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## CHAPTER VI

# The Mexican Revolution, 1913–1914

### MEETING WITH PANCHO VILLA

THE BET in the German Club in Shanghai was mentioned in the previous chapter. Derogatory statements made about the Rebels in Mexico prompted Thord to travel to that country. Thord disembarked in San Francisco at the beginning of November 1913. He took the train to El Paso and at the Rio Grande River crossed the border into Mexico and went to Pancho Villa's headquarters near Juarez.

From the outset it was obvious that foreigners were not wanted in the country. Villa did not pay any attention to Thord, but inspected the travel pass that had been issued by the Mexican consul in Shanghai.

He called Thord a '*gringo spy*' and roared an order that he was to leave Mexico. When Thord asked to have the travel pass back, Villa tore it up, whereupon Thord withdrew, resigned to returning to El Paso.

On his way out through Villa's camp, Thord observed two field guns and next to them a concerned looking warrant officer. Thord became curious and stopped to examine the pieces. The warrant officer, who had deserted from the US Army, confided in Thord that his knowledge of artillery was limited and that the Federal gunners had tampered with the pieces before abandoning them to the Rebels. Thord examined the mechanisms, found that the firing pins had been broken off and suggested making new ones. At that moment Villa and some companions arrived, and Thord was arrested. The officer at the guns stepped forward and explained that Thord was an expert on artillery.

The arrest was revoked and he was given the task of manufacturing new firing pins, which he managed to do in collaboration with an engineering workshop at the border. Apparently Thord was of great use. He was kept under supervision and ordered to participate in a firing test with the artillery pieces, even though there were no gunsights or rangefinders. The shots were fired without hitting the

targets but sand and lumber were thrown up. Villa was pleased and proclaimed Thord chief of the artillery with rank of first captain (*capitan primero*). Villa called Thord 'friend' and 'comrade'. He was invited, through an interpreter, to discuss with Villa other military issues such as training, discipline, tactics, and strategy. To serve as scouts and messengers between Villa and the guns, Thord was given two pureblood warriors from the Tarahumara tribe, which resides high up in the Sierra Madre. One of them was Pedro, who seems to have been a shaman. In conversations with Pedro, Thord developed such an interest in the Tarahumara that he began to take notes. The notes grew over the years and culminated in a Tarahumara-English and English-Tarahumara dictionary, which was printed by the University of Miami Press in 1955.

The day after the firing test and the conversation with Villa, the Rebel Army decamped, went against a superior enemy, and defeated it at Tierra Blanca. Thord was surprised that the legendary Villa showed himself to be hesitant and indecisive on this occasion. In Thord's view he erred in a number of key aspects. Firstly he had blundered into the battlefield without scouting or any intelligence as to the Federals' strength and dispositions. Secondly his troops were low on ammunition, with the result that they had to endure heavy enemy fire for much of the battle without being able to return fire. Thirdly Villa deployed all of his troops onto his front. As a result he did not have reserves to defend sectors that came under threat. He also took up positions well within the range of enemy artillery and had only two field guns (under Thord's command) without sights and rangefinders to oppose the Federals' battery of ten guns. He lost the initiative and his entire force had been helplessly pinned down, with Villa himself completely at a loss as to what to do. What might, according to Thord, have been Villa's Waterloo was only saved by the incompetence of the enemy commander, who made no use of his numerical superiority or his tactical advantages, especially in artillery.

Another decisive factor was the unplanned late arrival of a squadron of Rebel cavalry. There had been some mistake in dispatches ordering the cavalry to join Villa's force. As a result they arrived late and, by a stroke of good fortune, on the Federals' exposed flank. A daring charge put the Federals to flight and caused their commander to panic overnight and pull his flanks back towards his centre.

This allowed Villa to take the initiative at last by encircling the enemy with his cavalry and forcing a retreat, which turned into a rout. It was a bloody victory. Almost all the enemy wounded were killed. It was standard practice that all enemy officers in the Federal Army and those from the Volunteer Corps would be shot. The artillery's contribution to the victory was modest but not without significance. Loaded with booty, they returned to Juarez on 28 November 1913.

Early the following day Thord was summoned by Villa. The leader sat in a chair with both leather-clad legs on the table, his hat dangling from his neck and a serious expression on his face. Thord was briefed about a consignment of weapons that had been lost in the US, ending up in Arizona, instead of Texas as planned. The US had declared an arms embargo on Mexico, so smuggling was the only way for Villa to arm his troops. Villa explained that he needed a trustworthy person to

travel without delay to Tucson in Arizona to meet his agent. From there he was to lead a pack-horse train loaded with weapons and ammunition over the Mexican border. ‘Will you help me with this?’ asked Villa.

To serve in the Rebel Army was one thing, weapon-smuggling another. It was a distasteful mission but Thord knew that Villa’s fast-growing army depended on the delivery, so he agreed. Villa seemed very relieved and surprised Thord by saying: ‘When you have completed your assignment you will continue to Hermosillo and report to Venustiano Carranza. He has ordered that the man who repaired my guns must come to him. He has several that need checking. Goodbye, comrade!’

Accompanied by Pedro, Thord crossed the border into the US and made contact with Villa’s agent in Tucson, paid him the balance for the weapons and ammunition, and headed for the border. With him were a number of Indians and Mexican *charros* (cowboys) who were sympathetic to the Rebels and made a living out of cross-border smuggling into Mexico. By careful use of scouts Thord was able to avoid the US border patrols until they were very close.

Then a chase ensued with the smugglers just managing to get their train over the border before being caught by the US Cavalry.

The hero of the action was a *charro* named Lopez, who had held the cavalry off with his Winchester rifle while the pack train traversed the last few hundred metres to the border. He became another of Thord’s constant companions and lifelong friends.

After returning to the US to make a legal crossing to Mexico, Thord fell into conversation with an officer who had been in the cavalry detachment that had pursued them. The man expressed regret that an arms embargo was in force, because he and many others supported the Rebel cause. Thord asked if this was the case why the cavalry were so diligent in enforcing the embargo. The officer replied that they were not diligent in doing so; in fact only the previous evening they had chased a group of arms smugglers whom they could easily have stopped, but he had ordered his men to shoot high.

On 2 December 1913 this report appeared in an American newspaper: ‘It is reported to the Department of Justice Officers in El Paso, Texas, that the entire ammunition supply of this city has been exhausted. It is believed to have been smuggled across the border to Villa’s forces.’ (*Gringo Rebel* (1961) p61.)

On 3 December Thord arrived in Hermosillo after crossing the border and delivering the consignment. It was the end of Thord’s collaboration with Pancho Villa, whom he characterised as follows: ‘Loved by the poor, hated by the *cientificos* [the oligarchs who monopolised the wealth and power of the country] and feared by the Federal Army. He was tough, ruthless, and often cruel, but he would give his own shirt to help a friend.’ (*Gringo Rebel* p61.)



