

## **Trials and Blessings in the Mormon Battalion**

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The Mormon Battalion was one of the greatest sacrifices that the Saints went through. Suffering families, who left Nauvoo to go to Salt Lake, had to let their fathers, brothers, and sons go and fight a war with Mexico. Women and children were left to fend for themselves as they crossed the plains alone, and men had to endure the pain of leaving loved ones behind. But they found hope, a small light in the dark and dismal outlook, through the assurance that President Brigham Young gave them: "...if you live your religion, obey and respect your officers, and hold sacred the property of the people among whom you travel, and never take anything but what you pay for, I promise you in the name of Israel's God that not one of you shall fall by the hand of the enemy."<sup>1</sup>

The men had many reasons for not wanting to go to war. They had received no protection from persecution and mob action in Missouri and Illinois. They were already headed west to the Salt Lake Valley and enlisting would mean changing their course and leaving their families "in the midst of wild Indian country with only a wagon box for a home."<sup>2</sup> The women felt the request was unfair. They felt that they had given enough and owed the government nothing. Daniel B. Rawson said, "I felt indignant toward the Government that had suffered me to be raided and driven from my home . . . I would not enlist. On the way to the Bluffs we met President Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and W. Richards returning, calling for recruits. They said the salvation of Israel depended upon the

raising of the army. When I heard this my mind changed. I felt that it was my duty to go.”<sup>3</sup>

The Mormon Battalion was the only religious unit in the Mexican war. It consisted of about 500 men, including some women and children. At the Little Pony River in Council Bluffs, Iowa, they began what has been called the longest infantry march in history. It was approximately 2,000 miles and it took nearly six months to complete. “[On July 20, 1846] the battalion commenced a 180-mile march down the left bank of the Missouri [River] for Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. While no Mormon was killed in the venture, two died en route. The first, Samuel Boly, expired only twenty-eight miles from Council Bluffs.”<sup>4</sup> Brigham Young had promised that the Battalion would not die because of the enemy, but he didn’t say that they wouldn’t die because of sickness, exhaustion, or hunger. Out of about 550 men that volunteered, less than 25 died.

They arrived at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas on August 1<sup>st</sup>. Some companies stayed there for about 2 weeks; others stayed a little longer, training and becoming more familiar with military combat. Unfortunately, Colonel James Allen, who had brought Polk’s request for the battalion to Brigham Young and whom the Mormons had liked, became sick while at Fort Leavenworth and died. Daniel Tyler wrote, “. . . Sergeant Shelton . . . brought the painful news of the death of our highly esteemed and much loved Colonel, James Allen, who departed this life at 6 o’clock a. m. of the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of August, 1846.”<sup>5</sup> The Battalion had loved Colonel Allen because he treated them like equals. They held

a memorial service for him and he was buried in what is now the Fort Leavenworth National Military Cemetery.

After Colonel Allen's death, the Battalion sent a letter to the President of the United States asking him to appoint Jefferson Hunt, a captain in the Battalion, to the command. They continued their march under Captain Hunt's orders to Council Grove. However, there they met Lieutenant Andrew J. Smith who arrived from Fort Leavenworth claiming the lead. He was chosen to be the commanding officer by the vote of the Battalion officers. The leadership transition proved difficult for many of the enlisted men, as they were not consulted with the decision.

Lieutenant Smith and his accompanying surgeon, Dr. George B. Sanderson, were described in many journals as the "heaviest burdens" in the Battalion. Brigham Young had written a letter that read, "If you are sick, live by faith, and let surgeon's medicine alone if you want to live, using only such herbs and mild food as are at your disposal. If you give heed to this counsel you will prosper; but if not, we cannot be responsible for the consequences."<sup>6</sup> But because of Dr. Sanderson's beliefs and methods in treating the sick, it was rather hard to complete his requests.

Dr. Sanderson, or Doctor Death as he became known, forced a dose of calomel, a thick ooze that contained mercury and arsenic, to any of the ailing men. Whether it was because they had taken cold or had blistered feet through walking in poor shoes, all were treated alike. The brother of Joseph Smith had died from calomel poisoning at the hands of a doctor, so they refused it. Because

they refused, Lieutenant Smith considered it an attack on his authority. Private Henry Bigler wrote, “On the third of September, Lieutenant A-J Smith began to show his love for the Mormons by ordering all the sick out of the wagons, swearing if they did not walk he'd tie them to the wagons and drag them unless they took such medicine as Doc Sanderson prescribed.”<sup>7</sup> Sanderson considered the Mormons strangely superstitious about modern medicine and more than a little obstinate. The Battalion greatly disliked, maybe even hated, A-J Smith. But they feared Sanderson because they felt that one spoonful of calomel could end their lives.

