Subject: Military collaboration by Mexico during the war -- Squadron 201.

The collaboration of Mexico in the war effort of the allies during the second world war was not confined to this very complete and effective collaboration in the procurement program of the United States which I have mentioned elsewhere. It was quite obvious immediately after the declaration of war by Mexico that the Mexican government desired to collaborate in a military way in the war.

Immediately after the declaration of war by Mexico the collaboration of the Mexican government through its armed forces began to take more active and concrete forms. We already had large numbers of troops in Texas for training, both ground forces and very considerable units of the air force. We had established what were then some of the largest air bases in the world in Texas. The established bases had been considerably increased and were constantly augmented and new fields were established. Kelly Field outside of San Antonio was the largest and there were others which approximated it in size. The relations between the officers on the border of our forces and those of the Mexican forces were harmonious and cordial and cooperative. The Mexican-United States Defense Commission proved to be an admirable set-up for the discussion of means of military collaboration at the higher levels. Regular meetings of this commission were held at fixed intervals and as it seemed desirable, alternately in the United States and in Mexico.

The Mexican army at the beginning of Mexican participation in the war was already, in comparison with the armed forces in the other American Republics, a good army. Military service was compulsory for youths of certain ages in Mexico at the time. The beginnings of an air force had been established before Mexico's entry into the war. There was a small Mexican navy. All three arms of the forces, however, ground forces, naval forces and air force, were fully equipped. Due to the limited revenues of the government and the development programs which the government had undertaken to build roads, highways, schools, hospitals, irrigation dams and to improve certain social services absorbed the major revenues of the government. The most effective thing that we could do, therefore, in the United States to aid Mexico
in improving her military preparation was through the furnishing of equipment to these forces and through the offering of training facilities in the United States military for officers and technicians. The President, General Avila Camacho, and most of the high officers of the army and of the other forces were desirous of improving equipment and training.

The first important step in improving the situation of the armed forces in Mexico was in the high level conversations in the Mexican-United States Defense Commission and in the increased visits by high Mexican officers of the armed forces to the United States and officers of the United States to Mexico. This movement took considerable volume from the outset. The Mexican officers were given the opportunity to see all of our establishments in the United States. The officers who were sent to stay for fixed periods for training were carefully selected by the Mexican government. By far the largest number of officers sent were those from the Mexican air force. General Gustavo Salinas, who was in command of the Mexican air force at the time, was a very energetic and capable man. His principal lack was not only in material but in trained pilots and technicians. Although this was a rather costly program the United States saw in it one of the best means of the initial stages of the program. Very rapidly, with the material which was delivered to the air force and with the newly trained officers and personnel, a really unusually high degree of efficiency was established in the air force. The pilots proved themselves to be good, dependable pilots.

In the field of the ground forces the uniforms, small arms and smaller caliber guns, tanks, motorized equipment, communications equipment, all had a stimulating effect on morale, not only of the officers but of the men in the ground forces. I recall the 16th of September parade after the declaration of war. Some of the high officers of the general staff in the United States were present during the military parade, which is always held on this day. I was told by high Mexican officers that they could note already considerable improvement in the discipline, in the
marching and in the general morale of the troops who took part in this parade.

So far as the Mexican navy was concerned, it has really existed mostly in name. At the time of the declaration of war by Mexico the navy really had at its disposal practically no sea-worthy ships. There were few facilities at Veracruz and Tampico for the repair of vessels. The Mexican Navy had some ambitious plans as to the building of facilities at Veracruz for the construction and repair of naval vessels. It was quite obvious that this was a long-term operation and could not yield very much fruit during the war unless the war should be prolonged beyond any time that any of us were thinking of. On the other hand, the morale of the ground forces and of the Air Force was improving so rapidly and as the equipment was becoming modernized something had to be done for the Navy, and a number of small vessels were made available to the Mexican Navy by our government. These were used for patrol purposes, principally in the Gulf of Mexico.

