

Sherman L. Fleek. *History May Be Searched in Vain:
A Military History of the Mormon Battalion.*

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Reviewed by Stephen B. Sorensen

Basically, the Mexican War is an unknown conflict in American history. Most people do not know when it was fought, why it was fought, and, despite the name, who was involved. Yet from this war, the United States gained most of its western territory, including President James K. Polk's prize of California. In addition to ceding land to the United States, the war served as a training ground for an up-and-coming generation of American military officers who would achieve their own historical immortality in the American Civil War. Within the larger conflict are many interesting stories of personal and unit action that inspire and remind us of heroism, determination, and struggle despite seemingly impossible odds. It is in the context of this war that the Mormon Battalion was organized.

Many published and unpublished histories document the personal stories of those involved, but no one until now has made a serious scholarly attempt to explore the Battalion on a military basis. It is difficult to approach another work on the Mormon Battalion because the subject is tied to the family lore and spiritual history of so many people. It is part of the heritage that still gilds many perceptions today. None of this appears to ruffle author Sherman Fleek. Using his military and academically trained history background, he has made a lasting and very readable contribution to the scholarship on the unit by exploring what it truly was: a government-mustered collection of Mormon companies, formed into a battalion with a military objective in a time of war.

One way Fleek's book surpasses many of the previous accounts is in the manner that it attempts to strip away some of the folklore that has found place in some previous histories. Appropriate historical background is given, not only to the Mormons and their saga, but also to the smoke-filled back rooms of Washington, D.C., and the broader political motivation for organizing the Battalion. The Battalion's contribution is not downplayed

but is dealt with in an objective manner. There is no doubt that both sides of the bargain, the Mormons and the government, saw advantages to forming the military unit. More importantly, the author strategically places the Mormon Battalion in its 1846 historical context as a capable second string kept at the ready should serious efforts be required of the unit. The Battalion proved militarily adequate for this role. Also, the author understands the concept of American Manifest Destiny in its true character as a political philosophy only enabled through force of arms. The Mormon Battalion played an important role in being those arms for the government and in securing the southwestern United States and California.

Fleek stresses that the Battalion was formed as a combat unit in the Mexican War, and his proof is adequate. Also, there is no doubt in the author's mind or in his arguments that the Battalion would not have come about without the endorsement and evangelism of Brigham Young. Fleek details the unique circumstances of a military unit formed from a particular faith, with appointed leaders from that faith and the odd compromises that allowed several wives and some children to begin to accompany the Battalion on its march. His use of journal material from the soldiers adds a richness that comes from reading the language of the time. Fleek details the tension among the appointed Mormon officers, who, with limited experience, acted in a quasi-military, religious role to develop an inexperienced volunteer force into a reliable fighting combat unit.

However, there is one question that is explored less satisfactorily: what was the level of the Battalion's military preparedness? The question is raised but never fully dealt with. Aspects of the Battalion's training are noted, and some anecdotal statements are presented, but no in-depth exploration is made. The military historian is left wanting more. Fleek opens the door, but this is one of those areas that will have to be left for other works to explore. Also, there are some editing lapses in the book that are minor and a few redundancies that a careful review might have eliminated, but none of the errors are annoying or overly detracting from the completed work.

The author has generously mined the available secondary source material with reference to several primary works. The work is not exhaustive, which is a benefit to the general reader, but is greatly enhanced by the timely discovery and addition of the journal of non-Mormon Dr. George Sanderson, the Battalion's chief medical officer. Sanderson's journal adds an interesting perspective on the health and well-being of the Battalion and at the same time offers interesting military and social commentary. Through Sanderson's own words, it is clear that the oft-noted lack of

regard was reciprocal between the members of the Battalion and their chief surgeon.

