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Experiencing Battle in the Book of Mormon

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EXPERIENCING BATTLE IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Morgan Deane

Abstract: Historical chronicles of military conflict normally focus on the decisions and perspectives of leaders. But new methodologies, pioneered by John Keegan's Face of Battle, have focused attention on the battle experience of the common soldier. Applying this methodology to a careful reading of details within the Book of Mormon shows an experience in battle that is just as horrific as it is authentic.

The Face of Battle by John Keegan started an important method of inquiry into battle. Instead of focusing on the decisions of leaders, this method asks a very simple question: What is it like to be in a battle?¹ Put another way, what was battle like for the average soldier? This very simple question revealed new dimensions of understanding the battlefield. At the Battle of Agincourt, for example, this approach examined the soggy night before the engagement and its impact on the battle as much as Henry V's decision to fight there. As we study the Book of Mormon during the 2016 Sunday School curriculum, the "war chapters" are the focus of at least two lessons, and matters of warfare touch upon countless other lessons. I answer the question of what battle was like by looking at verses that show the individual experiences of soldiers on each side. This leads to a more universal understanding of the battle experience.

1 John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 16. The same line of questioning is addressed in Alexander Rose, *Men of War: The American Soldier in Combat at Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, and Iwo Jima* (New York: Random House Books, 2015), 3.

In writing this paper, I consciously chose not to look at individual battles, opting instead to look at the overall experience of war detailed throughout the book. This necessarily means that the approach will not be chronological (as the Book of Mormon covers approximately 1,000 years of time), but instead will focus on the overall experience of battle itself. Specifically I look at the period of time just before battle, the movement of armies to the battle, what happened on the battlefield, and the aftermath of those battles.

Before the Battle

The Book of Mormon offers a great deal of information that helps us picture what the average soldier would experience before battle. However, in typical readings of the text this information is easily missed.

For the most part, the Book of Mormon describes an agrarian people — farmers largely preoccupied with feeding their families and communities. These communities would not maintain full-time armies, so when war ensued, the armies would be conscripted from the general population (Alma 44:23, Alma 53:7). Outside of perhaps Teancum's force, the Nephite armies followed this pattern.² Raising an army wasn't always an easy or a quick task, either. It wasn't uncommon for an attacking army to destroy a city before a defending army could be assembled.³ Kings sometimes had difficulty mustering armies,⁴ and armies would have to be conscripted by force.⁵ Conscripts were understandably reluctant to fight in such situations, as their lives were not always valued by their leaders. For example, Amalickiah was known to throw his soldiers into futile attacks against heavily fortified cities.⁶

2 There are numerous comparisons that could be made between Teancum's army and other Nephite armies. Compare, for example, Alma 51:31 with Alma 16:3 or Helaman 1:24.

3 See, for example, Alma 16:2–3 where the city of Ammonihah was destroyed before “the Nephites could raise a sufficient army to drive them out of the land.”

4 An example is in Alma 47:1–2 where the Lamanites were fearful of the Nephites and disobeyed the king's call to arms.

5 Alma 47:3–4 recounts how Amalickiah was given authority to “go forth and compel” the people to arms. Similarly, Ether 14:27 and Alma 62:9 references people being given a choice to join or die, a choice not inconsistent with a type of forced conscription of the population.

6 Alma 49:10 states that Amalickiah would have compelled the Lamanites to attack the city of Ammonihah because “he did care not for the blood of his people.”

The soldiers received a small ration that was likely inadequate for their duties (Alma 55:9;⁷ 60:9⁸). As a result, this made stealing the wine a naturally appealing option. Wine — whether stolen or not — had a corollary benefit of providing some liquid courage and numbing the senses (Alma 55:11).⁹ During more extreme circumstances, consistent with what we know of historical practice, the soldiers likely had so little food and represented such a logistical burden that they supplemented their meager rations by stealing food from widows (Moroni 9:16) and, sometimes, eating human flesh (Moroni 9:10).¹⁰

7 Historically, the common soldiers' rations would be too small or watered down. Combined with the natural tendency to be bored and hungry on guard duty (as I personally experienced), I don't think they believed their rations adequate. The verse says they are "weary," but this sounds like a hunger or thirst resulting from boredom and inadequate rations. See footnote 9 concerning alcoholic rations as well.