Brazil had declared war before Mexico. The Brazilian government informed our government that it wished to send a contingent of troops to the fighting front. This involved many problems. It meant that the Brazilian officers would have to be trained along the lines of our own armed forces. Most of the officers who would be available for such duty abroad did not know English. It was obviously difficult to coordinate such units, even after their being trained, into any larger units of our forces or of the allied forces. Even if the offer of the Brazilian government had only a symbolic value, it was judged expedient and desirable to accept this collaboration so generously offered. This is not the place for me to speak about the Brazilian contingents which actually reached the front after training in the United States. I am told that they did well in Italy, where these Brazilian ground forces were sent (I think I should insert here something as to the number of Brazilian troops that were actually sent abroad).

In Mexico, with the increasing dangers from the submarines, the necessity of establishing patrols in the Gulf of Mexico became greater. It was found desirable
that this patrol should be carried through, so far as possible, by the Mexican Air
Force and by small vessels of the Mexican Navy. In order to make the collaboration
more effective, it was decided by the President to divide Mexico into a number of
zones, each one under the command of a high-ranking General. The zone which com-
prised the states bordering on the Gulf of Mexico was the more important and General
Abelardo Rodriguez, who had gone into retirement from actual government service but
who was still on the active list of generals of the army, volunteered his services
as the commander of one of these zones and was given the command of the Gulf zone.
Our own armed forces were very pleased at this designation. General Abelardo Rodri-
guez had been a President of Mexico. He was one of the most distinguished men in
the country at the time.

It was an extremely fortunate thing for Mexico and for the United States
that a man of the political and military prestige of General Abelardo Rodriguez
should assume command of the important Gulf zone. He had made an excellent record
as President during the years . He had retired after the presiden-
cy to private life, but retained his status as a general on the active military list.
He had shown himself a man of great business enterprise and acumen. He was particu-
larly interested in his native state of Sonora and spent a good deal of his time
there. His wife is an unusually beautiful, intelligent and attractive woman. The
fishing industry in the northwest had been largely in the hands of Japanese who had
settled there. General Rodriguez saw the opportunities of developing the fishing
industry and making it a source of economic strength in a state, the interests of
which at that time were entirely agricultural. He established fishing fleets and
packing plants and it was due to his initiative that the marine sources of the water
off the coast in the northwest began to find their way to the markets of Mexico City
and were widely distributed in the United States. Aside from doing various things to
improve the agricultural and industrial situation in the state of Sonora and also of
Sinaloa, his wife and he interested themselves in civic and social works, particular-
ly in Hermosilla and Ensenada, where they had homes. General Rodriguez was known throughout the country and in business circles as being a man who at no time used his political position and prestige in order to forward his business interests. They were developed through his industry, initiative and vision. With their own means General and Mrs. Rodriguez established a home for old men and ladies and engaged in all sorts of philanthropic work in a discreet and a quiet and completely unostentatious way. His prestige in the political field was high and there was no ex-president of Mexico more respected then and now than he. His prestige in the business world was high because of the known fairness and integrity of his practices. Among his colleagues in the armed forces there was no one with greater prestige.

With General Rodriguez in command of the Gulf Zone, the patrol of the waters of the Gulf along the Mexican coast was shared by the air force of Mexico and of the United States. With the gun boats and the armored launches which we had made available on reasonable terms to the Mexican government, the Mexican Navy was able to share in the sea patrol with our own vessels assigned to this duty. It was a delicate task in many respects because it involved collaboration of this close character between the armed forces of the two countries. It meant that the information with regard to the movements of ships, which naturally had to be kept most secret, had to be used with great discretion by the Mexican armed forces.

General Rodriguez had as his second in command in the Gulf zone General Azcarrate. He had been Military Attache of Mexico at the Mexican Embassy in Berlin during a part of the Nazi regime. He was a good soldier and a loyal one and proved to be an able second in command in this important zone.

