

Mormon Battalion Myth Talk Outline
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Title: Pioneers or Soldiers?

Opening

At the start of the war with Mexico the authorized strength of the U.S. Army was 8,613 men and officers, but only 5,500 of those positions were filled. President James K. Polk and Army commanders realized that in order to accomplish their war goals of conquering the Far West they would need more soldiers. (1) In reaction to these needs Congress authorized several actions. They increased the number of privates allowed in each company from 42 to 100 and created a company of U.S. Engineers as well as a regiment of U.S. Mounted Rifles. (2)

On May 13, 1846, Congress also authorized President Polk to raise 50,000 volunteers to serve for a 12 month period to supplement the regular Army. Commanding General Winfield Scott would combine these volunteers with his regular army units and then divide them to create three separate field armies; The Army of Occupation / The Army of the Center / and the Army of the West. Each army had specific goals. (3)

The Army of Occupation was commanded by General Zachary Taylor and was ordered to take their position along the Rio Grande at present day Corpus Christi, opposite the town of Matamoras and take control of the coast of northeastern Mexico.

The Army of the Center was commanded by Brigadier General John E. Wool. His orders were to assemble his army that was made up of primarily state volunteer militia units at San Antonio, Texas. He had his men secure and take control of key border towns of Chihuahua and Parra in north central Mexico.

The Army of the West was commanded by Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny. He was assigned the task of assembling his army at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. His army was made up of regular Army Dragoons and a large number of volunteers units from the mid-west. Once assembled and equipped they had three goals: (1) capture and secure Santa Fe, New Mexico, (2) proceed west across the mountains and deserts of the Southwest, and (3) capture, secure and occupy the coastal towns of San Diego and Los Angeles in Upper California where they would also connect with Naval Commodore John Sloat in Monterey Bay. It was in the 'Army of the West' that the Mormon Battalion would serve. Once the Battalion reached Santa Fe, they were given the additional responsibility of creating a wagon road across the deserts and mountains of the southwest. (4)

My Thesis

It is my belief that when the oath was taken by the Mormons to serve as volunteer soldiers, they were no longer pioneers but instead were soldiers in the United States Army, and from that day until their release in July 1847 they were treated as such. Although they did not engage in any combat with the Mexican Army, their day to day experiences in the field were similar to what other army volunteer units were experiencing. They marched, stood guard, labored on construction projects, were subject to military regulations and stood ready on several occasions

to engage an enemy force. A closer examination of their year of service will provide support for my ideas.

U.S. Army Volunteer Soldiers

As previously stated the Battalion was part of a larger military action and as a battalion had a specific function within that larger structure. *“A battalion during Mexican War was a group of companies formed for a specific task but disbanded when the task was finished.”* (5) Although each company was authorized up to 100 privates per company this staffing level was seldom realized. In addition each company was commanded by a Lieutenant and a number of Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs). The Mormon Battalion comprised five companies for a total of 500 volunteers. (6)

The Battalion was unique in its leadership. Unlike other volunteer units that were led by non-professional soldiers who were elected by enlisted members of the unit, the Battalion was led and trained by several Army Engineers. These men were West Point Military Academy graduates who understood the military culture, its goals and the functioning of the different levels of military combat strategies. These officers included; Colonel Phillip Saint George Cook (1827), Colonel James Allen (1829), Lt. Andrew Jackson Smith (1838), and Lt. George Stoneman (1846). The Battalion also had officers that were Church members; however the Officers were appointed by Brigham Young and sustained by the men and not elected by them.

The Federal government was not prepared for a large scale conflict and therefore didn't have enough uniforms on hand to provide the standard uniforms for all of the regular Army units let alone volunteer units. So when the Battalion arrived at Ft. Leavenworth, they didn't receive uniforms; they opted to give the money equal to a uniform allowance to the Church to help with the needs of the members involved in the migration. Other volunteer units including the Missouri Mounted Rifle Volunteers also marched as part of the Army of the West without uniforms.

The Battalion did receive the same firearms and accouterments as other volunteer units in the Mexican-American War that included the 1822 Springfield flintlock musket and a few rifled shoulder arms. While at Fort Leavenworth volunteer units including the Battalion received some very basic instruction in military drill and use of firearms. Additional training was received as they marched across the continent. Once the Battalion reached California and were assigned a duty station they received more extensive training on a regular basis. In his journal, James Pace notes that while detailed for six weeks (February 5 and March 14th 1847) at the Spanish Mission at San Luis Rey, the men received drill instruction at least once a day and sometimes more, demonstrating that the men experienced the typical daily routine of a soldier. (7)

Army Engineer Battalions

West Point graduates were all trained in engineering. Under their leadership, the Mormon Battalion performed numerous engineering projects along with their main duties as a front line infantry unit. One of the specific orders given to Cooke and the Battalion was to construct a road along the southern border of the United States [Arizona and New Mexico] for the public to use for transporting people and goods to California and to be used by the military to patrol the new border once the war ended. This was accomplished. Is road construction not something that the modern day U.S. Army engineer battalions are assigned to do?

