



From Iowa to IMMORTALITY

A TRIBUTE TO THE MORMON BATTALION



BY ELDER LANCE B. WICKMAN
Of the Seventy

In January 1993, as the Church prepared for the open house and dedication of the San Diego California Temple, I found myself thinking about the men of the Mormon Battalion, who had arrived in San Diego in January 1847 after one of the longest, most torturous marches in military history. I am not sure why my thoughts turned to them. I had no ancestor who marched in their ranks. Perhaps it was my own experience as a combat infantryman that brought this feeling of kinship. Perhaps it was something more. Whatever the reason, I felt we could not dedicate this temple without doing something to remember the sacrifice of the Mormon Battalion. I called a friend who was active in one of the Mormon Battalion commemorative associations. I asked him if on the morning of the first day of the open house we could have a color guard of men in battalion uniform and a solitary bugler playing “To the Colors” as the American flag was raised for the first time over these sacred premises. “No band and no speeches,” I said, “just the bugler and the color guard.”

The morning dawned cool and blustery in the wake of a Pacific storm. A few of us

gathered at the base of the flagpole and watched the Stars and Stripes flutter into full expanse as it caught the freshening breeze. The mesmerizing notes of the bugle floated across the tranquil temple grounds. In that moment I felt them there—the men of the battalion—formed one

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last time in silent ranks as the flag of the land they had served so valiantly rose above the temple that represented the Zion they had sought so earnestly. Tears filled my eyes. Truly, San Diego in winter can seem like paradise.

It must have seemed like paradise on that January day in 1847 to the half-starved 335 men and 4 women—many bare-foot or shod only in rags or rough cowhide—who straggled into the little mission of San Diego. Daniel Tyler, Third Sergeant, Company C, Mormon Battalion, U.S. Army of the West, recorded his first impression: “Traveling in sight of the ocean, the clear bright sunshine, with the mildness of the atmosphere, combined to increase the enjoyment of the scene before us. . . . January there, seemed as pleasant as May in the northern States, and the wild oats, grass, mustard and other vegetable growths were as forward as we had been used to seeing them in June. The birds sang sweetly and all nature seemed to smile and join in praise to the Giver of all good.”¹

An Incongruous Story

The column of unkempt, shaggy-faced men must have seemed strangely out of place in such charitable surroundings. How could anyone be so threadbare and bedraggled in the natural cornucopia that was southern California in that time and season? It was inconsistent.

But, then, the whole saga of the Mormon Battalion is filled with contrasts: its origin as a military unit drawn

from destitute refugees struggling for survival on the Iowa prairies; its roster formed from the unlikely—even bizarre—combination of hard-bitten Regular Army officers and the peace-seeking adherents of a despised and misunderstood religious sect; the willingness of these men to leave wives and families bereft in an untamed wilderness to serve a country that had turned its back on them when the Saints were persecuted in Missouri and Illinois; their long, long walk in the sun across prairie, mountain, and trackless desert; their willingness to suffer unspeakable privations; their vibrant faith in their God, their prophet, and, eventually, in their tough and austere army commander—Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke. The entire drama is incongruous—incongruous and inspiring.

As out of place as these men may have appeared upon their arrival at San Diego, as exhausted and subdued as they may have seemed in taking those last few agonizing steps in a trek of 2,000 miles, theirs is a story of courage and sacrifice that has few equals.

The U.S.–Mexican War was a long time ago. Military victories by American Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, plus the payment of \$15 million by the United

It was the physical hardships that were so difficult for the Mormon Battalion to bear: searing sun, cold winds, hunger, thirst, rock, sand, always more sand and more thirst.

THE MORMON BATTALION, BY GEORGE OTTINGER, COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF CHURCH HISTORY AND ART; TOP LEFT, DETAIL FROM THE MORMON BATTALION MONUMENT, BY GILBERT RISVOLD





President Brigham Young told the men they were needed, so they enlisted on July 16, 1846.

States, ultimately acquired the territory that later became the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. Yet history must also testify that equal, if not greater, honor belongs to an unheralded band of “citizen soldiers” recruited on the plains of Iowa. Theirs was unlike any other unit ever formed in the history of the United States Army—a battalion of Saints. This band of 500 men and a few women and children fired not a shot in anger, except at a herd of rampaging bulls. True to the prophetic promise made to them by President Brigham Young, not one of them was lost to hostile action, although 20 lost their lives due to the privations they suffered. But their work in carving out a wagon road with picks, shovels, and even their bare hands across the barren deserts of the American Southwest—a road which thousands would later follow en route to the fabled riches of California—did as much to secure these vast territories to the United States as all the storied military deeds of the war with Mexico.

