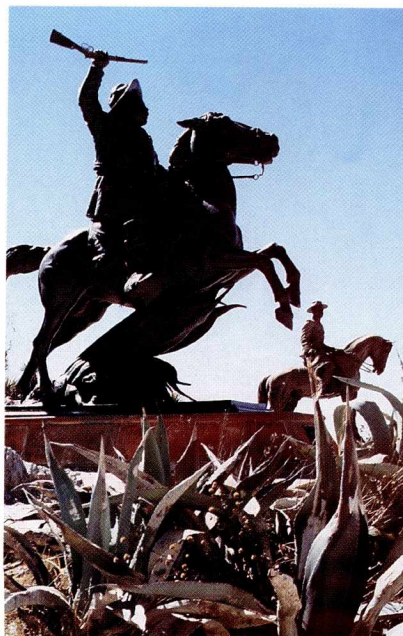
This simultaneous assault was successful: about 1:30 p.m., the federal troop withdrew from El Grillo Hill, allowing the revolutionaries a short respite while the artillery was strategically placed, since neither Villa nor Angeles thought that the defenders were willing to completely give up the position.

And they were right. About 2:45 p.m. fresh federal troops from the city began to scale the hill, pushing the revolutionaries back; however, when the rebel artillery began to give them support, they counterattacked and made a final assault after 5 p.m., at the same time that the final strike began against the La Bufa Hill and the positions in the south.

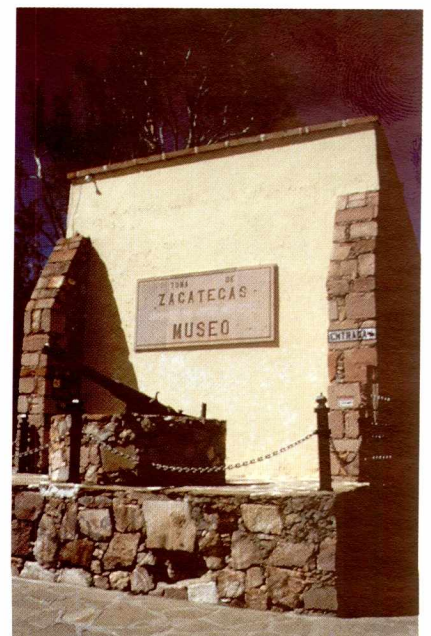
At 5:50 p.m., revolutionary flags waved atop El Grillo and La Bufa Hills while another part of their forces took



Monument to the revolutionaries and distinguished citizens of Zacatecas, on La Bufa Hill.



Two protagonists of the battle: Francisco Villa and Felipe Angeles.



Entrance to the Taking of Zacatecas Museum.

the train station and advanced on the center of the city. At that moment, the federal troops decided to blow up the Federal Palace building to keep the supplies and munitions stored there out of the hands of the revolutionaries.

Federal General Luis Medina Barrón understood that the defense of the city was no longer feasible and ordered a retreat to Guadalupe. Federal General Benjamín Argumedo led a cavalry charge with sabers drawn down Juan Alonso Street, allowing his troops to move forward along the stream, but they were driven back by the rebel reserves situated precisely to avoid the escape of any survivors.

The federal troops returned to the center of the city and attempted to escape by way of Jerez or Veta Grande,

but there they were also driven back. With no choice but to try again by way of Guadalupe, and, at great loss of men and horses, *huertista* Generals Medina Barrón, Argumedo, Olea, De los Santos and Vázquez managed to reach safety in Aguascalientes.

EPILOGUE

The victory of the revolutionary forces was the death knell of *huertismo*, which is why Zacatecas was given the honorary title of Heroic City. However, the battle had been very bloody, and the dead lay strewn all along the city streets. Since they were too numerous to bury and the decomposing bodies could have caused an epidemic, the order was given to pile

them up, douse them with oil and set them alight. Other cadavers were thrown into the mines. Despite these measures, however, Zacatecas was hit by a typhus epidemic and a famine that made the year 1915-1916 be remembered as the “Year of Hunger.”

