

The Mormon Military Experience: 1838 to the Cold War
By Sherman L. Fleek and Robert C. Freeman

Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2023

Reviewed by Kenneth L. Alford

The Mormon Military Experience, written by Sherman L. Fleek and Robert C. Freeman, is the first book to provide a comprehensive review of the Latter-day Saint military experience. The authors are to be applauded for undertaking a book of such an expansive nature and managing the subject matter as thoroughly as they have done.

Both authors are well prepared and qualified to write this book. Fleek is a retired United States Army aviation officer who served for many years, until his recent (second) retirement, as the command historian for the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. He has authored several books on Latter-day Saint and American military history, including *History May Be Searched in Vain: A Military History of the Mormon Battalion* (Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark, 2008) and *Saints of Valor: Mormon Medal of Honor Recipients* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

Freeman is a Brigham Young University professor of Church history and doctrine, former associate dean of Religious Education, and one of the founding directors of BYU's multidecade Saints at War Project. His numerous books about Latter-day Saint military history include *Saints at War: Experiences of Latter-day Saints in World War II* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2001) and *Saints at War: Korea and Vietnam* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2003).

Books of this kind benefit from an overarching thesis or theme. Instead of offering a unifying theme, the authors suggest that their book is "divided into two separate books or parts: the nineteenth century of Latter-day Saint exceptionalism as a distinctive military experience, and then the twentieth century and beyond during which LDS military service was no longer as unique but retained some distinctive qualities" (3), a decision that left me wanting. The book's theme is perhaps most

clearly stated in the foreword by William A. Taylor (who authored *Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016]) as “chart[ing] the broad contours of the complex interactions between the LDS Church and military affairs over the course of nearly two hundred years” (vii).

The book’s opening chapter seeks to explain and define “the Mormon military experience” by appealing to St. Augustine and just war theory. The chapters that follow address the Missouri Mormon War of 1838, the Nauvoo Legion, the Mormon Battalion, the Utah War, the American Civil War, Utah’s Indian wars, the Spanish-American War, the U.S. 1916 intervention in Mexico, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the MX missile question. Each chapter summarily outlines the context, issues, history, and key players of that conflict. (The authors chose not to include the 1834 quasi-military experience of Zion’s Camp.)

The book includes an interesting ten-page photo section (139–48) with images from many of the conflicts discussed in the book, a chronology (285–97) that ends unexpectedly in 1896—the year Utah obtained statehood—and an appendix that lists Latter-day Saint Medal of Honor citations (274–84). All three sections are useful additions to the book.

While the authors explain in their introduction that “in the twenty-first century there are distinctive policies and feats that continue to underscore the Saints’ distinctive military experience” (2) and further suggest that “the scope of this book spans from the 1838 conflict in Missouri to the recent war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq and other places in the world” (3), they dedicate only four and a half pages, in an epilogue, to the past forty years. There are only fleeting mentions of 9/11 and America’s longest wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The authors justify the omissions by suggesting “it is not [currently] possible to place these conflicts in proper context, because they are too recent” (270), which makes their decision to ignore the Gulf War (1990–91) somewhat puzzling, as more than thirty years have passed since hostilities ended at Safwan, Iraq.

Historical errors are minimal, but a few are present, such as incorrectly identifying Utah as a territory prior to the arrival of Latter-day Saint pioneers in 1847 (82); stating Utah became a territory in 1851—not 1850 (96); claiming the War Department “had little choice but to contact [Brigham] Young” in April 1862 because “there was no territorial governor in office at the time in Utah” (124, 125) without recognizing

that Frank Fuller was properly serving as the territory’s acting governor; or asserting that the first Latter-day Saint U.S. military chaplain, Elias S. Kimball, was assigned in Hawaii during the Spanish-American War (173) when he actually served with American expeditionary forces in Cuba.¹

As with any book that addresses an extensive timespan, readers will certainly feel some events and personalities are given short shrift while others receive too much attention. For example, a multipage discussion of the January 1863 Battle of Bear River (which the authors propose is “now known by some incorrectly as the Bear River Massacre,” 156) seemed out of place—as the authors correctly noted that “this tragic fight was not a Mormon clash with the Shoshonis but involved the Indians with federal troops” (156).

While the book is directed primarily at a non-Latter-day Saint audience, Latter-day Saint readers may notice the authors’ frequent and repeated use of the terms “Mormon” and “LDS” throughout the book, in contradiction to the Church Newsroom request to “please avoid using the abbreviation ‘LDS’ or the nickname ‘Mormon’ as substitutes for the name of the Church.”²

Because this book addresses events covering over a century and a half, readers will not be surprised to learn that the authors include citations from almost three hundred published sources. Only five of those sources, though, were published after 2013. Research from the past decade is generally missing. Contributions from the Joseph Smith Papers, for example, are absent from this work—with the authors relying instead on the less authoritative *History of the Church* volumes (28, 33, 35, 44, 53, 56, 60, 61, 66, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, and so forth).

In producing a single-volume study, the authors may have been better served to slightly refocus their book as “The Mormon *American* Military Experience.” The few attempts made to share military experiences of non-American Latter-day Saints—such as a two-page subsection titled “A Mormon Nazi Demon” about Erich Krause (218–20)—are limited and incomplete. The story of international Latter-day Saint military experiences is worthy of a separate volume.

1. Elias Smith Kimball, journal, MS 13348, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

2. “Style Guide—the Name of the Church,” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide>.

The authors set out to create a single-volume overview of the Latter-day Saint military experience and, despite some shortcomings, have successfully done so. Readers who are looking for a broad-brush historical overview of Latter-day Saint military service and experience would do well to begin with this book.

Kenneth L. Alford is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. He retired as a colonel in 2008 after serving almost thirty years on active duty in the U.S. Army. While on active duty, Ken served in numerous assignments, including the Pentagon, eight years teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and four years as professor and department chair at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. His books include *Civil War Saints* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), *Utah and the American Civil War: The Written Record* (Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark, 2017), and *Saints at War: The Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020).