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Continental United States NORAD Region – First Air Force (Air Forces Northern)
Office of Public Affairs

1210 Beacon Beach Road * Tyndall AFB FL 32403-5549
(850) 283-8080 * FAX (850) 283-3376 * DSN 523-8080

afnorthpa@tyndall.af.mil * www.1af.acc.af.mil * [twitter@1staf](https://twitter.com/1staf) * [Facebook@AmericasAOC](https://www.facebook.com/AmericasAOC)

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Remembering the ‘Forgotten Eagles’

By Lt. Col. Susan A. Romano, AFNORTH Public Affairs

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. –

Approximately 16 million American men and women served in the United States military during World War II. Of that 16 million, it is estimated that just one in four are still alive today. Many of the Allied Forces – United Kingdom, France, USSR, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – numbering in the tens of millions have also passed away.

And yet there is a small cadre of pilots – three to be exact – from a virtually unknown corner of the world, still alive today that

fought side-by-side with the Americans in the Pacific.

Historians and students alike are familiar with the Allies of World War II from smaller nations such as Ethiopia, Greece, Norway, Belgium and Yugoslavia, just to name a few. But these same aforementioned scholars and students may not be familiar with a group of men who came together in the summer of 1944 to help defeat the ever-growing threat from Japan in the Pacific.

What makes this story even more significant is the fact that not only do most ‘foreigners’ not know about their existence and participation in the war effort, but many of their own countrymen are not aware of their role in helping defeat the Axis Powers during the mid-20th Century.

Enter Escuadrón 201, a band of 33 pilots and 270-plus ground support personnel from Mexico, who became known as the “*Aguilas Aztecas*” or Aztec Eagles. The squadron was



A vintage photograph from the parade in Mexico City shows the proud men of Escuadrón 201 marching through the streets as throngs of their countrymen greet them with a hero's welcome. (Photo Courtesy of Asociacion Mexicana de Veteranos)

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formed after German submarines attacked Mexican oil tankers that were carrying crude oil to the United States. Immediately following the unprovoked attack, Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho declared war on the Axis powers and ordered his aviators to receive advanced pilot training in the United States.

In April 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt met with President Camacho in Monterrey, Mexico to encourage and support Mexico's active participation in the war effort.

The all-volunteer unit was made up of the best fighter pilots, electricians, mechanics and radiomen in the Mexican Air Force, and had the overwhelming support of the Mexican government. Some of the men had been already been serving in the Mexican armed forces, while others were selected by competitive examination from civilian life.



Mexican Air Force Col. Justino Reyes Retana vividly recalls his days with Escuadrón 201 as a P-47 pilot during World War II. (Photo Courtesy of Asociacion Mexicana de Veteranos)

“At the time, we weren’t sure what to expect,” said Col. Justino Reyes Retana, one of the surviving Aztec Eagle pilots, during a September interview in Mexico City. “We first went to Texas to get physicals, undergo initial processing and obtain additional fighter tactics training. A lot of the maintenance men were sent to other bases in the United States to get their appropriate training, and then we all reassembled in Pocatello, Idaho to get our final training, equipment and last-minute orders.”

Once the group completed processing in Pocatello, they were shipped out to the Philippines and were assigned to the 58th Fighter Group, part of the U.S. Army Air Forces in Luzon.

“We left from California in March 1945 aboard the S.S. Fairisle, a ‘victory ship’ as it was called back then,” said Aztec Eagle pilot Capt. Jose Luis Pratt Ramos. “The ship was used as a troop carrier, and we had no idea how long it would take to get to our final destination. After nearly 30 days at sea, we finally arrived in Manila.”

After about two weeks of acclimation and rebuilding the airfield – their new ‘home’ in Pampanga Province – the group took to the skies and began flying combat missions whose initial objectives were to strike enemy buildings, vehicles and artillery units.

The Eagles were ultimately assigned to conduct long-range strike missions against heavily defended Japanese targets in the region. Capt. Luis Pratt was one of the pilots whose P-47 Thunderbolt was hit by anti-aircraft fire.

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“Even though I was hit,” said Capt. Luis Pratt, “I was able to return to base safely. I was lucky. The hardest part wasn’t getting shot at by the Japanese – sometimes the hardest part was landing on that little metal runway back at our home base. That, and dealing the giant mosquitoes.”

Throughout the late spring and early summer of 1945, the men faced significant Japanese opposition and lost men to enemy fire, while others perished due to ground accidents or airborne mishaps.

Month after month, they launched their P-47s under austere conditions, practiced and refined their combat tactics, and provided much-needed close air support to American and Philippine ground troops.