One satisfying aspect of the text is Fleek's periodic expeditions away from the Battalion in order to show the broader action of the Mexican War and what was occurring as the conflict progressed. He successfully establishes important context, enhancing the reader's understanding and timing of the Battalion's journey. He refers to the combat actions of and personality sparks between generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott. Giving the broader context is an effective technique and clarifies that the Battalion's struggles and difficulties were not the only hardships of the war. Fleek spends precious little space detailing some of the nonessential military aspects of the Battalion's organization and march: the civilian caravan that is painstakingly split off and sent to Pueblo; the meddling of John D. Lee and others fomenting discord among the volunteers; the minor leadership squabbles between the men, the officers, and the Church leaders; and some bad behavior by certain individuals are touched on but not dwelt upon. Even the often-dramatized "Battle of the Bulls," named for the one hundred or so wild cattle that charged into the Battalion, is dispatched in a few short sentences as a less-than-significant distraction.

Fleek does detail many of the well-known personalities from American history that weave their way in and out of the Battalion's story. The detail provided on these people makes for satisfying reading. Scout Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, who as a baby was carried on the back of his mother, Sacagawea, during the Lewis and Clark expedition, links the westward expansion of the United States and the Corps of Discovery with the Battalion's military march. The collection of stories and anecdotes add depth to the narrative: Kit Carson, George Rosecrans, and Sterling Price are just a few of the other renowned figures of their day whose paths intertwined with the Battalion.

No military interpretation of the Mormon Battalion would be useful without an analysis of the officers involved. Fleek's analysis is one of the great strengths of his book. In addition to giving strong biographical information, he breathes life into Battalion commander James Allen and gives a proper understanding of Alexander Doniphan and his Missouri volunteers. Fleek gives Colonel Stephen W. Kearny his due and reinforces Kearny's place in history as one of the great leaders and characters of the emerging American military in the pre-Civil War era. His ability to organize, manage, and maintain the Army of the West during the Mexican War era is understood and appreciated from a military historian's eye. It is a well-deserved perspective when studying Kearny and his command,

particularly in light of how he secured California for the United States. In addition, Philip St. George Cooke is appropriately recognized as the outstanding frontier commander of his time. Fleek is not shy about voicing respect and admiration for Cooke, but he never steps over the line to become an apologist. Cooke comes across as a stern commander who hit problems head-on, solved them when he could, and relied on discipline and grit to survive. He clearly cared for the lives of his soldiers, and the records cited show the strength of the unit as a by-product of the strength of its commander. Fleek shows his level of respect for Cooke by naming the book after Cooke's now famous statement regarding the Battalion: "History may be searched in vain for an equal march of infantry." The book details the veracity of this statement in light of military history and interprets, with fairness, the reality of this claim. Often maligned A. J. Smith and Dr. George Sanderson are seen in a new light when viewed through the prism of military expediency and authority. Fleek is fair and even with both. John C. Frémont is appropriately exposed for his self-serving antics and treasonous behavior with the "Bear-Flaggers" in California.

This book is not a comprehensive study of command, although it is part of the work; neither is it a study of all the minutia of issues facing volunteer units in the Mexican War, yet it is part of that as well. However, it is not enlightening to define the book by what it is not instead of by what it is. This work serves as a launchpad for additional studies that need to be done. Fleek has created a solid foundation on which other works can build and explore other aspects of military history as it applies to the Mormon Battalion. Some examples might include comparisons of Battalion mortality rates with other units that did not see combat, military discipline exercised against members of the Battalion as opposed to other units, expenses and stores spent on the Battalion compared to other contemporary military units, and legal status and enlistment practices between state and federal militias. There is still plenty of fertile ground to be plowed.

Gratefully, Fleek has begun the process of seeing the Battalion as a military unit. As such, he concludes his story with the discharge of the Battalion and its Mormon volunteers when their service was completed in California. Appropriately, he sees no need to detail their journey from California back to the Great Basin.

The work does not stand as definitive on the Battalion in general, but it is vitally important in filling a long-neglected part of Battalion history. With that in mind, there is ample room for a "huzzah!" for this work and its author. Fleek's research has been sorely needed in the field of historical scholarship on the Battalion, and he has finally done the heavy lifting to

create a bedrock work for those seeking a solid military understanding of the Mormon Battalion and its unique character as a volunteer unit in the almost-forgotten Mexican War.

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