

Plan C: The Mormon Battalion
Address to the Mormon Battalion Heritage Day
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A few years ago Shirley and I went to the Salt Lake Cemetery to find the marked tombstones of some of her relatives. We found an old and simple tombstone for Elijah Allen, her great great grandfather who once farmed in the Red Butte Canyon area close to our home in Federal Heights. The inscription read simply “Elijah Allen, Utah, Pvt Mormon Bn Vols, Mexican War, Feb 7 1826, April 12 1866.” There was also a circular official Mormon Battalion marker that read “US Mormon Battalion Mexican War 1846-1848.” We also found his name on the Mormon Battalion marker in the State Capitol Building. This made the study of the Mormon Battalion story much more personal and meaningful to us. Here is some of that meaningful and interesting story.

1846 – Our minds went back to 1846 when momentous events were underway that would shape the geography of the United States. The Latter-day Saints were on their way to the Rocky Mountains. The Saints were scattered along a trail leading west through Iowa, in a pitiable condition, planning their migration west. For the second time in a matter of few years, the leadership of their country had failed to protect them from mob violence. The states of Missouri and Illinois had turned against them. Missouri’s governor ordered them exterminated and Illinois’ governor, far from protecting their rights as citizens, had advised them to get out. Their petitions for redress to the United States President and other leading officials for the savage treatment in Missouri had fallen on deaf ears – “Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you.”

Skirmishes between Mexican and United States troops that started in Texas on April 25, 1846 involved control of the territory and borders between Texas and Mexico. The struggle for control of parts of Texas led Mexican troops to cross the Rio Grande River into Texas. That crossing into territory that had now come under control of the United States led in turn to the Congressional declaration that a state of war existed between the United States and Mexico on May 13, 1846.

Brigham Young Seeks US Help – In need of some kind of help for their migration west, any help at all, Brigham Young had not given up trying. Totally involved in the effort to find a place of safety in the Rocky Mountains, he and his brethren of the Twelve were nevertheless still sending out missionaries. On January 20, 1846, President Young appointed his nephew Jesse C. Little as president of the Eastern and Middle United States Mission. In furtherance of that important assignment, Young gave him instructions in a letter, assigning him to labor in Washington DC to secure government aid for the Saints if at all possible. “If our government shall offer any facilities

for immigrating to the western coast,” he wrote, “embrace those facilities, if possible. As a wise and faithful man, take every honorable advantages of the times you can” (Brigham Young to Jesse C. Little, January 20, 1846).

Plans A and B – In furtherance of his assignment, Little enlisted the help of the Mormon’s self appointed friend and advocate, Thomas Kane of Pennsylvania. He also enlisted the help of Amos Kendall. One plan was to secure a contract to build forts and block houses along the trails west. The objective was to gain badly needed money and other help for the Saints. Nothing came of that plan. Another plan was embodied in an offer to haul supplies for the army, including the possibility of taking a shipload of supplies around the tip of South America, following the route Samuel Brannan took to San Francisco on the ship Brooklyn. Again nothing came of that plan. It appeared that nothing was going to be forthcoming from the government to benefit the Saints.

Plan C – Amos Kendall had a completely different and unique idea to help the Saints. He felt that the United States could aid the Saints by enlisting 1000 men into the United States Army, now at war with Mexico. Such an enlistment would not only aid the United States in its war with Mexico, but could help the Saints’ cause by providing some immediate cash. In the first meeting between the Church’s representatives and President James K. Polk, Kendall explained the idea. While Polk was somewhat favorable, the plan was not accepted as presented. Subsequently, acting on a suggestion by Kane, Little wrote a letter to the president that expressed the loyalty of the Saints to the United States, but also hinted that if the plea for assistance was turned down, this lack of help might force the Saints to turn to other countries, such as Great Britain and France for example, for help.

Days before receiving Little’s letter, Polk had already concluded that the United States should maintain possession of the territory of California, previously controlled by Mexico, even when the war was concluded with Mexico. To secure this objective he decided to send to Colonel Stephen W. Kearny of the U.S. Army of the West a contingent of army troops to secure California. Polk had decided to raise the troops for Kearny’s assignment, and thus Little’s letter arrived at a propitious time. The president authorized Colonel Kearny to receive a few hundred Mormon soldiers out of the body of the Saints on their way to the territory of California. Orders to that effect were drawn and sent to Kearny.

It seems clear that Kane’s idea of hinting that the Saints might have to turn elsewhere for help, and thus place a foreign jurisdiction in the way of what would otherwise be United States controlled territory, played a part in Polk’s decision to allow Mormon enlistments. Polk’s diary entry of June 2, 1846 read as follows: “Col. Kearny was also authorized to receive into service a few hundred of the Mormons who are now on their way to California, with a view to conciliate them, attach them

to our country, & prevent them from taking part against us” (Polk, p. 109).

I have chosen to call this enlistment of Mormon volunteers into the United States Army “Plan C.” I arbitrarily label the other offers by the Saints to secure freighting and building contracts as Plans A and B. Neither had been accepted. Then Plan C emerged, the enlistment of army volunteers.