The Mormon Battalion

The story of the organization of the Mormon Battalion is a tender one. June of 1846 found 15,000 Latter-day Saints strung out across Iowa in a half dozen or more makeshift encampments. Forced to leave their comfortable homes in their own city, Nauvoo the Beautiful, they had endured a tragic exodus across Iowa. Many had died of starvation, exposure, and disease during the cold winter and wet springtime. They had no homes, no property, and no clothing except what they carried in their wagons or wore upon

Below: Two days after the men enlisted, a dance was held in the bowery at Council Bluffs, with music by William Pitt’s Brass Band.



The Mormon Battalion made one of the longest treks in United States history—2,000 miles one way.

their backs. Food was scarce. Some were bitter at the disinterest shown by the U.S. government in their plight. By crossing the Mississippi River, these pioneers had left the United States, following their leaders west to a destination they knew not, to a place where they hoped to live in peace.

Into such desperate circumstances rode Captain James Allen, a cavalry officer, on June 26, 1846. The United States had declared war on Mexico, and President James K. Polk was calling for 500 Mormon volunteers to march to Fort Leavenworth, in present-day Kansas, and then to California on a one-year U.S. Army enlistment.

The Saints camped at Mount Pisgah were incredulous when they heard Captain Allen’s request. Surely, after all the governmental disinterest, even disdain, they had endured, this same government could not now be serious in such a

ABOVE: EARLY ILLUSTRATION BY DALE WILBOURN. ABOVE LEFT: MORMON BATTALION BALL, BY C. C. CHRISTENSEN. COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF CHURCH HISTORY. ABOVE RIGHT: SUGAR CREEK, BY C. C. CHRISTENSEN. COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF CHURCH HISTORY. AND ART; RIGHT, BELOW: ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL MANN.

preposterous proposal! Not only did they feel they owed nothing to the United States, but what would wives and children do if their husbands and fathers marched away on such an extended journey? How could they possibly face such an uncertain future?

But President Brigham Young, then at Council Bluffs, saw things differently. For one thing, the soldiers' pay and uniform allowances would provide a much-needed source of income to purchase necessary food and supplies for the trek west. More than that, their country had called. Despite the government's indifference to their plight, the Saints were still Americans, and America needed them. Touching is this personal account by Daniel B. Rawson: "I felt indignant toward the Government that had suffered me to be raided and driven from my home. . . . I would not enlist. [Then] we met President Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and [Willard] Richards . . . 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."²

It was as simple as that. The prophet of the Lord had said they were needed, so they enlisted. On Saturday, July 18, 1846, the recruits were brought together by the rattle of snare drums. President Young and members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles met with the officers, commissioned and noncommissioned, in a grove of trees. Brother Brigham admonished them to be "fathers to

their companies and manage their men by the power vested in the priesthood."³ A merry dance was held, accompanied by William Pitt's brass band. Then the mood grew more somber as a young woman with light hair and dark eyes and a beautiful soprano voice sang the poignant and melodic words,

*By the rivers of
Babylon we sat
down and wept.
We wept when we
remembered
Zion.⁴*

Many eyes glistened with tears. The next day was Sunday. On Monday morning they marched away—soldiers on an odyssey from which some would not return for a year, some for two or three years, some for almost a decade. A few would not return at all.



MORMON BATTALION TIME LINE

February 4, 1846

Latter-day Saint exodus from Nauvoo begins (below).

May 13, 1846

The United States declares war on Mexico.



June 26, 1846

Captain James Allen of the First U.S. Dragoons meets with Latter-day Saints camped at Mount Pisgah, Iowa, and asks for volunteers for the Mormon Battalion.

July 1, 1846

Captain Allen assures President Brigham Young that the Saints may encamp on U.S. lands, and President Young agrees to the formation of the battalion.

July 18, 1846

A dance is held at Council Bluffs, with music by William Pitt's Brass Band.

July 20, 1846

The Mormon Battalion begins its march.

August 23, 1846

James Allen, newly promoted to lieutenant colonel and the battalion's first commander, dies at Fort Leavenworth; Lieutenant A. J. Smith is acting commander.

Left: Soldiers left their loved ones, some not to be seen for years to come.

October 9, 1846

General Alexander Doniphan (right), commander of American forces at Santa Fe, orders a 100-gun salute to honor the arrival of the Mormon Battalion in Santa Fe.



October 14, 1846

Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke (above) assumes command of the Mormon Battalion.

January 13, 1847

The Treaty of Cahuenga is signed between John Charles Fremont and General Andrés Pico, ending the conflict in California.

January 29, 1847

The Mormon Battalion arrives in San Diego.

July 24, 1847

The Latter-day Saint pioneer company, led by President Brigham Young, arrives in the Salt Lake Valley.

September 6, 1847

A letter from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles directs the former battalion members to find work in California and to come to Salt Lake in the spring. Nearly half go to Sutter's Mill (right), and some are present when gold is discovered there on January 24, 1848.