8 Premodern peasants usually didn't eat well at home. They could hardly be expected to eat better while on military campaigns during a time of great stress on the state. While the Nephite armies usually got supplies from the government (which is why Moroni complained when those supplies didn't arrive), I hardly think it was generous to the average soldier, and it was frequently irregular. See Alma 62:39 and Alma 45:11 which shows how warfare is closely related to famine. Even fairly early in the war chapters, the Nephite forces had to deliver the people from famine (Alma 53:7).

9 These twin benefits of wine were not limited to Book of Mormon peoples. As late as World War I soldiers received a ration of wine (or an even stronger libation) before heading into battle (Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 245). In fact, the word "Dutch Courage" and the belief that alcohol grants some form of battlefield performance boost comes from British experience. During the 30 Years War British soldiers serving in the Low Countries believed their gin ration stiffened their resolve. Edgar Jones and Nicola T. Fear, "Alcohol use and misuse within the military: A Review," *International Review of Psychiatry*, April 2001; 23: 166–72. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/alcoholsmoking/Jones2011-Alcoholuseandmisusewithinthemilitary.pdf>

10 The verse doesn't explicitly state these are rations. As indicated in footnote 7, warfare is often associated with cannibalism because it is the practical effect of constant warfare. Considering the chapter includes armed competition over food and starvation of widows, I think the use of this scripture in regards to human rations is still supported. Moreover, there are numerous examples of armies being reduced to eating people in extreme situations, and even the Wikipedia page on "cannibalism" has several examples. See, for example, David Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 47.

Guard duty is the unexpected chore that comes with marching off to war.¹¹ Time on duty presented a great deal of opportunity for boredom and a natural desire to drink the shift away (Alma 55:14). Soldiers functioned as guards to protect key positions such as Moroni's immediate area (Alma 44:12), the Chief Captain or King during battle (Alma 2:32–33), and the gates of the city (Helaman 1:18). In addition to being guards, soldiers were presumably the planned executioners of the believers just before the birth of Christ (3 Nephi 1:9).¹² Outside of guard duty, soldiers at various times had additional non-battle functions. In desperate situations, they had to fight during the day and fortify their positions at night (Alma 56:15–16). The army was deployed to deliver “their women and their children from famine and affliction” (Alma 53:7).

Battle also often had a ritualistic component, as the Title of Liberty ceremony illustrates (Alma 46:13–21).¹³ Near the end of the Book of Mormon, rape and cannibalism served a ritualistic function, as evidenced by these horrible acts being considered “a token of bravery” (Moroni 9:10). Another ritualistic behavior happened at the end of battle — when an army in Mesoamerica conquered a city, they typically pulled down and defaced leadership monuments in those cities.¹⁴ Interestingly, Alma 51:17–18 appears to describe such behavior when it states, “they did pull down their pride and their nobility,” leveling them “with the earth.”¹⁵

11 Again, this is not unique to Book of Mormon times. As a Marine I spent more time on guard duty and cleaning than actually training for battle. The Marines who deployed to Iraq faced significantly more guard duty than battle.

12 I say “presumably” because it is more likely that armed soldiers would carry out the will of the nonbelievers towards the believers than that it would be done by other citizens.

13 After Captain Moroni finished praying over the Title of Liberty, the Nephites ran and ripped their garments “in token, or as a covenant” (Alma 46:21). For a deeper discussion on this point, see Kerry Hull, “War Banners: A Mesoamerican Context for the Title of Liberty,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 84–118. <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=3592&index=4>

14 See, for example, David Freidel, Barbara MacLeod, and Charles Suhler, “Early Classic Maya Conquest in Words and Deeds,” *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, Kathryn Brown and Travis Stanton eds. (Oxford, UK: Alta Mira Press: 2003), 192–196.