(I think it was General Mangin who was in command of the zone in the northwest. I do not recall the names of the Generals who were in command at Monterrey and in the north east and along the border. I shall have to get the names of these Generals from General Rodriguez in order to insert them in this record. While the collaboration of General Rodriguez was outstanding, all of these Generals in command
of the military zones collaborated loyally with our people and effectively.

There was a good deal of sentiment privately among some of the high officials of the government, as well as among some of the military men such as General Rodriguez that there should be active participation by Mexico at the fronts. They favored the sending of Mexican contingents to the front to be merged with or to serve side by side with our forces. This matter was not openly discussed between military the high officials of the two governments. It was well understood and appreciated that the great majority of the thoughtful people in Mexico were happy that Mexico had declared war. They favored this program of military collaboration and in the field of procurement of strategic supplies. The war, however, for many of the Mexican people was still far away. Mexicans who were resident in the United States under our draft laws were subject to the draft. This did not go down too well with a certain number of people in the country. There was in fact even open criticism that these Mexican residents should be subject to the draft. There was of course no basis for such criticism because under our law every alien admitted for permanent residence, although he is not a citizen, has certain obligations with respect to the payment of tax, military service and other usual obligations. I always felt that desirable as it would be for units of the Mexican army to serve with our armed or more forces at one of the fighting fronts, that there were many reasons why it might not be desirable. Should the participation of such forces have been in considerable number, there would have been casualties and in considerable number. I felt that all this could mar the effectiveness of the program which was going on and which was so satisfactory and which was such a marked contrast to what had happened in the first world war. In matters of this kind peoples moved slowly. I was sure that some of the high officials of the Mexican government who had this same feeling that I did for the desirability of such participation, also had the same reserves.

In the meantime, as the months went on improvement in the equipment of the air force and of the ground forces and even of the navy became increasingly obvious
An entirely new spirit pervaded these forces. They took extraordinary pride in their equipment and they maintained it as well I believe as any country maintained the not equipment which we gave to it. I had from time to time to see this equipment/only in and around Mexico City but in other parts of the country, and all of it was kept in perfect condition and the troops were being trained in the use thereof. Army officer, naval officers and air force officers were going to the United States in constantly increasing numbers. A certain number of officers of our armed forces came for short periods to Mexico City and to other headquarters of the Mexican army throughout the country. These periods of duty, however, were relatively short and were more for maintaining a spirit of camaraderie than for training. There was seldom a week that passed that some high officers of our armed forces did not come to Mexico City for short stays. All this established a situation which I do not see could have been more satisfactory.

As it was inevitable that at some time or other the question of actual participation by Mexican units at the front would become more actual, I took occasion to discuss this with Secretary Hull and with President Roosevelt. I discussed it with them before I made any mention of it whatever to any of our military at home. I knew that it was a question not so much of military policy as of political policy. We had so many problems at home of all kinds connected with the war. Our officials were overworked. It was obvious that if any units of the Mexican armed forces were to be offered by the Mexican government that they would have to be after military training in Mexico sent to training centers in the United States to go through the same training as our troops and along side of them. This involved many problems which were susceptible of ready solution but it was a question as to whether the real contribution to Mexico in the war effort of the allies and that of our country would be made more effective by such actual participation.