February 2, 1848

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican War; Mexico cedes territory including Utah to the United States.

April 12, 1848

The members of the Mormon Battalion who reenlisted for an additional six months are discharged; they pioneer the southern route to the Salt Lake Valley.

Trials and Suffering

The trials suffered by the members of the Mormon Battalion cannot be captured adequately by the written word. For one thing, the men of the battalion were ordered to march in virtual tandem with a group of Missourians under the command of the infamous Colonel Sterling Price—the same Colonel Price who had driven the Saints from their homes in Missouri a decade earlier. The Missourians refused to share rations until the battalion's acting commander, Lieutenant Andrew Jackson Smith, threatened to “come down upon them with artillery.”⁵

Then there was the battalion members' suffering at the hands of the medically incompetent army doctor George B. Sanderson, whose remedy for every ailment was a large dose of calomel. The men soon learned that



the supposed cure was invariably worse than the disease. They would either suffer in silence or refuse to swallow the calomel, spewing it out once out of Dr. Sanderson's sight.

The changing leadership of the battalion presented yet another set of challenges. Shortly after they left Fort Leavenworth, the men learned that their beloved Captain Allen—who had recruited them and who had been a kindly and beneficent commander—had died. They were left under the temporary command of Lieutenant Smith, a man whose imperious and autocratic manner visited much misery upon them. In Santa Fe they received a new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, another cavalryman. He also was stern, and at first the men were dismayed. But with time they learned that, though he was tough as rawhide, Colonel Cooke cared for their welfare, and it was his toughness that helped them survive.

But most of all, it was the physical hardships that were so difficult to bear: searing sun, thirst, cold winds, hunger, thirst, sand, always more sand, thirst, rock, thirst. Six months into their trek, most of the men had traded away any spare clothing in exchange for food. Rags and pieces of hide took the place of shoes. Hair and beards were unshaven and uncombed. Skin was darkened to a deep, leathery brown. Bones and ribs of man and beast protruded through stretched flesh. The 339 survivors who at last struggled into San Diego that lovely midwinter day in January 1847 each bore a wild but strangely holy countenance. They had made it. They had come through for their country and for Zion. On the morning after their arrival, Colonel Cooke wrote: “The Lieutenant-Colonel commanding congratulates the Battalion on their safe arrival on the shore of the Pacific Ocean and the conclusion of their march of over two thousand miles. History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry.”⁶

TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: COLONEL PHILIP ST. GEORGE COOKE. USED BY PERMISSION OF UTAH STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED; ALEXANDER DONIPHAN. USED BY PERMISSION OF INTELLECTUAL RESERVE, INC.; BOTTOM LEFT: GOLD DISCOVERED AT SUTTER'S MILL. BY VALOY EATON; TOP RIGHT: MORMON BATTALION. BY JOHN FARRANKS; COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF CHURCH HISTORY AND ART; ABOVE RIGHT: MELISSA CORAY, COURTESY OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF UTAH PIONEERS

A March into History

The story of the Mormon Battalion does not end with its arrival in San Diego. Securing California for the United States, building the first courthouse in San Diego and building Fort Moore in Los Angeles, discovering gold shimmering in the mill race at Sutter's Mill near Sacramento and thus bringing on the California gold rush of 1849—all of these were contributions of the Mormon Battalion. But the men of the battalion were not much interested in gold. Most just wanted to go home.

Significantly, the person who has come to best represent them was not a soldier at all, but a woman—Melissa Coray, the 18-year-old bride of Sergeant William Coray. Melissa was one of four women who marched all the way to San Diego



Melissa Coray was the youngest of the four women who made the entire march with the Mormon Battalion.

with the battalion. Her odyssey continued as she and William migrated to Monterey, California, after William's discharge, where she gave birth to a son, William Jr., on October 2, 1847. William Jr. died within a few months after his birth and was buried in Monterey. The couple then went to San Francisco and eventually on to the Salt Lake Valley, traveling more than 4,000 miles in all. When they arrived in Salt Lake City on October 6, 1848, Melissa was expecting their second child. William was ill with tuberculosis he had contracted in California but hoped to live long enough to see their child born. Happily, he did. Baby Melissa was born on February 6, 1849, about one month before William's death.⁷

Years later Melissa returned to California for a meandering trip through her own hall of memories. In 1901, when asked by a reporter about walking with the battalion, she simply said: "I didn't mind it. I walked because I wanted to. My husband had to walk and I went along by his side."⁸ In 1994 the United States government dedicated a mountain in the Sierra Nevada Mountains east of Sacramento in her honor—Melissa Coray Peak, a fitting and permanent