15 I think this provides additional context to Captain Moroni's actions against the King Men. The “pulling down” can refer to specific objects such as the statues or monuments that represent their authority. While not directly stated, given the possible Mesoamerican location of Book of Mormon events and the political

In addition to effecting rituals and tokens, the senior leaders held war councils (Alma 52:19). Many soldiers even spent time with their families (Alma 56:28).¹⁶ When battle seemed imminent, some armies altered their appearance to help identification between and among groups (Alma 3:4). At other times, soldiers manipulated their appearances in order to look imposing by dying their bodies in blood and shaving their heads (3 Nephi 4:7).¹⁷

Of course, the activities that immediately preceded battle varied based on national policy. The Nephites focused more on fortifications and thus would have faced more guard duty or had an emphasis on defensive armor. The Lamanites, on the other hand, often aggressively attacked the Nephites and thus would experience more marching and plunder.¹⁸ But the age still witnessed large similarities in the battle experience for the common soldier.

In summary, even before the army got to battle, they were often malnourished, tired, overworked, undercompensated, had altered their appearance, and had tried to curry divine favor as best they could through pre-battle ritual.

To the Battle

When two opposing armies operated within close proximity, they moved toward each other in complex pre-battle maneuvers. This was typically done during the dry season, for the wet season would flood rivers, muddy trails, and generally make travel difficult. The dry season, in contrast, facilitated movement and allowed the conscripted soldiers to be away from their fields. Indeed, John Sorenson's research concluded that most

subjugation of the King Men, combined with the unique phrase to "pull down," it makes this an intriguing idea.

16 See Morgan Deane, *Bleached Bones and Wicked Serpents: Ancient Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Ebookit Press, 2014), 109–120.

17 An idea as to why the armies of the Gadianton Robbers manipulated their appearance is intimated in 3 Nephi 4:9: They believed that "the Nephites had fallen with fear *because of the terror of their armies*" (emphasis added).

18 See Alma 17:14. Alma 47:33 includes a tantalizing statement where the queen asked the leader of the army to "spare the people of the city." I believe this implies that the army would otherwise sack the city. Sacking includes burning down the city, raping the women, and pillaging the city. This was a common practice in history and one of the few ways that the average soldier was consistently paid (i.e., rewarded with women). The other way to get paid was the looting of dead bodies; see below.

battles coincided with the Mesoamerican dry season.¹⁹ However, the dry season generally meant more heat, and this warmth would frequently lead to fatigue (Alma 51:33, 37) and other heat-related casualties as well, causing soldiers to drop out of the ranks and decreasing their fighting power. In letters, Mormon emphasized to Moroni his advantage in being able to bring fresh armies into battle as opposed to the over-marched Lamanites (Alma 52:28, 31). Helaman's account to Moroni acknowledges that the speed of the march fatigued the Nephite army, contributing to the death of Antipus and the army's leaders (Alma 56:50–51). Teancum's one-man campaign to slay the Lamanite king in the evening was successful for the very reason that the army was fatigued "by the labors and heat of the day" (Alma 51:33).²⁰

The heat and long marches weren't the only sources of discomfort while marching to battle. In some cases the forces had to hide in swamps,²¹ and while it might have been hot during the day, cool shore breezes (Alma 51:32) and lower temperatures would have added to the warriors' discomfort at night and made resting difficult. While on campaign, the armies may have lived in somewhat flimsy but useful tents made out of woven grass mats.²² While these details rarely made the cut in ancient records, it is consistent with the location, time period, and historical practice to believe that warriors experienced a significant amount of discomfort marching and maneuvering, even before battle.

19 John L. Sorenson, "Seasonality of Battle in the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica" in *Warfare of the Book of Mormon*, Stephen Ricks, William Hamblin eds. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991).

20 This is rather common throughout history. American Civil War General Stonewall Jackson became famous for his long marches with his foot cavalry, yet even his forces struggled with stragglers and dropouts to the point that it ended his famous Valley Campaign. Based on my personal experience, I can say that in addition to the danger of being a heat casualty, excessive heat and sunshine produce a great deal of chafing along the neck as the sweat and armor moves against the skin. For a more extensive treatment of the subject, see Morgan Deane, *Bleached Bones and Wicked Serpents: Ancient Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Ebookit Press, 2014) 53–66.

21 Alma 52:22 indicates that Mulek was near the seashore, where it is common to have swamps. This is verified if we accept Sorenson's location of Mulek; if we don't, it is still plausible they operated in swamps elsewhere. See John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 538–539.