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## BACKGROUND TO THE CIVIL WAR

ALTHOUGH Mexico had won its independence from Spanish rule as early as 1821, little had changed for the poor, the rural peasants (peons), and the Indians. Politics and the economy were dominated by the so-called *Peninsulares*, descendants of the Spanish colonialists who prided themselves on their non-indigenous descent. Ownership of land was concentrated in the hands of a few very wealthy *hidalgos* (landowners). Many of the peons living on *haciendas* (estates), although nominally free, were virtually debt slaves to the *hidalgos*. Mexico desperately needed land and social reform. The predicament of the poor created a volatile situation that would ultimately degenerate into a confused, multi-partisan civil war and plunge the country into a bloodbath.

When Francisco Madero was elected president after the autocratic Porfirio Díaz in 1911, the country thought that a new and peaceful era would dawn for Indians and peons alike. Díaz's presidency had seen the erosion of democracy in Mexico and the heyday of the *científicos*. Madero had made promises of reform. But within only two years Madero lost much of his support because of apparent weakness, broken promises, and his failure to enact land reforms. Political instability and general unrest spread through the country.

On 19 February 1913, determined to restore order, General Huerta, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, seized power in a coup d'état and placed President Madero and Vice President Suarez under arrest. On the evening of 22 February they were to be transported to the town jail 'to protect them from all danger'. When the military escort arrived at the rear of the jail, both men were forced out of the cars and shot.

General Huerta had achieved his objective, the presidency, but the murder of President Madero, who despite his shortcomings came to be seen as a martyr for freedom, was the spark that lit the fire of revolution. Venustiano Carranza had been the interior minister and later governor of the State of Coahuila in Madero's presidency. When Madero was murdered, Carranza took a stand against Huerta and declared the new government unlawful.

He went to war against Huerta with few followers, insignificant amounts of money, and no credit or weapons. At that time Huerta had a large army, money in the treasury, and foreign credit.

Carranza fashioned a revolutionary programme. He was elected as leader of the Revolutionary Party and commander-in-chief of the Rebel Army. He found his place of refuge close to the north-western border and would later on move his headquarters to Hermosillo.

Of the men gathered round Carranza, Thord met General Alvaro Obregon of the North-Western Army, General Lucio Blanco of the North-Western Army's cavalry, and Lieutenant-Colonel Miguel Acosta. Thord described Acosta as 'a very young man for his grade but an outstanding soldier, who became a prominent general later'. (*Gringo Rebel* p78.)

There were three forces in the revolution. In the north west the troops were trained and organised by Carranza and Obregon. Villa's experienced and formidable guerrilla army was in the north. South of the capital, Zapata led another guerrilla force comprising mainly Indian volunteers. Only Villa had recognised Carranza as commander-in-chief. At the beginning the three were to a certain extent united in their objectives. The main aims were to make Mexico more democratic and implement a programme of land reform.

Despite military victories, however, it proved hard to drive out the *cientificos* and transfer the land to the peons and the Indians. It was almost unfeasible to bring together individuals of such different backgrounds.

Villa was indispensable to Carranza, who appointed him commander of the northern army. But at the same time Carranza looked on Villa's growing popularity among the Mexicans with displeasure and fear. Villa in turn often gave impudent answers to Carranza, ignored his orders, acted contrary to them, or ridiculed them as feeble-minded or foolish.

Villa's attitude towards Carranza seemed to be, 'Run the politics but do not interfere in my operations.' The mutual intelligence-sharing was deficient and added to the distrust.

## WITH CARRANZA

THORD'S FIRST acquaintances in Hermosillo were two American journalists, Timothy Turner from Associated Press and George Weeks from New York. Both became lifelong friends. They arranged a meeting with Obregon, who at first was unnecessarily hostile but later calmed down.

Thord suspected that he was hiding something and later came to understand that he was afraid of exposing his limited knowledge of military matters. However, he was keen to learn and did so. Thord offered his services as a cavalryman. A few days later he received an invitation to meet Carranza, who looked like a well-dressed plantation owner. His dignified and fatherly behaviour inspired confidence.

Nevertheless, he was stubborn and did not want to let Thord join the cavalry, insisting instead on the artillery. Thord's commission as captain was signed by Obregon on 9 December 1913 and stipulated that he was placed as artillery instructor and chief of battery under Major Merigo.

All other foreigners had been turned down with the exception of a German machine-gun expert, Major Kloss, and two American Smith brothers, who were airmen and had at their disposal 'an awful-looking biplane'.

The atmosphere was generally one of animosity towards *gringos*. This attitude was shown especially by Merigo himself and Obregon's chief-of-staff, Serrano. In the former case the attitude was probably motivated by jealousy, as Merigo certainly had fairly good theoretical knowledge but very limited field experience.

Thord had just begun his service in the artillery when he met Miguel Acosta. They found themselves to be soulmates and therefore met often. Acosta was acting chief of the cavalry division that was being organised. He had a lively interest in all military matters and came with frequent questions regarding cavalry tactics.

He also introduced Thord to his commanding officer, General Blanco, who had shown a natural touch as a guerrilla chief but lacked any kind of military training.

It was evident that Blanco needed somebody to organise his cavalry into effective units.



A controversy with Merigo culminated in Thord's arrest, but he was saved by Turner's intervention, and this precipitated his transfer to the cavalry. For a while he served as instructor for the artillery in the mornings and for the cavalry in the afternoons. Obregon and Blanco started their lessons in strategy and tactics on 18 December. On Obregon's orders, these activities were kept strictly secret, which was understandable given his position as chief of corps.

Organisation plans and handbooks for the command were compiled as well. These also addressed the problem of organising a rebel army without money, weapons, or ammunition.

Criminals in the US took money for weapons and then notified the border patrol, who seized the shipments before they could reach the Rebels.

On 5 January 1914 the cavalry were ready to move. Some delays had been caused by Serrano and his stubborn refusal to ask Blanco for help. The cavalry division, still not much more than a few regiments in strength, was moved southwards on 8 and 9 January by rail to a place alongside the port of Guaymas. This town was held by the Federals, who sent troop columns against the Rebels. The Rebels in their turn used a troop of Yaqui Indians.

Thord wrote a very interesting description of this operation, which was totally commanded by drum signals. Different drum tattoos were played when the troops should move forward, retreat, go to the side or perform other manoeuvres. The enemy columns were encircled by use of the drum signals. The drumming sounded ominous and caused the Federal soldiers to panic. It was probably the reason the Federals broke their ranks and started running backwards in disorder towards Guaymas.

On 10 January the movement southwards continued. Thord, Lopez, and four Indian scouts were ambushed by Yaquis while travelling on a railroad hand-cart. Although there were deaths on both sides, it turned out that the ambush was just a spirited game for the Yaquis, who were in fact sympathisers hoping to join the Rebel Army.

One of them, a handsome Indian whom they nicknamed Tekwe (Eagle), became another of Thord's devoted companions.

In the absence of his general Thord had to inspect the cavalry units on 12 January. He realised that the reorganisation of the cavalry would face additional difficulties

because many officers were relatives or friends of some general. That same day the second officers' course began and to Thord's surprise all the students turned up.