I therefore told President Roosevelt and Secretary Hull on one of my trips north that I felt the time was approaching when this matter would be mentioned to me,
in all probability, by President Avila Camacho, and we talked the matter over at
length. The President and Mr. Hull were both pleased to know that I thought that
high Mexican officials were thinking of this. It was a sure indication of the
way the collaboration between the two countries was developing and the real under­
standing and of Mexican interest in the war. They had by this time, however, appreci­
ciated through experience the actual problems involved in the training of foreign
troops on our soil. The President and Secretary Hull appreciated the problems in­
volved in the training of foreign troops on our soil. It was quite obvious that
a period of training in our country alongside of our own troops was essential be­
fore such troops could be sent abroad. We had a shortage of officers speaking
Spanish. We needed these officers for all kinds of service in liaison with the
other Latin countries of America. It would mean, among other things, establishing
schools for the training of officers for this work and such officers securing an
adequate proficiency of Spanish. It meant that the contingent, not only the officers
but the men, would have to remain in the United States long enough to get a knowledge
of English, at least a fair knowledge by the officers of our language and a rudimen­
tary knowledge by the private soldiers. Our experience with the Brazilian troops in
the field had shown how important this was in actual operations at the front. It
was found that this was really a controlling factor. On the other hand, the Presi­
dent and Mr. Hull both realized that from the point of view of the collaboration of
the two countries in the war effort, and for the moral effect it would have on the
enemy, it would be desirable to have such collaboration not only from Mexico but
from others of the American countries besides Brazil and Mexico. I had the definite
feeling myself that in case Mexico offered, and we accepted, such units from Mexico,
that several other countries in Latin America would offer contingents. All this was
most encouraging from the psychological point of view, but it offered practical
problems which in the midst of war had to be considered on a purely practical basis.
No one in our executive or military establishment at home failed to recognize the
importance which any such offers from Mexico or other countries might have, but they had to look at the problem from a coldly practical point of view when they were engaged in this tremendous effort.

I was told that if at any time the Mexican government raised this question with me that I should set forth these practical considerations and make it clear how much we appreciated the offer. We were entirely prepared to accept such contingents. It was our belief, however, that it would be much better to limit it to the countries wishing to send aid to do so in the way of a squadron or two or even more from their air force. This greatly limited the scope of the operation and it would maintain its psychological and moral value.

It was not long after these exploratory conversations in Washington which I undertook as a measure of precaution that President Avila Camacho raised this matter with me. He said that it was the desire of the Mexican government to make its contribution, even though it had to be on a modest scale in the way of units of its armed forces. I assured him of how much my government would appreciate such action by the Mexican government. We discussed some of the practical problems involved.

The President was a good military man. He himself appreciated what the problems involved were in the United States and in Mexico and at the front, without any mention of them. When I suggested, therefore, that the first collaboration should be in the form of a training of a squadron of the Mexican air force in the United States for participation at some front, the President accepted this idea very readily and said that he thought it was an excellent one. It took no time whatever to work out the details and a carefully selected group of Mexican aviators was formed into a squadron to be sent to the United States for training before going to one of the fronts. This was the squadron which became known as Squadron 201, and had training at several places in the United States. The officers in charge of the training schools where the members of this squadron was stationed all made reports indicating that the pilots were good men and were developing into good fighting pilots. The time came
when this squadron was ready for going to one of the fighting fronts.

(At this point I must insert a brief paragraph on the young Mexican air force officer who was made commander of this squadron. He proved to be an excellent man. I know him very well but I cannot remember his name at the moment. He has a very beautiful wife who speaks English as well as he does)

(The following brief paragraph is one that cannot be used in any published notes, but as a matter of interest I wish to record the following here. When the time actually came to assign this Mexican squadron to a fighting front, I spoke about this matter to the President and to Secretary Hull themselves. This matter was one which was kept on this level from the beginning to the end. The President thought it would be well for the squadron to go to Europe and he had the chiefs of staff make the necessary explorations in order to reach their determination. They found that the officers in command of the European theater did not want any foreign contingents. They found the language problems and the fact that the officers and the men had such an inadequate knowledge of our ||knowledge, made operational problems at the front exceedingly difficult. They thought it would lead to complications with the governments concerned and that all this was not worth while. President Roosevelt himself mentioned this matter to me and said "Where are we going to send them?" I told President Roosevelt that President Avila Camacho had great admiration for General McArthur. He had met General McArthur some years before when General McArthur had made a visit to Mexico. He often spoke of him in very glowing terms. He spoke of him in somewhat the same terms that he spoke of him, the President. The President said that was wonderful and that he would telegraph himself to General McArthur. I do not know the nature of the telegrams which passed between the President and General McArthur, but it was very shortly thereafter that the President informed me that the squadron would go to fight under the command of General McArthur. When I mentioned this to President Avila Camacho he was tremendously pleased)