And when they weren’t looking death in the face day after day on their combat sorties, they found time to enjoy the local area and learn about the Filipino culture.

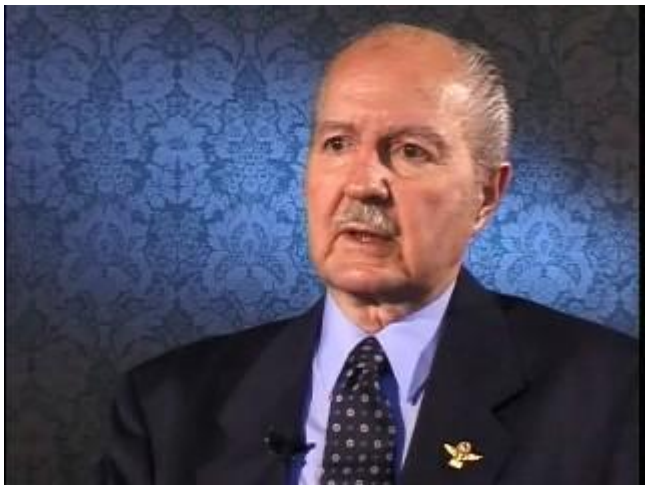
“We spoke Spanish to each other in the squadron, and did our best to communicate with English-speaking pilots who we flew with,” said Capt. Luis Pratt. “But when we weren’t flying, we socialized with the local Filipinos who spoke ‘Pampango, their own dialect, which we picked up pretty quickly.”

In August 1945, the unit received a message that two atom bombs had been dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and Japan announced its surrender to the Allied Powers, officially ending the war in the Pacific. The men celebrated long into the night and anxiously awaited their orders home.

“I can vividly remember our welcome home to Mexico,” said Capt. Luis Pratt. Once we got to the States, we boarded a train from Laredo, Texas. As we traveled through the towns toward Mexico City, we were greeted by cheering crowds and confetti and marching bands.”

Col. Reyes Retana continued, “It was an incredible sight to see our nation welcome us home. President Camacho recognized us with a parade at the National Stadium on Nov. 20, 1945. Everywhere you looked, you saw American and Mexican flags, men cheering, girls blowing kisses, children dancing in the street and some people with tears in their eyes. I will never forget it.”

That same day, Col. Antonio Cardenas, the group’s commander, returned their battle flag to President Camacho during the huge welcome home celebration at the confetti-littered *Plaza de la Constitucion*.



Mexican Air Force pilot Capt. Jose Luis Pratt Ramos discusses his role as an aviator during World War II fighting against the Japanese in the Pacific. (Photo Courtesy of Asociacion Mexicana de Veteranos)

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According to public records, President Camacho said, “I receive with emotion the flag as a symbol of Mexico. You return with glory, having complied brilliantly with your duty and in these moments, you receive the gratitude of our people.”

The brave men of Escuadrón 201 hold a place in Mexico’s history as the first and only Mexican Air Force unit to see action in World War II. They hold the distinct title of being the only Mexican fighting force to ever operate outside the borders of their own nation. That statistic still holds true today.

Nearly 65 years have passed since their homecoming, yet both the colonel and the captain relive their memories of that historic part of their journey with vivid clarity.

“What I miss the most is the camaraderie and friendship we enjoyed,” said Capt. Luis Pratt. “There is nothing like the brotherhood of pilots, and a special part of me longs for those days. It was the best time of my life.”

Despite getting on in years (both are 85 years old), the men, including the third surviving pilot, Col. Carlos Garduño Nuñez, get together once a month and enjoy recalling what they call, “their glory days.”

“We talk about what it was like back then, but we also talk about today’s modern aircraft, and what current pilots face in combat,” said Capt. Luis Pratt. “I don’t think I could fly the machinery of today. I have the spirit, though!”



The replica of the original wings and squadron designation is worn on the lapels by all members of the Aztec Eagles. (U.S. Air Force photo by Lt. Col. Susan A. Romano)

“I think it’s important to recognize the efforts of these incredible aviators,” said Maj. Gen. Hank Morrow, Air Forces Northern commander. “A large part of our air sovereignty mission is working closely with our Mexican neighbors to the south, and I know the historic groundwork the men of Escuadrón 201 laid plays an absolute critical role in how we work with the Mexican Air Force today. As a pilot myself, I am in awe of what these men accomplished during World War II. They are absolute heroes in my eyes.”

Despite the dim spotlight that has been placed on these national heroes, they truly were an integral part of what Tom Brokaw called “The Greatest Generation.”