As an occupational army, they provided service to the citizens of Southern California by constructing public buildings, wells, and irrigation ditches. The Battalion units stationed in Los Angeles constructed a redoubt on a hill top above the city. It was named Fort Moore for Capt. Benjamin Moore, killed in the Battle of San Pasqual, and was dedicated 4 July 1847. Their quality work, good behavior and respectful treatment of the civilian resulted in the building of good will between the U.S. Army and California citizens and helped to repair the hard feelings that had been created by the harsh treatment they received from Frémont's California Volunteers prior to the arrival of the Mormon Battalion.

Mormon Officers Show Support to Regular Army Officers and Good Leadership Judgement

After Colonel Allen's death a conflict arose among the Mormons over whether regular Army officers or Mormon officers should lead the Battalion. Colonel Allen signed an agreement with Brigham Young that stated in the event of his death, the highest ranking Mormon officer would assume leadership responsibilities. In several incidents, the Mormon officers elected to give leadership authority to Regular Army officers, recognizing the logic and the benefit to the Battalion by doing so.

These decisions included giving command of the Battalion to Lt. Smith who would lead the Battalion from Council Bluffs, Iowa to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Although reluctant to do so they also supported Smith's decision to send a group of sick soldiers, children and women to Pueblo, Colorado; again breaking another promise made to Brigham Young, that the Battalion would not be divided. The officers would again support two more divisions of the sick, women and children from the Battalion; one at Santa Fe and another at Socorro, Arizona. After their arrival in California the Battalion was split again; with 2 companies being stationed at San Diego and the other 3 in Los Angeles. The Mormon officers were obedient in leading the men at these locations.

In September 1846, Church leader John D. Lee met the Battalion near present day Ingalls, Kansas. He was sent to collect their pay, and learned that the Battalion was being led by Lt. Smith, not a Mormon officer as was agreed. He begins to foment trouble between the enlisted men and Mormon officers, and challenges Smith's ability and right to command. The Mormon officers stood together against Lee's efforts to subvert Smith's authority, and they continued to support their decision to give command to regular army officers.

Combat readiness

During their march to California, the Battalion demonstrated their willingness to engage in combat whenever called upon to do so. They formed and stood ready to take Tucson, Arizona by force if necessary. Upon their arrival in California, the Battalion was stationed in Southern Military District. From there they provided Kearny with the military support he needed to assert his authority over John Charles Frémont's claim as the American authority in California. On several occasions, the Battalion received warnings of trouble and mobilized to meet those threats if necessary. Just because the threat never materialized doesn't mean that Battalion members did not qualify as combat soldiers.

The security and stability of the Southern District was vital in successfully transitioning from Mexican to American governance. Kearny stated, *“The Southern district is the most important one in the Dept., & the one in which (for many reasons) difficulties are most to be apprehended. The Route between California & Sonora leads from the frontier of that District, & that is the only one by which Mexican troops can be brought into this country.”* Units from the Battalion were called upon on a regular basis to guard Cajon Pass, the main entry way into the District from the south. (8)

Also, as part of their duties in this District, they were frequently called upon to respond to attacks on local ranches by Indians and attacks on Indians by California ranchers. Most of the patrols experienced no combat. However, on Sunday 8, May 1847, 20 privates from the Battalion marched from Los Angeles under the command of Lt Samuel Thompson, Co ‘C’ in response to reports of Indian attacks on civilians. That evening the patrol was attacked by Indians and a 2 hour engagement occurred resulting in the deaths of six Indians and the injury of 2 Battalion members. This was the only combat members of the Battalion would experience. (9) The question to be asked is; if Kearny didn’t feel confident in the Battalion as a military unit, would he have stationed them there? Kearny had the power to send the Battalion to the Central or Northern Districts and bring in another unit from Santa Fe to replace them.