The Mexican squadron was assigned to the Far Eastern theater of the war and
served under General McArthur. The squadron acquitted itself admirably. Another squadron was in training at the time the war came to an end. The Mexican press and public received the sending of this squadron to a fighting front as an inevitable part of their participation in the war. I am sure that a good part of the thoughtful people of Mexico were very happy and satisfied that there was this direct contribution at the front. They did not overestimate the importance of this contribution, but that they should have this satisfaction and pride in the gesture is understandable and it was appreciated by our public in the United States.

The highest ranking officers of our armed forces came to Mexico. General Marshall came and made a four or five day stay in Mexico City while I was in the Embassy. General Arnold and Mrs. Arnold made a stay in Mexico City. High ranking officers of our navy and of all branches of the service came on many occasions to Mexico City. They were always treated with great consideration and their visits were received with pleasure and satisfaction in the government and by the people.

I recall that when General Marshall came with a considerable number of high ranking officers and naval officers to attend a September 16 Independence Day celebration he viewed the parade of the Mexican troops from the balcony of the Palace in the Zocalo. At lunch after the parade he remarked to me that the appearance, training and military aspect and demeanor of the Mexican troops had really impressed him very much. He said, "It is a first class army and they carry themselves like a real army". I was delighted to hear this because while I had seen the progressive improvement in the armed forces, I was not in a position to form any judgment, and General Marshall was not the kind of a man to make that kind of a statement unless he meant it, and he made it first to me and in the hearing of no one else. I told General Marshall that if he saw no inconvenience I thought it would be a good thing for him and a helpful thing to repeat this statement to the President when he saw him again before he left Mexico, and also to General Urquiza and perhaps some of the other Mexican army officers. General Marshall said he saw no inconvenience and that
same day in the evening he had the opportunity to say this to the President.

The high officers of the Mexican government collaborated in the fullest possible degree with our military establishment in the United States. When I revise these notes I shall have to speak of General Urquiza, General Ruiz, General Alamillo, General Mangin, General Guzmán, Cardenas and many others.

My own personal relations and those of the officers of the Embassy with all the high officers of the Mexican military establishment could not have been on a more friendly and more cordial basis. The presence of so many high ranking officers of our military establishment from Washington and from the South Eastern command from time to time in Mexico provided the opportunity for frequent receptions in the Embassy where the American and Mexican officers could meet with their families. The Mexican military on the occasion of such visits always provided appropriate entertainment for the American officers, usually in the military club, along the Reforma. The frankest spirit of cordiality prevailed at all of these friendly receptions in the Embassy and elsewhere. On my arrival in Mexico and when we made the Embassy Residence more livable, we had put in the lower floor of the Embassy a small theater which held comfortably some 70 or 80 people. We had put in very comfortable seats and had provided a bar off the theater. It was the practice of my wife and myself from time to time to ask groups of Mexican officers and high officials of the Mexican government to the Embassy for supper, after which we showed a picture in this theater. The armed forces were very good in making available to us pictures which were not released for ordinary distribution in the United States. These evenings grew to be almost a routine. I am sure that the showing of these pictures and the getting together of the Mexican and American officers in the residence in this way from time to time served a very useful purpose.

The materials which we furnished to Mexico were furnished under the Congressional action which authorized the furnishing of such equipment to the Latin countries of America. One of the things which our military and civilian authorities
noted in Washington with the same satisfaction that I did in Mexico City was that the requests which the Mexican government made for equipment were on a modest scale and at no time did they ask for anything which they did not need or could not use and purely for the purpose of show. Another thing which gave us great satisfaction to note in Washington and in Mexico City was the fact that the material which was furnished was used in the most effective way, was carefully maintained in excellent condition.