They were now in the midst of the Maya Indian territory. Groups of these marched past and performed dances for him. Another group demonstrated the superiority of the bow and arrow to the rifle in woodland fighting. According to Thord, without the bows and arrows of the Yaqui and the Maya Indians, the revolution of 1913–1914 might never have succeeded. These remarkable Indians with their bows and long knives captured thousands of rifles from the enemy. It was the bow that gave the Rebels some of their first firearms, desperately needed during ensuing battles.

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After some days, on 21 January, the cavalry mobilised again and went by to Culiacán. The smallpox that had been a constant threat to the troops throughout their march was now ravaging the town.

Theoretical lectures and field practice for officers were revived on 25 January. The troops were inspected over and over again by visiting politicians, which seriously hindered the training programme. The officers' course came to a standstill owing to a plethora of fiestas.

The non-commissioned officers' school, on the other hand, was ongoing and Thord was glad to see how keen these Indians and peons were to learn. Culiacán was full of ruthless criminals and numerous thefts occurred, mostly of weapons. At one point Acosta, Thord, and Tekwe were searching for stolen weapons when they were surrounded and attacked in a small back alley. They saved themselves by rushing at their aggressors, shooting like madmen, and almost miraculously breaking through and escaping.

By 2 February the First Cavalry Division had two brigades. The first brigade had only one complete regiment. The other regiment was incomplete and lacked officers and warrant officers with military experience. The second brigade was being set up bit by bit, but it suffered from the lack of command and most of all a shortage of weapons. A third brigade was also in the making but consisted only of a skeleton staff with a few officers.

They were now informed that the division would leave Culiacán and start the march toward the capital within two weeks. Before that Thord would need to have trained officers and non-commissioned officers for all three brigades, an impossible task. The plan was for two further units to be organised and trained during the battles on the way to Mexico City. The programme was rushed and training was in progress from before dawn to late in the evening.

They were relying on taking weapons and ammunition from the enemy. To get their hands on the right kind of men, they searched from *hacienda* to *hacienda*, from town to town in Guadalajara as far as 725 km away to take out all the *vaqueros* (ranch hands) they could find. On 3 February President Wilson removed the embargo on weapons and ammunition to Mexico 'so that those who revolt against Huerta could secure them'. (*Gringo Rebel* p108.) It was a big day for the Rebels. But they had to have American dollars in order to buy arms. Thousands of animals were herded every day then transported across the border and sold for

cash. The buyers knew the Rebels' situation and were dishonest. They did not give more than \$5 per head on average, not even for well-fed animals worth \$40 each.

Money was also needed for salaries, requisitions, and other expenses within the country. The Rebels even resorted to printing their own bills, sometimes on toilet paper. Merchants who refused to take those bills were harshly treated and sometimes everything they owned was confiscated.

Officials would often buy gold with toilet paper and then sell it in the US for American dollars that ended up in private pockets instead of being used for buying weapons and ammunition.

On 5 February Thord got orders to stop the training and go south the following morning to report to General Rafael Buelna, who was in command in the northern part of the Tepic district. The mission was to try to moderate Buelna's recklessness. Although he was successful, he was known to be foolhardy and careless. Thord liked the young general and tried to impress on him and his officers the need for an orderly advance against the Federal troops with proper scouting, patrols, and guards. His officers bragged that the enemy was in retreat, that the revolution was nearly over, and that General Buelna was the leading military and political figure on the Rebel side. He would soon become Minister of War, they said, and in time even President.

Buelna must have been born with more than average luck, because he defied Thord's warnings and continued his advance without guards or reserves. His troops' vigilance and discipline decreased but still Buelna scorned Thord's advice. He continued to advance but then the inevitable catastrophe struck. Owing to the lack of scouting and protection, Buelna's units were surprised by the enemy twice in rapid succession. In the second instance they only just escaped total annihilation after taking heavy casualties and losing a train, valuable weapons, and supplies in the process. Buelna was forced to retreat a hundred miles with his battered force and learned a hard lesson in military command and humility.

After these setbacks Thord considered his mission over. On 15 February he returned to Culiacán. There he heard the news that Villa had cleared Federal troops out of north Chihuahua. They had retreated and were now encircled in Torreón, their last stronghold in north Mexico. The rumour spread that Villa was tired of Carranza's proclamations and that they had fallen out.

The training of officers and non-commissioned officers resumed upon Thord's return and every unit had uninterrupted training from morning to evening.

On 21 February Thord was asked by Lucio Blanco if he would lend the Rebel government \$10 000 to acquire ammunition. Thord did not have that much money in his dollar account, but gave Blanco a check for \$1 200 and another one for \$2 000.

It was agreed that the money was to be paid back with five percent interest when the revolution had come to an end, or on demand if he were to leave Mexico before the end of the conflict.

The North-Western Army had suffered some setbacks during its advance along the Pacific Ocean coast and had been forced to retreat, mainly due to lack of

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ammunition. They suspected that the Federals intended to manoeuvre towards the army's rear and flank in the hilly terrain below the Sierra Madre. The mountain chain made up the border between the North-Western and Northern Armies. Scouting in this direction was necessary and Thord was given the mission. Bearing in mind the supply difficulties, he chose a small detachment of twenty-five men. They were handpicked Indians from different tribes, among them Pedro, Tekwe, and Lopez. It began on 22 February.

After their arrival in the general scouting area, Thord decided to send two scouts out in different directions. Among other things, they would question the local population as to where the enemy was and what he was up to. The first few days passed without result. But on 26 February while in a river valley the detachment got caught between two superior enemy forces. They had to split up into smaller groups and scatter according to plan so that each group could return to their lines and report back. Pedro and Tekwe stayed with Thord. They released the horses and Pedro, who knew the terrain, led them on foot over the river to caves in the mountains. They were pursued by the enemy all the time. From captured pursuers they learned that a price of fifty cattle was being offered for the capture of Thord.

The escape continued day after day in difficult terrain, which required, among other things, scaling steep cliffs. They encountered a bear, snakes, and scorpions. After a few days Thord suffered a bout of fever. For six years he had been tormented by periodic African malaria: Had he been on his own at this time he would have been helpless. Pedro's medicine eased his condition at first, but then despite (or maybe because of) the treatment, he lapsed into unconsciousness and awoke later in a Tarahumara hut. It must have been on about 2 March. His comrades had carried him several kilometres.

When the Federal pursuers caught up with them, Thord was placed in a storage house, covered with goat skins, and warned not to answer if anyone called him. Rats and 'crawlies' made it hard to lie still.

A Federal soldier looked in and saw Thord but paid with his life when Tekwe threw his knife at the intruder.

Other pursuers arrived at this Tarahumara village and were killed as well. Then during a few days of convalescence, Thord had the opportunity to supplement his knowledge and experience of the Tarahumara Indian religion and customs. He was especially impressed by their ability to persevere in long-distance runs.

By 10 March the small group was back in Culiacán. His experience among the Tarahumara during this time and the protection they gave him – despite the tempting reward being offered for his capture during his illness – made a deep and lasting impression on Thord.