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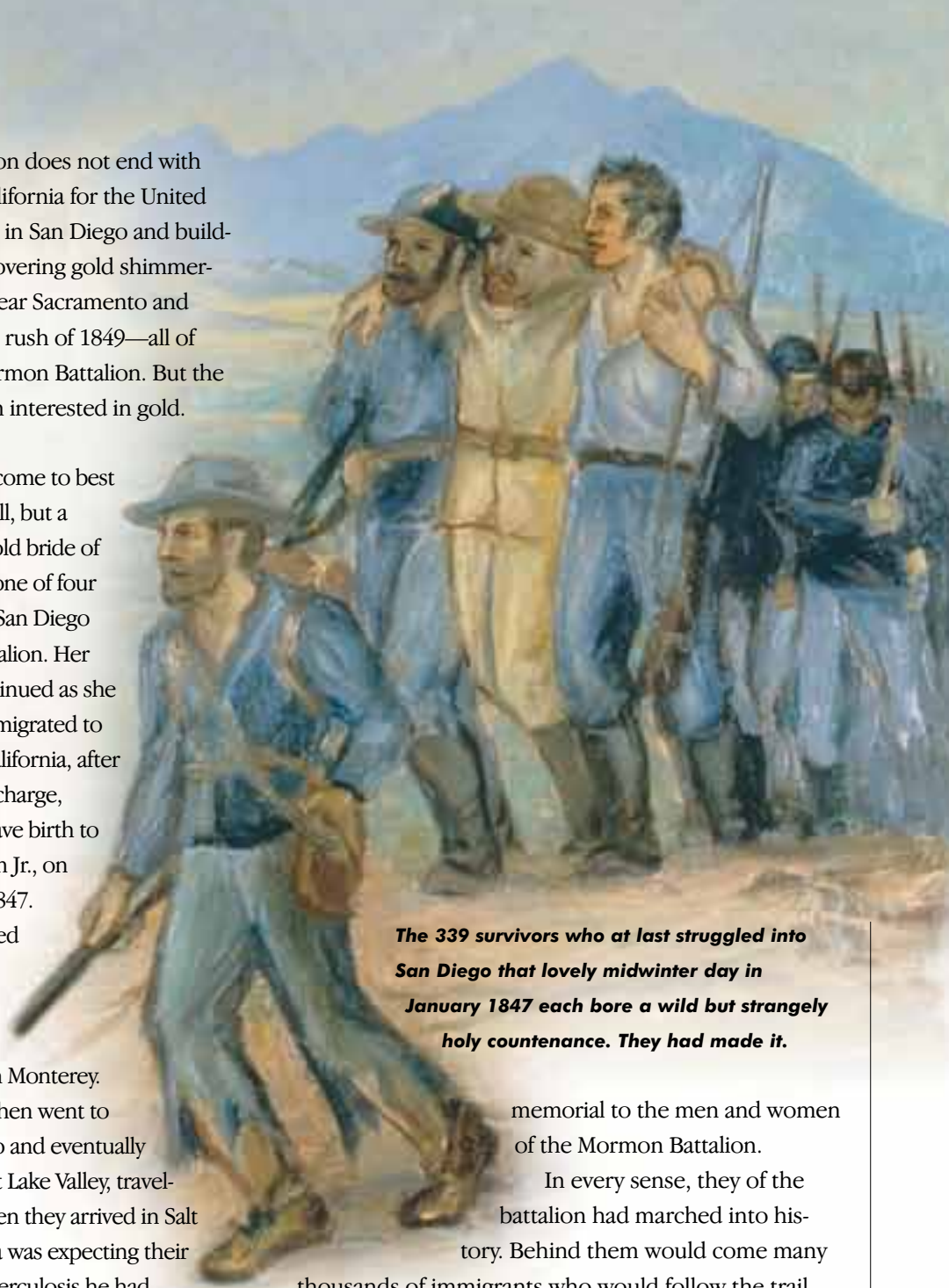
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memorial to the men and women of the Mormon Battalion.

In every sense, they of the battalion had marched into history. Behind them would come many

thousands of immigrants who would follow the trail they so painstakingly—and painfully—pioneered. They had raised "Old Glory," the flag of their country, on the Pacific shore. And they had raised the ensign of Zion. ■

NOTES

1. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War* (1881, 1969), 253.
2. The Diary of Daniel B. Rawson, as quoted in Norma Baldwin Ricketts, *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West 1846–1848* (1996), 13.
3. *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West 1846–1848*, 16.
4. *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West 1846–1848*, 16.
5. *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West 1846–1848*, 55.
6. *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War*, 254.
7. Norma B. Ricketts, *Melissa's Journey with the Mormon Battalion: The Western Odyssey of Melissa Burton Coray, 1846–1848* (1994), 81–82.
8. *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West 1846–1848*, 274.