But there was a fly in the ointment. In an interview with Little and the president on June 5, 1846, Polk told Little he was not prejudiced against the Mormons and would thus look favorably upon an offer to enlist 500 volunteers into the Army, but only after the Saints reached their destination in California. Little tried to get the president to allow the enlistment to proceed immediately to gain needed cash, but Polk did not bend.

Providence Intervenes – Fate and providence then intervened in the process. Instructed to enlist an army unit to secure California for the United States, Kearny had a decision to make and an ambiguous order in hand. Polk’s decision to allow Mormons to be a part of the army contingent was clearly communicated, but the timing was not clearly indicated in his order and Kearny was unaware that the president intended the enlistment to take place only after the Mormons reached their destination. On the occasion, Kearny used his discretion to order an immediate enlistment of the Mormons into the army. This decision led to the creation of the Mormon Battalion almost immediately. Since the war in California was concluded quickly, without this decision by Kearny there may never have been a Mormon Battalion and certainly not at the time it was created.

Thus it was that Colonel Kearny sent Captain James Allen from Fort Leavenworth to intercept the Latter-day Saints in Iowa and raise a battalion of about 500 men for the United States Army. These enlistees were to receive part of their pay for enlisting and a \$42 clothing allowance, part of which they returned to the soldiers’ families.

Suspicious – On June 26, 1846, Captain Allen first intercepted the Saints at Mt. Pisgah, Iowa. There he met with Wilford Woodruff and the high council. Many of the men were suspicious of the government’s motives. After all, the government had never before helped them and this enlistment request came at an awkward time. The Saints were in terrible straits and rumors were extant that this enlistment could be a means of pulling men away from the body of Saints to afford enemies the opportunity to destroy them as they did Joseph and Hyrum in Carthage.

We learn the feelings of some of the enlistees by reading Henry W. Bigler’s diary. He wrote: “It was against my feelings, and against the feelings of my brethren although we were willing to obey counsel believing all things would work for the best in the end. Still it looked hard when we called to mind the mobbings and drivings, the killing of our leaders, the burning of our homes and forcing us to leave the States and Uncle Sam took no notice of it and then to call on us help them fight his

battles. To me it was an insult....” (Bigler diary).

Samuel H. Rogers wrote this in his diary of July 5: “It was like a ram caught in a thicket, and that it would be better to sacrifice the ram than to have Isaac die.” He continued: “Reflecting upon the subject, it came to my mind that Isaac, in the figure represented the Church of which I was a member, and for the saving of its life, I was willing to go on this expedition, and that my circumstances I could as well be spared as anyone, for having no family of my own, none were depending upon me, and should I die there would be none left to grieve me.”

John Steele said: “I could not find words hard enough to say in just anger for that kind of treatment. However, President Brigham Young...preached faith unto us, for we were all mad...the only thing left for us was to furnish 500 men and march against the Mexicans...for said they, we know there is a deep settled plan if we do not raise these men that the mob will come against us and cut us all off, and not allow us to cross the Missouri River....”

This gives you some idea of the men’s feelings. Few if any of them could know about the efforts of President Little that led to what I call Plan C, the formation of the Mormon Battalion, nor to the assignment by Brigham Young to procure governmental help to give the Saints a boost in their dire circumstances.

Brigham Young Sees Ahead – When Captain Allen approached Woodruff, he was cordial, but noncommittal and suspicious. He merely sent the Captain on to meet with Brigham Young at Mosquito Creek, about 3 miles east of Council Bluffs, Iowa. Brigham Young saw immediately that this was the first help ever offered by the United States, even though it came at a great sacrifice in manpower needed by the Saints. He said this at a meeting in Council Bluffs, Iowa on July 13, 1846: “We must raise this battalion....We can do what other people cannot, all the fighting that will be done will be among ourselves.”

In addition to needed money and provisions, benefits that accrued to the Saints for obeying their Prophet and acceding to the request of the United States included the following:

- The enlistment provided evidence that the Latter-day Saints were loyal to the United States;
- The men of the Battalion would travel to the West at government expense;
- Their service gave Mormons the rationale to allow the Saints to remain for some time on Indian lands where they established Winter Quarters;
- Brigham Young promised safety for the troops.

Battalion Raised – With Brigham Young’s encouragement, they raised the Mormon Battalion almost immediately. Among them was Elijah Allen, Shirley’s great great grandfather mentioned in the beginning. He had come as an unemployed young man to live and work in the Brigham Young

home. At the time Captain Allen (no relation to Elijah) was raising the battalion, Elijah was employed driving a team for President Young. Elijah decided to enlist. He wrote this of his enlistment: “A call from the government was then made for five hundred men to go into the United States service. President Young wished his boys to enlist, so Nathan Young (and) Albert Dunham, we threw down the ox whip and left his teams and cattle to be took care of as best they could in the wild, unsettled country, and put our names down in Company ‘B’.”