On the same day Thord was given a new mission to conduct on his own. Two weeks earlier a sergeant had been sent south to enlist men into the cavalry. He had recruited more than three hundred but at the same time had promoted himself to general. In some inexplicable way he had acquired weapons and ignored all orders to return to Culiacán. The recruits and the insubordinate sergeant had to be brought home.

Thord took with him Pedro, Tekwe, and Lopez as well as ten good Yaqui Indians and a few reserve horses. They traveled by train and on horseback to the town of Rosario in the province of Sinaloa. They stayed outside the town and sent in a few disguised scouts who confirmed that the 'general' had taken command of the district and was now giving a grand fiesta in his own honour. He had increased his 'commando' by opening prisons, which explained the scouts' report that many of them looked mean.

Thord's group waited until strong drink (served generously and free of charge for the fiesta) took effect. When they arrived at the unguarded party venue, it was nearly one in the morning. Only about ten men could stand upright without help. The rest had fallen asleep. The 'general' sat half-drunk in an armchair with a woman in his lap. He was seized and tied up. The rest were forced to hand in their weapons and placed in rooms under guard.

Formation for inspection was ordered the following morning. Even though a part of the prison community had been scared and escaped during the night, over three hundred men took part in the morning. Some 17 000 pesos was collected – money that the 'general' had printed on toilet paper and distributed to his recruits.

On 18 March, during a pause on the way back to Culiacán, General Blanco appointed Thord as chief of two cavalry regiments of the First Brigade.

All signs indicated that the Federals were beginning to become active on the North-Western Army's flanks, which worried Blanco. The march southwards could hardly take place with unknown enemy numbers on the left flank. Even the right flank was questionable, because the Federals still held the important harbours of Guaymas and Mazatlán, from where they shot at Rebel messengers whenever they had a chance.

On 19 March Blanco ordered Thord with the requisite number of men to go eastwards towards the hilly terrain at the foot of the Sierra Madre. There they should locate and drive out the strong enemy units that had reportedly been positioned there. 'More soldiers than days in the year,' as an old Indian had expressed it. Thord went out with two squadrons.

Some skirmishes occurred with minor enemy units but the force was called back after a few days. Deserters from the Federal Army had joined the Rebels after some encouragement, a sure sign that Federal morale was waning.

The training in Culiacán continued. It had succeeded far beyond Thord's own expectations. Most of the students burned with eagerness to acquire new knowledge and to seize the chance to get somewhere. The top twenty students among the men would earn the rank of cavalry captain. Two of those could not read or write but were promoted because they had placed themselves first and second in field duty. They were good leaders and became colonels two months later. By now the First and Second Cavalry Brigades were ready and all officers had some kind of technical training. Some officers were replaced by new men, transported to staff-quarters and once there got the most intensive training ever given in a rebel army. The best were made instructors, because new officers were in demand for the four new brigades.

In spite of all these successes, Blanco warned Thord about Serrano, who believed Thord to be an American agent: 'Look out and never go out alone at night.' (*Gringo Rebel* p199.) During that time Thord was the victim of several failed assassination attempts.

On 3 April they learned that Villa had taken Torreón. The efforts to get more officers had to be doubled. It was imperative to arrive in the capital before Villa. On 19 April a move southwards from Culiacán was launched to the heights close to the Federal position at the port of Mazatlán.

During an inspection tour in this area Thord was captured, tied, and kicked by a Rebel infantry unit but was freed by Pedro and Tekwe. They had heard that the *gringo* spy was to be executed before dawn. Thord was a *gringo*, and an outsider to everyone outside his own unit.

On 24 April two squadrons of Rebel cavalry under the command of Acosta and Thord succeeded in an assault on a Federal cavalry regiment, causing it to scatter and gallop away, leaving thirty dead and thirty-three wounded behind.

At that time a tense situation had arisen between Mexico's Federal Government under Huerta and the US. As an apology for the arrest of two American sailors, Admiral Mayo demanded that Huerta should salute the American flag. When he refused, all Americans were asked to leave Mexico and a few days later Veracruz was occupied by US forces.

This not only irritated the Federals but also many in the Rebel forces. There were some, especially officers with questionable loyalty to the Rebel cause, who tried to reconcile the internal antagonisms so as to show a united front against the US. Huerta's idea was to force the US to intervene and thereby unite the Mexicans. Even Carranza condemned in strong language the occupation of Veracruz. Only Villa thought there was no point in taking it all that seriously and suggested to Carranza that Huerta should be left to stew in his own juice.



Thord's opinion on this question was that few people in US or Mexico knew how dangerously close Huerta had been to dragging America into the war. Had his reputation been less tarnished, the plan might have succeeded.

A few years later with his regiment in France, Thord began to believe that a similar strategy was being used by the German General Staff to tie Washington's hands and keep the US isolated from Europe's affairs.

Pancho Villa, Lucio Blanco, and Alvaro Obregon deserved to be honoured, because they did more than all the others combined to avoid the awful catastrophe that would have followed any unification with Huerta against the US.

After the occupation of Veracruz, Thord became (at least temporarily) a barely tolerated foreigner. The officers' attitude swung like a pendulum, depending on who spoke last and most convincingly. But Blanco's kindness never failed. Nor did that of Acosta, the horsemen, or the Indian scouts.

The North-Western Army's next operation was aimed at taking the town of Acaponeta, which was strongly held by the enemy. The cavalry would participate

in encircling the town and perform a feigned attack from the north. But its main force would remain at the railroad south of town to stop the enemy from escaping or retreating by train.

During the preparations for this operation, Thord narrowly escaped another assassination attempt. His saviour was Tekwe, who to Thord's question, 'What would happen if one knifed to death a sergeant from his own lines?' answered: 'This man tried to kill you but failed. He shot at you twice from very close range and missed, but would not miss a third time. He deserved what he got. It was either you or him.' (*Gringo Rebel* p223.)

Thord was now Chief of Staff under Blanco. That meant that at times he was far ahead of the front accompanied only by his scouts, and therefore unable to get a personal idea of the situation and terrain. He was shot at several times accidentally by his own men. Once a bullet pierced his big Australian hat.

From dawn on 1 May 1914 the Rebel forces marched forward to the surrounded town. The total attacking force did not exceed fourteen hundred men with weapons in the front line. The remaining rebels, four thousand men, had no firearms. The most important and interesting part of the siege unfolded when Yaquis and Maya Indians were sent to separate places around the town with twenty war drums. When positioned, each drummer beat twice on the drum to show that he was in place. When all had been posted, the drummer that followed instructions from the chief gave a signal, and then the magic, frightening drum rolls began from all twenty drums.

The tribe's spirit was hidden in the drum and now spoke to the warriors and gave them orders to march forward and kill their enemies.

The drums were heard moving slowly closer and closer towards the town. All of a sudden the defenders' nerves could not withstand the pressure. They had counted twenty drums and believed each one represented something like two hundred and fifty or three hundred Indians, making altogether five thousand Yaquis. The Federal commander sent out two officers under the congressional flag and explained that he wanted to surrender, but not to the Indians. That day one general, a colonel, a lieutenant colonel, and 1 312 junior officers and soldiers capitulated. The booty comprised four field guns, six machineguns, 1 600 Mauser rifles, 60 000 cartridges, a number of shells for the artillery, and some money. All this was won without firing one shot thanks to fear and an imaginary horde of Yaqui Indians. In reality there were only two hundred on the Rebel side but twenty drums instead of one – a good example of war stratagem.