There was a brief period during the war when General Cardenas was Minister of War. Whatever his feelings may have been, he was asked to take this post by his friend President Avila Camacho, and he did nothing to interfere with the sound basis on which the military collaboration had been established and was going forward. While he was Minister of War he was, I believe, out of Mexico City in his native state of Michoacán as much as he was in the city.

When I revise these notes I shall have to at the close thereof put some paragraphs giving in a little more detail the actual forms which the military collaboration took.

During the presidency of General Avila Camacho he carried into effect an idea which he strongly believed in and which has had lasting good effects. In view of the period of revolutions through which Mexico had passed, the military naturally had gained a considerable control in the affairs of the country. For many years the Presidents of Mexico had been military men. General Avila Camacho believed that the military should be subordinated to the civil power and that generals should not participate in political activity in the states or in the Federal government. It was a bold idea for him to put forward, being a military man himself. It was only because of the prestige which he enjoyed because of his character and known qualities, that he was able to carry through this. I believe some 300 or 400 generals were retired during his period as President. Many of these men had acquired the title only through courtesy or through political preferment. It did not add prestige to the
military establishment that the relatively small Mexican army should be loaded at the
top with so many generals. The political aspects of this step of General Avila
Camacho while he was President were far more important than the administrative aspects.
He carried through this reform in the Mexican army and while it was resented in a few
quarters, it was accepted and approved by the people. It was during his administra-
tion when for the first time in many years the army was removed from actual control
of politics in the Federal government and in the states, and there is today I believe
in Mexico more subordination of the army to the civilian authorities than there exists
in any other country of Latin America, with the possible exception of Uruguay. This
was a great step forward in the political organization of the country and it is one
of the great achievements of President Avila Camacho.

Since the end of the war the military collaboration between Mexico and the
United States is continuing through the Mexican-United States Joint Defense Commis-
sion, which operates on the same lines as the Canadian-United States Defense Commis-
sion.

I cannot refrain from mentioning a little incident which occurred after I
in 1947 had retired from the Foreign Service and came back to Mexico to live and acted for
some years as Chairman of the Board, and Chief Executive Officer of the Mexican
Light and Power Company. It was in 1948 that I went one evening by appointment to
the Palace in the Zocalo in order to see the Minister of Hacienda, Ramon Beteta. We
were old friends and I had known him from the time I came to Mexico as Ambassador
in 1942 and at which time he was Under Secretary of Hacienda. I went about 8 o'clock
in the evening to see him on a matter of business of my company. I had dismissed my
car when I arrived at the Palace, intending to take a taxi home. After a pleasant
talk with Dr. Beteta I found when I came to the door of the Palace that it was raining.
I must have stood in the doorway for at least 20 minutes or more waiting for a taxi
to pass. As I was about in desperation to give up the idea of finding a taxi and
starting out in the rain, a car stopped in front of the portico and I saw an officer
in uniform driving the car. I could see him looking at me. In a few moments he opened the door of his car and came to me in the portico. He greeted me and he said, "Are you waiting for your car, Mr. Messersmith?" I said to him that I had let my car go and that I was waiting for a taxi, but that on account of the rain I had been waiting for some time but I was sure one would be along. The officer insisted that he take me home. By that time I had noticed that he was a Colonel. I was trying to search my mind as to whether I knew him but I could not place him. He courteously insisted that he take me home, that it would be no inconvenience to him, and finally I agreed. During the drive to my home, which took some 15 minutes, we chatted and when we got to my house I asked him to come in for a drink. He said that unfortunately he could not do so but hoped he could some other time. I thanked him for having shown this extraordinary courtesy to me. I was accustomed to being treated courteously in Mexico but this man had really gone out of his way to be friendly and courteous. He said to me, "Mr. Messersmith, this is a small thing for me as an officer of the Mexican army to do for you, who did so much for my country and for our army when you were Ambassador here during the war. I and my associates will never forget what you did because it meant so much for us." It made my heart glow because I could see that the expression of his sentiments, while so courteously put, was completely sincere.