Private Elijah Allen – Elijah also wrote: “President Young asked me if I thought we would have any fighting to do. I said I do not know.” He then prophetically said that the battalion would have no fighting to do in the service. His words proved verily true. Elijah added: “His last words to me, he said he would see me again.”

Members of the Twelve met with the Battalion while camped on the Missouri River about eight miles from the camp of the Saints on July 18 and “there gave us their last charge and blessing, with a firm promise that on condition of faithfulness on our part, our lives should be spared and our expedition result in much good, and our names be handed down in honorable remembrance to all generations.”

Thus it was that they left Council Bluffs on July 20, 1846, a battalion with about 500 soldiers, volunteers from the Camp of Israel, and some 80 women and children. The women and children were wives and children of some of their officers and about 20 women that served as laundresses. Six members of the Twelve counseled the officers “to be as fathers to the privates, to remember their prayers....They also instructed us to treat all men with kindness...and never take life when it could be avoided.” They were to be virtuous and clean and to remember God.

Fort Leavenworth was their first destination where they were outfitted with muskets and supplies. James Allen, promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, was in command. At the fort he became ill and stayed behind when they left for the West on August 12. On August 23 he died. His successor treated the men badly as did the Missouri doctor that he assigned to them. They continued on to Santa Fe where Lieutenant Philip St. George Cooke was placed in command. Cook proved a great improvement over his predecessor. Most of the women and children were sent to Pueblo, Colorado from two different convenient locations before the infantrymen pushed on for their long and arduous trip from Santa Fe, New Mexico to their destination in San Diego.

The March and Arrival – I haven’t time to detail the arduous nature of their trip that took them south, sometimes following existing trails, but more often cutting new roads. They followed the lower Rio Grande River, and then on November 21 turned toward Tucson. As is well known, the battalion had its only battle when the men encountered a herd of wild cattle that wounded some of

the men and gored two of their mules to death. Guides joined them about Tucson and led them to the Colorado River. Often on the way their only water came from digging deep wells. Narrow mountain passes through the coastal range required them to use ropes and pulleys to get the wagons through.

They finally reached the San Diego mission on January 29, 1847 to find that Mexican forces had already surrendered what soon thereafter became the state of California. Thus their only duty was occupational service in San Diego, San Luis Rey, and at Los Angeles where they built Fort Moore in the sleepy village of Los Angeles. Some of the men reenlisted, but most were discharged on July 16. Part of the battalion wintered at Sutters Fort, awaiting money and provisions to join the Saints in the Great Salt Lake Valley. These men were there to participate in the discovery of gold. A number pushed on from Los Angeles to the valley as soon as they could.

Elijah Returns to Family – At this point we rejoin Private Elijah Allen as a representative of the battalion for the purposes of these brief remarks. His only writing about the trip from California to Salt Lake was this: “I left Williams Ranch about fifteenth of February in company of ten or twelve others, with 200 head of cattle for the Church. I stood guard most every night and drove cattle all day for about three months...till about the twenty third of May, I arrived in the Salt Lake Valley.”

His family had not yet come west so he commenced farming at the mouth of Red Butte Canyon, within walking distance of our home east of downtown Salt Lake City. There he farmed for the season, but the crickets ate the kernels from all the corn, which, he said, saved him the trouble of harvesting. He then pushed on east to find his family. While traveling east across Wyoming, he met Brigham Young. President Young blessed him, visited with him, and gave him some good clothes to wear. His personal prophecies to Elijah that he would return safely, see him again, and engage in no fighting were fulfilled. Elijah continued on to find his family and eventually came to the Great Salt Lake Valley again. He moved to Provo, then to Herriman, Utah. He saw action for the Saints in Echo Canyon during the so-called Utah War. His was somewhat typical of the varied experiences Battalion members had after being mustered out of the army.

The marker on his gravestone is evidence of the value Private Elijah Allen placed on his service. One of his colleagues said this:

Allowing Brigham Young and the Saints to enlist the Mormon Battalion was the decision of United States President Polk. Irrespective of his motivations, this was the first help ever accorded the Saints by the United States and his name is held in honorable remembrance by them.

Although President Polk rejected the first two requests for help, Plan C emerged with its distinct benefits to the Saints.

Prophecy Fulfilled – Brigham Young’s prophecy that the Battalion would be held in honorable remembrance has surely been fulfilled, even tonight as we celebrate their place in United States and world history. He seemed to see far into the future, sensing that this would be a positive and remarkable chapter in the history of the Church. Indeed there is nothing that quite compares with their long march in the annals of military history. Their service added needed money to the impoverished Saints, driven from their homes and their country. Their unprecedented long and arduous march gained a measure of respect for the Saints in the eyes of the people and the government. These faithful and loyal men and women served their Church and their country well, and helped establish the boundaries of a growing nation founded on inspired principles of freedom.

We don’t always know what is best for us. We didn’t receive the contract to build block houses or the contract to haul material to the West or around the Cape. But we did receive the call to serve our country in a time of war. This is the same country that had turned its back on us. In retrospect, Plan C was better than Plans A and B by multiple factors.