When he arrived back at camp that afternoon Thord found his batman Francisco dead. He had been shot by an officer for refusing to part with the key to Thord's field chest, which was filled with documents and letters. The person responsible had opened the tin coffer and carefully searched the contents, but only a few letters were missing.

The malefactor was found, arrested, questioned, and was sentenced by Blanco personally to be shot within half an hour. The hostility towards Americans – and it was insisted that Thord was such – became so strong that his bodyguard was

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field chest.**

doubled by the alert Tekwe. All were Yaquis except for Pedro and Jesus, both Tarahumara Indians. This vigilance seemed to scare off potential assassins.

During preparations for a continued southward advance, reports came in about great numbers of the enemy in the open territory on the eastern flank. Thord suggested to Blanco that he, Thord, should go personally to investigate the matter. The mission was carried out with thirteen Yaquis and the usual henchmen from 6 May in the morning to 8 May in the evening in stormy weather. When he returned, Thord received an order from Blanco to investigate discipline and conditions among the cavalry that formed a part of the besieging troops at Mazatlán. They were 135 km northwest; consequently in a totally different direction from the closest target, which was 120 km south. The Rebel forces had been besieging Mazatlán for some time and the Federals were efficiently enclosed in the important port town, even if every now and then they did attack to get the feel of the situation. Through Acosta, Thord learned that the general had received an anonymous letter threatening Thord's life. That was the reason why a trip to Mazatlán for a few days had been ordered. Thord was to hurry back: they counted on the storm abating shortly. He was back in place on 11 May.

All Americans had by then left Mexico and it looked like war with the United States was imminent.

The North-Western Army's next target was the strategically important town of Tepic. The cavalry had to clear the approach area of enemies, form a protective veil in front of the army, and drive the Federals away from their positions in and around the town. The defenders were expected to be around 2 000 men in position behind walls and houses and in simple trenches.

The attack force was of the same size but only one-third was cavalry. The enemy had to be tricked. The plan of attack was discussed by Blanco, Acosta, and Thord. They decided to avoid a frontal attack, which would entail heavy losses. They would surround the town but leave an opening for the defenders to withdraw, as well as using the old trick of creating dust clouds for the enemy to get a false idea of the size of the attacking force. A prisoner was primed with false information about the attack force's strength and then given the chance to 'escape' being accused of spying and shot by a firing squad. All went according to plan. Faced by imaginary, overwhelming numbers, the Federals streamed out of town. More than a thousand escaped but the Rebels took 600 prisoners, 500 rifles, 400 000 cartridges, two field guns, and four machine-guns.

Thord also wrote about the treatment of prisoners. Of course there were some unpleasant episodes, which could not be defended. But each case should be assessed on its own merits.

He himself was involved in a case where a Rebel soldier butchered a *hacendado* (landowner) after the Rebel forces occupied the area where the soldier, a peon, had lived before joining the revolution. It turned out that the *hacendado* had raped the sister of the rebel soldier and seized his family's land.

Blanco was personally overseeing the case and invited Thord to pass judgment. Thord chose to acquit the peon.

The relationship between Carranza and Villa worsened at that time. The former began to fear the latter as a competitor. Carranza's constant suspicion (and even more so his jealousy of Villa's military accomplishments) culminated in interrupted coal deliveries, deliberately intended to delay Villa's advance. This provoked Villa to take leave in June.

The Rebel Army was split into two camps in a race to the capital and it was a matter of time before they would confront each other. Villa did not always understand the serious consequences of his actions. He alienated people unnecessarily by his rough-manner and harshness, strengthening the opposition to him from the upper classes and the US. The US had earlier been on Villa's side but backed Carranza after the so-called Benton Affair, in which Villa murdered a British subject, allegedly in self-defence.

The North-Western Army's next objective was Guadalajara, 225 km southeast. Blanco suspected that the enemy intended to strengthen the garrison there and outflank the attacking Rebel columns. A report had stated that a considerable cavalry force was marching south from Valparaiso in the province of Zacatecas. Blanco had orders to clear the territory of enemies to the furthest extent possible. In addition, he had to collect information about enemy movements and arrange for the protection of the army's supply lines.

He decided that Thord and a detachment should survey the region all the way to Zacatecas. When the scouting was done, they would go south and rejoin the column in the vicinity of Tepic on the border to Jalisco.

Thord, who was always keen to get out on independent missions, found the task promising. He was also tired of accusations of being a foreign agent. The detachment, intended initially to be a regiment, was reduced (at Thord's request) to fifty-three men, reserve horses, provisions for twelve days, and forage for two days. The month-long reconnaissance took place in very difficult terrain. Intelligence was collected mostly from the local population.

This contact with different Indian tribes gave Thord increased knowledge of their customs and way of life – something that had always interested him greatly. He was surprised at how little these people knew about the world beyond their own tribes. In contrast they seemed to know a lot about their own people's history and their gods.

The reconnaissance passed largely without incident, except for a few minor skirmishes. But one night when Thord was lying asleep he was awakened by something thudding into the saddlebag he was using as a pillow. Grabbing the knife he always kept at his side he swung his arm backwards with full force. He felt the blade hit something hard and heard a deep groan.

His attacker was an Indian whom he had refused to issue with a carbine two days earlier. The attacker's killing thrust had been deflected when he tripped over Thord's boots. The knife had plunged deep into the saddlebag only six inches from his throat. Thord's knife had hit and buried itself in the man's spine, killing him on the spot.

He kept the knife for forty-seven years as a symbol of luck.

**Thord felt  
his blade hit  
something and  
heard a groan.  
His attacker was  
an Indian whom  
he had refused  
to issue with  
a carbine.**

Through Thord's scouting raid it became clear that no serious threat against the North-Western Army's left flank existed.

After all their training and scouting work, they could finally focus on their main objective, the drive towards the capital. During the march through the province of Jalisco, the Rebel columns were battered by a Federal counter-attack, but they managed to defend grimly until the attack petered out. Thereafter the Federals went on the defensive, trying to halt the Rebel advance by occupying and fortifying towns. The Rebel Army's operations therefore comprised a series of attacks on these fortified towns. The cavalry division's tasks were to cover the army's advance as the vanguard and act as a mobile support force.

Thord participated in the conquest of Guadalajara – Mexico's second largest town – on 8 July 1914; La Barca on 24 July; Tanhuato on 25 July; La Piedad on 27 July; and Trapuato on 30 July. Seleya was taken on 2 August; Queretaro on 4 August; Tula on 6 August; and Teoloyucan – a railroad station 30 km north of Mexico City – on 8 August. On 13 August 1914 the Rebels marched into the capital and the Federals capitulated.

