

Mormon Battalion a valiant emblem of faith, devotion

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The Mormon Battalion set an example of the Doctrine and Covenants injunction to "be anxiously engaged in a good cause, do many things of their own volition and help to bring about righteousness," Elder David B. Haight of the Quorum of the Twelve said June 15.

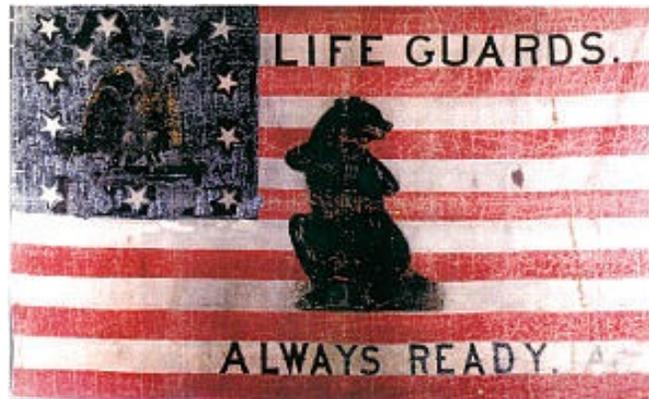


Photo by Jeremy Harmon

The Mormon Battalion carried this huge, hand-painted American flag during its 2,000 mile march from Iowa to California's Pacific coast.

Elder Haight was the keynote speaker for the annual Mormon Battalion Heritage Program sponsored by the Mormon Battalion service organization that seeks to preserve and honor the group of 500 volunteers recruited from among the initial company of pioneers making its way westward from Nauvoo, Ill., in 1846.

It was the largest such program held since the organization's annual Heritage Day was instituted in 2000, with attendance mostly filling the Salt Lake Tabernacle. The Southern Utah Heritage Choir performed several selections. Fred Ball, executive vice president of Zion's Bank in Salt Lake City also spoke. Bob Welti, a prominent former weatherman with KSL-TV provided a narration, and Carol Mikita, KSL-TV news specialist, delivered a recitation.

A huge, hand-painted American flag once carried by the pioneers from Nauvoo and borne by the battalion during its 2,000-mile infantry march from Iowa to the California coast, was displayed on the rostrum, as were two oil paintings by Helen Paul: "Sunrise — Raising the First United States Flag at Fort Moore, Pueblo de Los Angeles, California" and "Five Hundred Wagons Stood Still — Farewell at Council Bluffs, July 20, 1846."

Elder Haight, in his talk, made reference to the Fort Moore painting and spoke of its details. He said battalion members cut two pines and lashed them together as a flag pole "so that Old Glory would be shining the first time over the Pacific Ocean, the first time over what would become California."

The painting "capsulizes what we've talked about tonight," he said, "a great deed" originating in the mind of Brigham Young, who desired some means of moving the vast companies of Latter-day Saint pioneers across the prairies of Iowa and Nebraska toward the Rocky Mountains. He spoke of Jesse C. Little, president of the Eastern States Mission, who was introduced to U.S. President James K. Polk by Col. Thomas L. Kane, an influential friend of the Church. From this meeting, in which it was proposed that the Church be given a government contract to haul freight west, the idea originated to enlist some of the Latter-day Saints to serve in the U.S. Army in the war with Mexico.

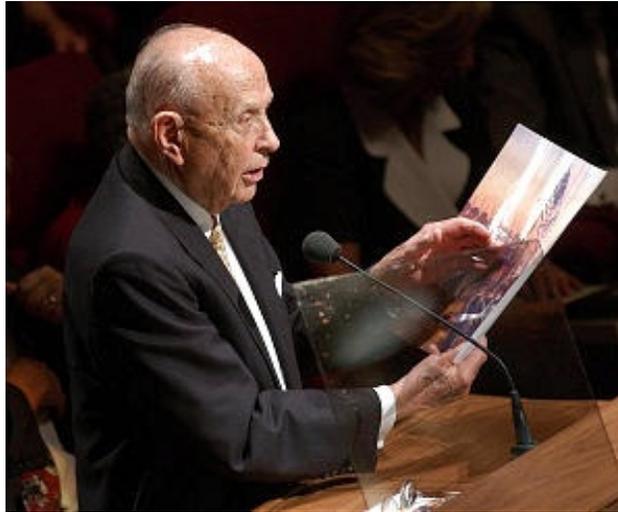


Photo by Jeremy Harmon
As keynote speaker, Elder David B. Haight addresses the annual Mormon Battalion Heritage Program.

"And so when we talk about faith and devotion, we think about this whole concept of the Mormon Battalion," Elder Haight said. "Those men would be taken who were valiant, to go into the army for a year, to take that terrible march that they did. But everybody seemed to win as a result of this. The United States found that the Mormon people were friendly and that we kept our word and that we could be trusted. . . . The pioneers began to receive a little bit of cash to help them along the way."

Brother Ball, in his address, mused, "I wonder how I would have responded to such a call." He remarked: "Why would a man suddenly volunteer to leave his family and loved ones behind in uncertain circumstances? . . . Why did he serve an army and a country that had refused him and his people protection under the laws of its Constitution? . . . We have heard that service is the rent we pay for our room on earth. I think the Mormon Battalion members just wanted to be good tenants. . . . Today we owe a great deal of love and appreciation to those brave saints."

Brother Welti, referring to the historic flag, which is currently in the possession of Elder Eldred G. Smith, General Authority emeritus and formerly patriarch to the Church, said: "If only this old flag could talk, what tales it would tell! . . . It started its journey in Nauvoo where it narrowly escaped the mobs burning the city. It next appeared behind a desk set up by Brigham Young to encourage his followers to join the United States Army to fight in the Mexican War." And, he said, it was raised

over San Diego, then just a tiny hamlet of adobe huts.

He said the heroic act of the battalion "saved their families and their church from possible death. In proving their patriotism by enlisting they had thwarted a vicious plan by a few state and federal officers to exterminate all Mormons."

"On July 4, 1847, the battalion raised this flag over Fort Moore on which they painted the California bear," he said. "Now many believe this was the forerunner of the official California flag."

He noted that battalion members blazed three trails that became major interstate highways. "Furthermore, they probably saved the pioneers three times: one, by giving their pay and uniform allowances to buy supplies for the westward journey; two, they saved the saints from possible extermination and, three, they brought back seeds and clippings of crops capable of thriving here in the arid West and the knowledge of irrigation, which they had learned from the Indians."

The contributions and history of the battalion are largely forgotten because they were pushed into the background by ensuing events such as the Gold Rush and the Civil War, he said. "But this great history must not be forgotten. The wonderful tales this grand old flag could tell must be preserved, a legacy passed on to future generations. And perhaps someday this flag will have a home of its own where it can be proudly displayed in a beautiful building now being planned for construction at This Is The Place Heritage Park."

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