The Battalion followed the Santa Fe Trail, which was first carved by William Becknell in 1821 and had since become a two-way thoroughfare of international trade. It proceeded diagonally across Kansas through the Oklahoma panhandle to Santa Fe, New Mexico. On this trek the soldiers suffered from extensive heat, lack of sufficient food, improper medical treatment, and forced long-distance marches. Mysterious fevers also began to plague the Battalion — a situation made worse by the lack of water in the hot desert plains.

“[The Battalion] reached Santa Fe on October 12. The American flag was flying high in the air at Fort Marcy, located on a nearby hill overlooking the town. Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan, who had ordered a salute of one hundred guns from the housetops to honor the arrival of the advance battalion group on October 9, was commander of the post.”<sup>8</sup> There the Mormons met Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, who was to be their new commander from Santa Fe to California. Colonel Cooke told the officers he had been ordered to make a wagon

road to the Pacific — something that had never been done before by a southern route.

In Santa Fe, three separate detachments, which included nearly all the women and children and many sick men, were sent to Pueblo for the winter. For the next four months and 1,100 miles, Cooke led the battalion across some of the most arduous terrain in North America. Most of the Mormon soldiers soon learned to respect and follow this accomplished frontier officer. The group acquired another guide in New Mexico—adventurer and mountain man Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, who as an infant had travelled with his mother Sacagawea across the continent with the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

On December 16, 1846, as the battalion approached Tucson, Arizona, they nearly had a battle with a small detachment of provisional Mexican soldiers. The Mexicans fled, however, as soon as they were within sight. The local Indian tribes along the march route were very helpful and charitable to them. Mormon soldiers learned many pioneer methods of irrigation from the Indian peoples and employed them later on in Utah and other areas.

On December 21, 1846 the Battalion encamped on the Gila River. They crossed the Colorado River into California on the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1847. By 29 January 1847, they were camped at the Mission of San Diego, about five miles from General Kearny's quarters. That evening Colonel Cooke rode to Kearny's encampment and reported the battalion's condition. On January 30 1847, Cooke issued orders enumerating the accomplishments of the Mormon Battalion. Colonel Cooke said, "History may be searched in vain for an equal

march of infantry. Half of it has been through a wilderness where nothing but savages and wild beasts are found, or deserts where, for lack of water, there is no living creature."<sup>9</sup>

"The five companies of the Mormon Battalion, the U.S. Army of the West, were discharged officially at Fort Moore in Los Angeles on July 16, 1847, one year after their enlistment. There were 317 men who lined up for the brief ceremony. After discharge, it took several days for them to receive their final pay and to complete their arrangements for their journey. Each man received \$31.50, but no transportation allowance for traveling back as promised. When the companies were paid, they purchased animals and supplies for the return journey."<sup>10</sup> It was also noted by several men that the price of horses increased when the Mormons began buying so many. Seventy-nine men from the Battalion also reenlisted for another six months. They were called the Mormon Volunteers.

Many blessings came because of the Battalion's obedience to their country, to their prophet, and to their God. The Battalion's march and service were instrumental in helping secure new lands in several Western states, especially the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 of much of southern Arizona. The march also opened a southern wagon route to California. Veterans of the battalion played significant roles in America's westward expansion in California, Utah, Arizona, and other parts of the West.<sup>11</sup> The men also provided funds from their salaries and allowances to assist the Mormon exodus west. The pay (forty-two dollars), the clothing, and the supplies (which the volunteers were allowed to

keep), eventually funded the Salt Lake Valley economy to the equivalent of \$50,000 1847 dollars.

The Mormon Battalion consisted of men who were brave and courageous. They fought for the United States of America because God asked them to through President Brigham Young. They were loyal to their commanding officers even though they sometimes disagreed with the orders that were given. One hundred and sixty years later, the Mormon Battalion is remembered and honored because of their endurance through the circumstances in which they fought and because of their great faith in God. They trusted him with their lives, and in return, God blessed them many times over.

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