Within his narrative on the war Thord intersperses comments and observations of a more analytical nature on aspects like the relations among the three revolutionary forces and their leaders, Carranza, Villa, and Zapata.

United initially by their common determination to avenge President Madero's murder and oust the reviled Huerta, the Rebel leaders gradually fell out with each other because of personality clashes and competing ideas about political reform.

Carranza was a liberal democrat and wanted to democratise rather than overthrow the culture and institutions of the country. He wanted to create a solid middle class that the government could depend on to oppose extremists on both sides of the political spectrum. For Villa and Zapata the objective, apart from revenge, was to drive all *cientificos* from power and implement a programme of revolutionary land reform that would return the land to the peons and Indians. These differences inevitably led to conflict among the leaders and their armies, which finally ignited into bloody civil war in the autumn of 1914, after Thord had left Mexico. The convulsions were to last into the 1920s and cost at least two million lives.

## TACTICS AND COMMAND

THORD'S narrative provides interesting insight into technical and military aspects of the campaign, such as tactics, leadership, and psychological warfare. An all-pervading theme was his emphasis on the need for constant vigilance and security. He records numerous instances of the unfortunate results of poor guarding and picketing. His Indian bodyguards were of great help in teaching the troops vigilance and supervising its implementation, especially when fatigue set in. 'Never has there been a more cunning and intelligent scout and friend than Pedro, the Tarahumara Indian and shaman.'

To maintain discipline in these cases demanded drastic measures like demoting an indolent cavalry captain or forcing officers on 'French leave' to march long stretches on foot to reunite with their units.

During the Federal counter-attack in Jalisco, Thord's depleted brigade was pitted against an army corps and had to conduct a strategic withdrawal against a superior enemy, suffering heavy casualties. Many soldiers were physically and mentally exhausted. The troops should have been relieved and rested. Some had reached their limit, and then there would be a reaction.

'I worried that these habitually fearless men would become grumpy and rebellious. Under such circumstances a soldier may sometimes throw down his weapon and desert or else surrender owing to a fear that he is losing his mind or due to lack of sleep and food. Many of our men were in this state and contaminated others with their fear and dissatisfaction. I had noticed this deplorable condition several times among Federal soldiers but never before among our own.' (*Gringo Rebel* p330.)



Thord served the rebel cause in many different capacities: as instructor, advisor, and supervisor of protection and security. He was also sent on independent reconnaissance missions. His other role was as a commander.

He was appointed chief of two cavalry regiments on 12 March and then chief of staff to Blanco on 28 March. Evidently the organisation of the Rebel command must have been quite fluid and flexible to allow for this constant changing of roles, in marked contrast to the rigid organisation typical of most military forces in the modern era.

Obregon, chief of the North-Western Army, understood the importance of training and appreciated the positive role that Thord could play in this regard.

However, relationships within the command were complicated by personal rivalries and feuds. His chief of staff, Serrano, in particular, made life difficult for Thord, who believed Serrano was behind the string of assassination attempts on his life. Even Thord's boss Blanco was exposed to Serrano's ill-will, which he expressed by denying the cavalry the credit for taking important districts, like Guadalajara and Mexico City. The cavalry actually advanced into these places first but this was never officially announced, and they were forced to withdraw and allow Obregon's columns to claim the glory.

Another deficiency in the military command was the lack of planning and clearly defined objectives.

'The war command's indecisiveness made me nervous,' Thord wrote. 'Just to stand still and not have any idea of what the enemy was planning was an invitation to a catastrophe.' (*Gringo Rebel* p332.) He felt it was essential to show the colours through intensified scouting.

Attempts to take barricaded villages and towns by frontal attack failed on several occasions. So encirclement became the common method of capturing them. These settlements were often held by forces of at least equal strength to the attacking

ones. They used different ploys to mislead the defenders about their strength. In the classical way, they raised dust clouds by dragging bunches of twigs in the sand. They also used Indian drum signals and bugles to deceive the enemy as to their numerical strength.

An ugly game with white flags took place on both sides to tempt the enemy into carelessness or to infiltrate enemy lines.

Carefully misinformed prisoners were allowed to 'escape' and relay their false intelligence to the enemy.

In captured settlements the attacking troops rode up and down the streets to give the impression of greater numbers.

This psychological warfare seems to have succeeded. As the campaign progressed there was evidence that the Federal troops were more and more demoralised. This did not, however, prevent fierce battles being fought.

It was to be expected that an army 'that had been stomped out of the ground in a fairly primitive society' would struggle to cope with functions other than those directly connected to combat activity. Liaison and communications at the level of units were primitive, based only on personal meetings and cavalry couriers for written messages. The supply of weapons and ammunition has been touched upon. What could not be bought in the US and smuggled across the border had to be taken from the enemy. Things improved when President Woodrow Wilson lifted the arms embargo on Carranza in February 1914. But access to money and credit was another enduring problem for the Rebels.

Given the shortage of money and the lack of supply infrastructure, the Rebel Army was very dependent on resources available in whatever district they were operating. When these were inadequate, they would be forced to sweep outside the real operation area.

Thord wrote of one such foraging operation – with newly recruited units – that had to be combined with training. The usual food was porridge made from cornflour and water.

It was understandable that Thord eagerly grasped opportunities to 'shoot something wild for the frying pan' during these expeditions.

Medical care was primitive. 'Our wounded have to endure horrible sufferings as we are without medical supplies and do not have a doctor with us. Several injured men asked to be freed from their torments. Three people's requests were granted. I tried every conceivable way to mitigate the anguish of these faithful young men, and I let Indians, shamans, and even witchdoctors go ahead because I thought it was madness to let the wounded die in groups, lacking any medical care. We mixed salt water for washing wounds, and it seemed better than juice from chewed tobacco, such as the Indians used. They also used to blow smoke into the wounds.' (*Gringo Rebel* p355.)

In the American press there were complaints that the Rebels had destroyed the Mexican railways. 'Naturally we tore up the railway tracks and burned or blew up bridges, but only when it was militarily necessary and – sometimes – to save ourselves from getting hanged in the closest tree.... The Federals... as a rule

destroyed the railway to put a halt to our advance. They were not particularly fair and did not acknowledge their destructive work but transferred the blame onto Rebel shoulders. These false accusations were often published in the American press.... Critics should consider that the opponent's communications are important objectives and an officer should always aim to demolish those.' (*Gringo Rebel* p341.)

In general, resources for clearing battlefields were lacking. The population was called upon to take care of this as well as having to bury the dead.

By and large, the population in the communities they captured saluted the Rebels as liberators.

Great animosity was directed at the Catholic priesthood, which supported the ruling elite. 'The priests were against us and urged the population not to have anything to do with the Constitutionals. They forbade their congregations from swearing the oath of allegiance to the Rebels and if they had already done so, declared that such oaths could be broken with impunity. Priests got into trouble not because they were priests but because they interfered with the revolution unnecessarily by joining our opponents and encouraging others to do the same. Some small units in Huerta's army seem to have been made up entirely of priests that actively fought against the people's liberation force and all land reforms.' (*Gringo Rebel* p342.)

