

Aztec Eagles: Mexico's Fighter Pilots of WWII

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(Members of the 201st Mexican Fighter Squadron walk the flight line during training. Left to right 2nd Lt. Migel Moreno Arrecola; 2nd Lt. Jaime Cenizo Rojas; 1st Lt. John Haley; 1st Lt. Fernando Hernandez Vega and 2nd Lt. Raul Garcia Mercado. From an AAF photo.)

Several days after Hurricane Katrina struck along the mid-eastern coast of the Gulf of Mexico, Americans watching the morning newscasts saw the first green tractor-trailers cross the international bridge at Laredo. Flying Mexican flags, the 18-wheelers were given a police escort from the border to San Antonio, where

they set up water treatment plants and mobile kitchens that fed 7,000 people a day. Over 200 military engineers, doctors and nurses, mechanics, cooks and Mexican soldiers crossed onto American soil that bright September day; as part of an international response to the recent catastrophe wrought by the category four hurricane. "This is the first time the Mexican military has operated north of the Rio Grande River since 1846," the broadcasters said. They were wrong; by about 68 years.

May, 1942. German submarines sink two Mexican oil tankers, the *Portero de Llano* and *Faja de Oro*, in the Gulf of Mexico. With a small peacetime army and navy, Mexico did not have the resources to field a large battle group, but still wanted to help in the war against the Axis. It did not take long for Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho to come up with a plan for his country to wage war on the enemy. A full year passed before the details were worked out, but the end result was the formation of the U.S. & Mexico Defense Commission and the Bracero Program. From the American point of view, the Bracero Program was a success. <http://braceroarchive.org/> Thousands of impoverished Mexicans headed north, replacing young Americans in the fields and on the railroads. As a result, the ranks of Uncle Sam's military swelled with new recruits. The braceros labored tirelessly thinning sugar beets, picking cucumbers and tomatoes, and weeding and picking cotton. Their labors had a direct, positive effect on the American war effort. American soldiers were the best fed and clothed in the world. But there was a dark side, too. After the war, the program continued, but now the braceros suffered harassment and oppression from extremist groups and racist authorities. The contracts, controlled by independent farmers associations and the "Farm Bureau," were written in English, so most who signed them did not understand their full rights and the conditions of employment. When the contracts expired, the braceros were required to turn in their permits and return to México. Under the terms of the contract, the braceros could return to their native lands only in case of an emergency, but first they must have written permission from their boss. The Bracero Program was discontinued in the early 1960s.



Flight school

Laredo, July 25, 1944. Thirty eight pilots and 260 support personnel, all members of an elite group of airmen known as the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force were reporting for duty. From Laredo, they were transported to Randolph Field in San Antonio, where they were given medical exams and tested for flight and weapons experience. Next, the squadron was sent to the army base at Pocatello, Idaho, where they received extensive training in each man's area of specialty, such as armament, communication, or engineering. Next, was the Gunnery School at Harlingen. Training included combat air tactics, formation flying and gunnery practice over Padre Island. The pilots received further aviation instructions and training at Majors Field in Greenville, where they were presented with their battle flag. Under the command of Col. Antonio Cardenas Rodriguez, Squadron 201, now dubbed the Aztec Eagles, were attached to the United States Army, Air Force 58th Fighter Group.



Flying the P-47-D Thunderbolt

single seat fighter during the liberation of the main Island of Luzon, the Aztec Eagles carried out tactical air support and bombing missions in support of American troops operating in the South Pacific. Flying 60 missions, the Aztec Eagles dropped 1,038 bombs and fired over a million rounds of live ammo. In all, the 201st Squadron accumulated 1,290 hours of combat missions during the last six month's of the war. Five pilots lost their lives during the unit's tour of duty. Three crashed during bad weather, one was shot down by the enemy, while the first was killed during gunnery training when he crashed into a tow-plane that was pulling the target over Padre Island.



Medalla Por Servicio en el Lejano Oriente

The men of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force were highly decorated, earning a Presidential Unit Citation from the Philippine Secretary of Defense and many other honors. Twenty of them received the U.S. Air Medal. The pilots became national heroes of Mexico. On November 18, 1945, they were personally congratulated by President Avila Camacho during a ceremony broadcast live by radio throughout Mexico. The pilots were decorated by the President with the

Medalla Por Servicio en el Lejano Oriente – a special medal that was the only decoration ever awarded for foreign combat by Mexican military personnel.