Provost Marshall Duty

Because they were in a place where the citizens had been ill treated by Col. Frémont’s California Volunteers, Battalion units in Los Angeles found that the locals harbored ill feelings towards Americans. The Battalion had the challenge of enforcing civil law and providing security in the District despite how the locals felt. To work towards alleviating these feelings and fears, the Battalion often provided security during religious festivals and other public events. Mormon soldiers consistently treated the locals with respect and enforced laws fairly.

Efforts to reenlist the Battalion

By March 1847 the War was coming to a close, California seemed to be pacified; and Kearny wanted to return to Ft. Leavenworth to give his report on his activity in California. He also wanted to take Frémont to Ft. Leavenworth to stand trial for insubordination. Kearny selected 15 men from the Battalion to serve as his escort on his overland trip to Ft. Leavenworth. (10) There were other issues that needed to be resolved before he could depart. First he appointed Richard B. Mason his replacement as Military Governor, and appointed Colonel J.D. Stevenson Colonel Cooke’s replacement as commander of California’s Southern Military District. The last task would not be easy: He needed to make sure that he had enough soldiers to maintain order in the Southern Military District.

The enlistment periods of his volunteer units in California were coming to an end, leaving his occupation force understaffed. Most of the volunteers were not interested in reenlisting; including most of the members of the Mormon Battalion. However, because of the many positive reports about the Mormon Battalion, regular Army officers began a concerted effort to get the Mormons to reenlist for another year. They began their efforts by working through the Battalion’s Mormon officers.

In a letter dated 29 June 1847, Col. J.D. Stevenson makes Governor Mason aware of the good feelings of the citizens of San Diego toward the Battalion, as well as his intentions to try and

retain them for another year. *“All persons at San Diego are anxious that the Mormons should remain there, they have by a correct course of conduct, become very popular with the people, and by their industry have taught the inhabitants the value of having an American population among them, and if they continued they will be of value in reconciling the people to the change of government than a host of bayonets.”* (11)

Most of the Mormon officers supported and encouraged the enlisted men reenlisting for another year. Battalion members Levi Hancock, a General Authority in the Church and David Pettegrew, the spiritual advisor for the Battalion were against reenlistment; but told the men that they had their agency to decide for themselves as to whether or not they would enlist. Most of the men just wanted to return to their families.

Officers held a council with the enlisted men to discuss the pros and cons of reenlistment. No enlisted men signed up again immediately after the meeting. (12) However, 4 days after the end of their service on 20, July 1847 Mormon Capt. Daniel Davis and Lt. Cyrus C. Canfield and 1 company of 82 Mormons were mustered into military service for and other 8 months. They would be named the Mormon Volunteers and were assigned to San Diego. (13)

Soldiers to Pioneers

The Mormon Battalion mustered out of service on 16 July 1847, and most of the Battalion members began to organize under the direction of their Priesthood leaders to prepare to rejoin the Saints somewhere in the intermountain west. Little would these men realize that their experiences surviving in the harsh arid deserts of the American Southwest and their association with the Hispanic and California culture would prepare them as pioneers leaders for their fellow Saints.

The skills they acquired working with irrigation and adobe, as well as the agricultural products discovered in California and Colorado, would help the Saints in the Salt Lake Valley to survive their first two years in their new desert home. The trails they carved across American's deserts, mountains and plains would within a year be used by tens of thousands of people to cross the continent to the California gold fields and the Pacific Ocean. The California Gold Rush, 1849 - 1852 would also result in solidifying American's hold on California; becoming a state in the Federal Union in 1850.

These overland travelers to the gold fields would also bring to the struggling colony of Saints in the Salt Lake Valley the hard currency and tangible hard goods they needed to establish their religious sanctuary; and from which they would organize a massive colonization effort that resulted in the Mormon Church gaining a controlling foothold throughout the Intermountain West. Brigham Young would call on Battalion veterans to lead many groups of Mormons in their attempts to establish new communities in far reaching areas of the Great Basin.

Concluding Statement

Even though recruited from a single religious body as part of political strategy and not for patriotic reasons, the Mormon Battalion was treated as a military unit, performed all of the duties they were ordered to do; and stood ready to face combat without hesitation. Their behavior as a provost unit was held in high esteem by the citizens under their military jurisdiction and also by the regular Army officers who commanded them. As a result of their hard work and by dutifully

carrying out their orders, they contributed greatly to the transition of the newly acquired territory of California from Mexican to American governance. As American soldiers, they showed loyalty to their officers and to their country. Upon discharge, they were able to immediately shift from soldier to civilian. Using the knowledge of the Far West they acquired during their year of military service, Battalion veterans turned their energies toward reuniting with their families and toward the establishment of the Mormon Church in the Inter-Mountain West.

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