A captured Federal officer revealed under questioning that a foreign civilian with the Federals had been asking around for information of a *gringo* that was serving with the Rebels. The prisoner was allowed to leave and had with him a piece of paper with Thord's name. On a later occasion Pedro brought a prisoner who had asked to meet *el gringo jefe* (chief).

The prisoner handed over a note with the words: 'Dear Thord-Gray. The Rebel faction is doomed to fail. Come over to the Federal side before it is too late. I guarantee your security. Bradstock.' This was the man Thord had met in the German club in Shanghai in October 1913 and whose derogatory comments about the Rebels had prompted Thord to travel to Mexico. The message confirmed Thord's previous suspicions that Bradstock was a British agent.

At the capture of Tula, the former capital of the Toltec empire, Thord found a number of relics from Toltec times in the form of sculptures made from volcanic rock and terracotta. He bought some of the larger sculptures and many of the smaller ones. The items were left in storage and were collected seven years later – untouched – and then given to the Museum of Ethnography in Gothenburg.

## MEXICO CITY

SOME ODD situations arose when the Rebel cavalry reached the vicinity of Mexico City. The Federal governor in the area, who commanded the capital's police, had, at his own request, been brought over to the Rebel camp, where he was received by Acosta and Thord. He wanted help to control the gangs of

bandits that continued to exploit the city and to get food for thousands of starving people. However the cavalry had strict orders not to march into the capital before Obregon's arrival, so the governor had to return disappointed.

Some members of the diplomatic corps sent a courier to Obregon and proclaimed their wish to meet him before an extensive siege of the capital began. They suggested meeting at a certain time on 9 August 1914 in Teoloyucan, which was held by the cavalry division. Obregon had not yet arrived but the proposal was accepted and general preparations were made for a parade of the First Cavalry Brigade to coincide with the meeting.

At the given time the brigade was ready to mount but no diplomats arrived. After a three-hour wait without any sign of the diplomats the troop had to stand down. Demanding negotiations and then not bothering to come made a bad impression. Breaking the agreement, it was felt, was done deliberately to put the Rebels in their place. This stupid behavior backfired later, especially on the part of the British, who were mostly responsible for the arrangement and were embarrassed about Thord's British connection.

An odd apology was sent to Obregon. There had been 'misunderstandings' and the diplomats would come on 11 August instead. This explanation was considered a deliberate insult. A brief and clearly cool reception of guests took place on 11 August. There was no parade or march past, not even a guard of honour. Obregon did not show the slightest trace of cordiality and it was obvious that he found the guests' perplexity amusing.

Thord did not take part in the negotiations but followed Blanco as ordered. When Thord was presented to Great Britain's envoy, Sir Lionel Carden, the latter recognised his name: 'You are not Mexican, are you?' Sir Lionel asked.

Thord mentioned that he had fought with the British army against the Boers, and then Sir Lionel remembered him and told Thord that a telegram was waiting for him at the British legation. He gave Thord the first official information that war had broken out in Europe.

The conference between Obregon and the diplomats ended in deadlock, especially when he stated plainly that they should mind their own business.

Sir Lionel came over to Thord and bombarded him with questions concerning military information of a sensitive nature. Each question was wily and at the same time an insult to Thord's loyalty to the Rebel cause, his uniform, and his integrity. Thord was flabbergasted at the man's arrogance but realised that he had to control himself and put a good face on it. Therefore he answered with distortions of facts and obvious lies and he mentioned that what he had spoken about was confidential and not to be told to another soul. If that happened, he would be shot as a traitor. Because of the picture Thord had painted, the conversation ended with Sir Lionel exclaiming:

'There is no hope then for the Federal troops. I shall try to get them out of the capital tomorrow.' Because Thord had been completely preoccupied with Sir Lionel, he did not get the chance to talk to any others, with the exception of Commander Harry Hopkins, with whom he became a lifelong friend.

The next day the cavalry marched towards the outskirts of the capital. Scouts had reported that the city centre had been evacuated by the Federal troops but considerable military activity continued east and southeast of the city. Blanco had orders to inspect and clear all the arterial roads the following day. Acosta and Thord burned with eagerness to get a look at the city, because here in ancient times once lay Tenochtitlan, capital of the fabulous Aztec empire. They had already agreed, whatever the cost, that they would have a quick look around the same evening.

This inappropriate and careless escapade greatly affected events that followed. With Pedro on foot two hundred metres in advance, armed with a revolver, Bowie knife, and a sling, Acosta and Thord rode alongside a groom with carbines in saddle-holsters as well as revolvers. At nine in the evening on the outskirts of the city they met with twenty armed soldiers under the command of a certain Sergeant Herrera. It turned out to be a troop of Guerrero Indians, Zapatistas, who were out on reconnaissance.

After talks the evening's prowling-force increased from four to twenty-five men until it became time to part again. Directly after the farewell, yells and gunfire were heard. Thord and his friends realised that their Guerrero friends had got into trouble, turned around and galloped towards the sound of fire. The Indians had found themselves caught between two Federal patrols but they had positioned themselves in doorways and were putting up a good defence. Acosta and Thord's group surprised the combatants and the clash was short-lived. The Guerrero soldiers had lost four men and the Federals had sixteen dead or dying in the street.

The excursion ended at two in the morning: it was more by luck than skill that Thord's party had escaped unscathed.

Patrolling the city's streets the following day to find out if the enemy really had evacuated, Blanco and Thord came by coincidence to the place where the conflict had taken place during the night. The dead were still on the ground and the sight puzzled Blanco, as they were all Federal soldiers – the Guerrero Indians had taken away their dead – but Thord chose not to volunteer any information.

On 14 August 1914 the cavalry division rode into the capital in a show of force. In the district Thord was assigned to patrol, he reported that the vanguard of one of Zapata's regiments was near. It turned out to be commanded by Sergeant Herrera from the preceding encounter, who greeted him with a salute and a cheerful smile. It was necessary to find out more about these Zapatistas and Thord accepted Herrera's invitation to meet his colonel. He rode with him for about five kilometres and found a dismounted Zapatista regiment preparing to march. (Thord's regiment had halted to prepare for combat some distance away.) Thord rode forward and met the commander, Colonel Morales, who turned out to be a pleasant Guerrero Indian with the refined manner of an Indian chief. He knew of the previous night's fight against the Federalists and was very grateful for their help. When Thord rode back by way of another street he noticed foreign flags on some of the houses along the coast. One of those was Swedish and one of two men called into the house in Swedish: 'Come out and take a look at the Rebels!' They were Carl Erik Östlund and Gösta Lundberg, who became close friends of

Thord's. The friendships were passed on to succeeding generations of children and grandchildren.

On 16 August Blanco offered to take Acosta and Thord with him for a look at the National Palace, the Mexican President's residence. In a neat room with a large desk lay quite a few items engraved with the initials PD, which must have belonged to Porfirio Díaz. They were probably gifts he had been given on different occasions, among them a heavy, silver knife and an old-fashioned silver-plated hand grenade fashioned as a lighter. Blanco presented these two items to Thord and said: 'Take these things as souvenirs of the revolution.' (They are now in the possession of the author's family.)