The disputes among the revolutionary generals were forgotten for a while when the United States invaded the Mexican port of Veracruz. In Mexico, the parties at war protested, as did the public worldwide. Argentina, Brazil and Chile offered to act as mediators and met in Niagara Falls to discuss terms. However, the U.S. government had already decided to support Carranza. Huerta resigned July 15, 1914, thus opening up another chapter in the struggle to reunite the country. **NM**



Panoramic view of Zacatecas from La Bufa Hill.

NOTES

¹ This article is based on information taken from the chronicle now exhibited in the Taking of Zacatecas Museum, written by city historian Professor Roberto Ramos Dávila.

² Madero took office in 1911 after having called for an uprising to depose Porfirio Díaz, in power for over 30 years. However, both society and the economy continued to be organized just as it had been under Díaz and Madero's own party had serious internal differences. Guided by his democratic zeal, Madero did not really comprehend how complex the situation was. This caused concern among those with economic power, who thought energetic action should be taken against the government. With the aid of the U.S. ambassador, the remaining *Porfirista* forces and the revolutionary generals Victoriano Huerta and Félix Díaz, the Pact of the Ciudadela was signed, which decreed the resignation of the president and vice-president and put Huerta in office. Despite Huerta's having sworn to respect

the life of his prisoners Madero and Pino Suárez, they were murdered. When news of this got out, the revolutionaries regrouped under Venustiano Carranza and began their struggle to restore constitutional order. [Editor's Note.]

³ The Treaties of Ciudad Juárez, signed May 21, 1911, established peace and a cease fire between the revolutionary forces led by Madero and the federal army under the Porfirio Díaz government, thus ending 30 years of dictatorship. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ The city of Zacatecas is surrounded by hills, the most important of which is La Bufa, overlooking the whole town. Huerta's forces held strategic positions on all the hills, making the siege of the city more difficult. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ Guadalupe is a town a few kilometers east of Zacatecas. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ The rebel army had several divisions, each under the orders of its own strongman or revolutionary commander. A peculiarity of these divisions was the soldiers' loyalty to their own commander first, and to the interests of the overall armed struggle second. The most important rebel leaders, both because of their influence and their strategies, were Emiliano Zapata of the Division of the South and Francisco Villa of the Division of the North. [Editor's Note.]

⁷ Carranza was uneasy about the strength Villa's growing strength; Villa, in turn, distrusted Carranza because of his dictatorial behavior, which Villa thought was dividing the different states of Mexico.

⁸ The arrival of the Division of the North under Villa was decisive because it joined forces with the Division of the Center, creating a force larger in both armament and men than the federal forces.



A Museum With a Whiff of Powder

The Taking of Zacatecas Museum sits atop the La Bufa Hill, an open-air window on the city of Zacatecas. It is a small place with photographs, maps, weapons, furniture and other memorabilia of the passing of the revolution through the area. Mexican scenes from early in the century, remembrances of the days when the revolution dictated life and death. Showcases exhibiting the famous *bilinbiques*—the ephemeral currency printed by each revolutionary army—turned into *topillos*, or useless paper—to the misfortune of their holders—as soon as the winds blew against their issuers. The revolutionaries' favorite 30-30 carbines, the topic of innumerable popular *corrido* songs. A cannon that may have been definitive in winning the battle.

As you leave, you ask yourself how the city was able to save its many baroque treasures from the savage

battles. Outside, statues of the revolutionary generals, protagonists of the taking of Zacatecas and the death of *huertismo*: Pánfilo Natera, Francisco Villa and Felipe Angeles. Their horses recall the way the riders later died: Angeles' mount, relaxed, reminds us that his horseman died a natural death; Villa's steed hints at his dying in an ambush; Natera's horse recalls his master standing ramrod straight before a firing squad. Each June 23, homage is paid to these and other heroes of the battle.

The visitor can also see the La Bufa chapel-sanctuary. Built in 1739 and dedicated to Zacatecas' patron saint, Our Lady of Protection, it is the city's oldest. To finish your visit, take the telfer slowly across to the other side of the city where you can admire its streets and buildings from another vantage point.