

BATTLE OF THE BULLS

When war broke out with Mexico in April 1846 the prize the United States hoped to gain was California, Nevada, Utah & northern Arizona. The “Battle of the Bulls” could easily be considered as the most unusual battle of the war and the one with the least significance on the outcome of the war. Also unusual were the circumstances that led to that battle. During the period leading up to the war a new church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) had been established (1830) and its members (called Mormons) had been undergoing significant persecution because of some of the churches practices. The Mormons, who were led by Brigham Young, had been forced to leave Nauvoo Illinois in February 1846 and had temporarily relocated to the Potawatomi Indian Territory in western Iowa (became Council Bluffs Iowa). The Mormons wanted government help in moving to the unpopulated west in order to settle their religious group there.

Eight days after war was declared on Mexico, Mormon representatives met with President Polk to request government assistance in their relocation. The government agreed to pay the Mormons as soldiers, and at the same time use them to build a road for future settlers and their western expansion. The Mormons were asked to form a volunteer army unit to serve for one year in support of the Mexican war. This unit was to consist of 5 companies (500 men) to be led by Mormon officers and commanded by US Army officers. The unit also included twenty laundresses to ensure that the men had clean clothes. Brigham Young was able to meet this requirement and the unit, known to history as the Mormon Battalion, was formed in July of 1846 as a component of General Kearny’s Army of the West. This Mormon Battalion was the only religion-based unit in US military history. The unit arrived at Fort Leavenworth Kansas on 1 August where they received flintlock muskets and training in anticipation of possible Mexican & Indian encounters in route. The men were to receive the same pay, rations and allowances (a \$42 clothing allowance) that other volunteers received. Mormon “soldiers” were not required to wear military uniforms (another unusual circumstance) so the \$42 was collected and turned over to Young. Young used this money to move the rest of the Mormons and families of the male soldiers to Utah to seek religious freedom.

In Santa Fe, Captain (brevet Lt. Colonel) Phillip St. George Cooke assumed command of the battalion. His assignment was to march them to San Diego and to build a wagon road along the way. As the battalion was approaching the San Pedro River in November of 1846, the group attracted the attention of a herd of wild bulls. The curious bulls began stalking the battalion. These bulls were the survivors of Mexican cattle that were left behind when the Apaches ran the Mexicans off their ranches in the 1830’s. The calves and cows were eventually killed off, but the remaining tough bulls banded together in a herd and fiercely fought off mountain lions and other predators. They became quite aggressive and protective of their territory. They were so wild that even the Apaches would not tangle with them.

By the time the battalion reached the area along the San Pedro where Charleston & Millville were later located, the bulls began charging the battalion. They damaged some wagons, killed three mules, injured many more and seriously gored three men. The Mormons killed at least 15 bulls before the remaining animals ran off. One immense bull was shot and killed by Corporal Frost just a few yards before it would have struck Captain Cooke. Some reports say 80 bulls eventually died of wounds as a result of the hour long “Battle”. One of the blessings of the attack was that the battalion was low on food so they butchered the bulls for meat. They also used the hides for making sandals as their boots were wearing out. After licking their wounds and regrouping, the victorious soldiers of the Mormon Battalion continued on their mission and arrived in San Diego on January 29, 1847 after a march of nearly 2,000 miles. The “Battle of the Bulls” was the only time the battalion was able to use their muskets in an offensive way. In an after action report, Captain Cooke referred to the incident as the Battle of Bull Run.

A historical marker that commemorates the Battle of the Bulls was erected at the site of the “battle” in 1980.

Prepared by Terry Ferguson and T. Johnson in April 2020 from Wikipedia & various other web sites. Photo by T. Johnson



Battle of the Bulls Historical Marker