The same day Blanco was visited by a committee of four lieutenant-colonels with an unpleasant and surprising errand for Thord. A group of officers had assembled to discuss the policies pursued by representatives and embassies of foreign powers, especially the British. The British Government was opposed to the Revolutionary Party and Sir Lionel Carden had vigorously promoted this policy and given Huerta as much support as possible. The committee suggested that the British Legation should be closed immediately and in addition that Sir Lionel should be declared *persona non grata* and sent home. If the British refused to close and leave the legation, it would be burned and the ambassador would be arrested and deported with his personnel to the Americans in Veracruz.

These were drastic measures. Thord was worried that Blanco's nationalist enthusiasm and his inexperience when it came to diplomacy could be problematic and suggested that someone else should go to Sir Lionel to request that he leave Mexico before he was forced to go. The suggestion was accepted but the message would be phrased as an instruction, not a request, and it was decided that Thord should inform the minister. Sir Lionel was not at home apparently and the message had to be delivered instead to the first secretary of the British legation, Thomas Hohler, which was very awkward. The message, which was tantamount to an ultimatum, left Hohler speechless. When he had recovered, he answered that he would deliver the message to Sir Lionel the following morning. Thord perplexed Hohler even more by advising him to convey the message the very same day, because the Rebels were impatient and were demanding action.

It became evident from Thord's conversation with a British sentry when he left the legation that Sir Lionel was in fact at home and had most likely been listening to the conversation with Hohler.

At that time George G de Parade Junior invited Thord to live in his house, the Casa de la Condessa, in Tacubaya, one of the most beautiful homes in the capital. Thord accepted and moved in.

Another sensitive mission fell to Thord during August. Blanco called a conference. He was upset and complained that Carranza was even more embittered than usual and was refusing to negotiate with General Emilio Zapata unless this 'Indian bandit' came to him with hat in hand and recognised him as commander-in-chief. Blanco revealed that he and four other generals were dissatisfied with Carranza's attitude towards Zapata and Villa. He wanted to know the opinion

of his *compañeros* (comrades), hence this conference. It was well known that Obregon did not feel at ease with Villa's large army in the north poised to strike. Zapata in the south was unpleasantly close as well. It was known that Villa and Zapata had for some time been conspiring to throw Carranza and Obregon out of the capital and remove them from the political stage.

Thord suggested that he and Acosta should ride to Zapata for talks. Blanco was of the opinion that it was unwise for both to leave at the same time. 'It would trouble me to lose both my left and right hand at the same time.' (*Gringo Rebel* p396.) Thord told them of his meeting with the Zapatista patrol, the fight against the Federals, and the conversation with Colonel Morales. To judge from those conversations, in his opinion, it would not be impossible to come to an accord with Zapata.

Blanco hesitated, but Thord offered to ride alone to Zapata and try to convince him that Carranza was not as intransigent as he seemed and that the Indians would surely get their land. Blanco agreed to this on condition that the mission was carried out in the greatest secrecy and with no armed conflict with the Zapatistas other than in self-defence.

Thord wanted to be lightly equipped and take only two scouts, Pedro and Tekwe, for the mission. But Blanco rejected the idea and insisted that the escort must be at least one hundred men, bearing in mind the number of bandit groups roaming around in the area.

Thord's objection to having an unwieldy squadron to deal with did not avail. He knew that Blanco meant well.

Blanco gave Thord a very beautiful Colt .45 revolver with exquisite casing and gold inlay and asked him to offer it plus two hundred cartridges to Zapata as a token of friendship.

It would take too long to relate in detail how this strange expedition played out. Suffice it to say that the scouts Thord was allotted were Zapatista agents who led the troops into a trap. They escaped only by the sacrifice (to the very last man) of a rearguard of Yaqui Indians.

Thord contacted Colonel Morales, who felt obliged to disarm the detachment but promised to inform Zapata.

Awaiting his answer Thord took the opportunity to visit the temple pyramid complex in Tepoztlán, where he found an old Indian as guide. Out of gratitude for Thord's kindness to him, this man accompanied them and came to be invaluable on their return to the capital.

After the visit to the temple, a further meeting took place with Morales in the presence of a man in the background who was not introduced. Thord believed this might have been Zapata himself. But Morales maintained that the commander was unavailable and therefore could not respond to Thord's message. He gave Morales the revolver intended for Zapata and Morales made a final effort to win Thord and his men over to Zapata's side. With a warning that they would be followed, he returned their weapons and released them as a gesture of gratitude for the help they had given the Zapatistas in the capital a few days earlier.

The return journey thus became a hide-and-seek chase for two days with the old Indian proving his worth as a guide in helping them to evade Zapatista forces that assiduously tried to pursue and capture the expedition.

One of Blanco's reflections after Thord's account of the events was: 'A march straight into the heart of his area by an armed force might cause some misgivings that Zapata's position is not as invulnerable as he brags.'

This assumption of Blanco's proved to be perfectly correct. Zapata delayed his already late attack on the capital.

Eventually he united with Pancho Villa in November, drove Carranza and Obregon from the city and occupied it for a while.



The bothersome affair with Sir Lionel was sorted out when Hohler felt compelled to telegraph the contents of the Rebels' message to the government in London. The government in turn recommended the ambassador's immediate transfer, which duly took place. Thord and Sir Lionel could still part as friends. Later Hohler took over as chief of the British legation.

Since learning that there was war in Europe, Thord had tried in vain a number of times to take his leave of the Mexican Army. It was Serrano who blocked it. Indirectly permission was obtained from Carranza in the form of a hint that Blanco might give Thord 'furlough' without asking the chief of staff. In a letter dated 3 September 1914 Thord got indefinite leave from the Mexican Army. By then he had been colonel for some time.

His departure also turned into an adventure. Blanco had proposed to Obregon's staff that Thord should be offered a private railroad wagon for the trip from the capital to Veracruz. It seemed strange that Serrano agreed to this favour, as only a few days earlier he had implied to Blanco and others that Thord was in collusion with Villa.

Thord's faithful bodyguards Pedro and Tekwe were particularly suspicious.

By questioning friends in the staff headquarters, they had found out that there was a plot to uncouple Thord's wagon while the train was on its way down a steep slope – because a *gringo* spy would be travelling in it. After a ceremonial farewell with a march-past of the First Cavalry Brigade, Thord was therefore diverted by Pedro and Tekwe before he reached the station. They piloted him to a freight train that was due to depart a little earlier. In this way his life was saved, because the wagon intended for him was unhitched according to plan and was crushed in the ensuing derailment. Thankfully Thord was not on board.

In Veracruz, which still was under American occupation, Thord encountered several people he knew from his time in the Philippines: Captain Burnside, Lieutenant West, and Major La Mot. On 13 September 1914 he travelled from Veracruz on the *SS City of Mexico*. Thus ended his first journey to the land he had come to love. He returned there many times on other errands unrelated to military matters. His Indian friends and the country's ancient history came to dominate his interests in later years.