22 John L. Sorenson, "Vive Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (Provo: FARMS, 1994), 332. <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/review/6/1/S00010-51b10a39a975910Sorenson.pdf>

On the Battlefield

Once the opposing armies finally reached each other on the battlefield, the conflict followed a generally consistent sequence of events. Linda Schele and David Friedel suggested that the Mesoamerican battlefield included ritualistic pre-battle insults. These activities followed an “honorable precedent” that went back 20 katuns (about 400 years) or more.²³ Yet a study of historical battlefields finds these behaviors unrealistic. Real-life battles, even in the early stages of the conflict, were a confused melee of screaming warriors bellowing battle cries; commanders attempting to shout orders; battle drums, gongs, trumpets, or cymbals; the braying of pack animals or cavalry horses; and the pounding of one’s own heart. This noise had to be processed or understood by those likely wearing helmets or head gear that limited hearing. The Book of Mormon doesn’t mention all these specific things, of course, but logic insists that battle amongst thousands of people would be a noisy affair — and the early battle sounds would be quickly added to by thousands of clashing weapons and the screams of the wounded and dying. Moreover, the rush of adrenaline triggers physical reactions that make battle notoriously difficult to understand for those participating in it.

“Studies have found at least half of participants [in battle] will experience the event in slow motion, a fifth in faster-than-normal time; two-thirds will hear at ‘diminished volume’ ... a fifth at amplified levels; about half will see ... with tunnel vision and black out everything not directly ahead and the other half with amazingly heightened clarity. Most individuals will suffer memory loss, while others will ‘remember’ events that never occurred.”²⁴

Based on the analysis of the chaotic and loud battlefield then, Schele and Freidel’s recreation of Mayan battle fails to take into account the impractical nature of trying to understand each other during this kind of physical stress on a chaotic battlefield.²⁵ As other historians have

23 Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 151.

24 Alexander Rose, *Men of War: The American Soldier in Combat at Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, and Iwo Jima* (New York: Random House Books, 2015), 72–73.

25 Karl Friday, *Samurai Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2004), 145–149. While modes of battle aren’t the same between Samurai and Book of Mormon peoples, the important points are the practice and effect of pre-battle insults, as well as the general chaotic nature of the pre-battle phase and the effect it had on participants.

suggested when examining pre-battle insults, this honorable tradition is more likely a stylized recreation of the account embellished long after the battle rather than a realistic recreation of events. Some kind of pre-battle yelling and insults probably did happen, but instead of ritual communication between groups it was far more likely they were prearranged outbursts with some elements of spontaneity to strengthen the shouter's morale and that of nearby comrades.²⁶ We would expect that writers with military experience, such as Mormon and Moroni, would avoid stylized after-action accounts of battles in favor of more realistic descriptions.

Actual bloodshed started with an exchange of missile fire (Alma 49:2), though some would die by slings and stones (Alma 17:36; 49:20). Remembering that the bulk of ancient armies, including those in the Book of Mormon, consisted of untrained peasants, slings and missile weapons would be familiar weapons. As David showed when he slayed Goliath (1 Samuel 17:49-50), slings were the natural strength of pastoral shepherds and would be a natural favorite of untrained soldiers. (Note how Zeniff armed his people in Mosiah 9:16.) During such an exchange of volleys, the Nephites recorded that they received occasional wounds in their legs and other unarmored extremities that could be very severe (Alma 49:24; Alma 43:38). The Nephite focus on defensive armor (which protected vital organs) and strong fortifications is a possible difference in the battle experience between them and the Lamanites.

After the opening volleys came the clash, wherein opposing groups of infantrymen rushed toward each other, seeking to cut their way through to their destination or out of a trap (Alma 52:33-34; Alma 43:39-43). The ferocity with which the forces fought was often accentuated when they faced overwhelming odds.²⁷ The contestants hacked and slashed at each other until one side collapsed into a confused retreat. Pre-battle

26 See, for example, Alma 43:49-50 and 3 Nephi 4:8-9. In these examples, warriors are crying (shouting) to God "with one voice," which can be seen as a form of ritualistic or symbolic prayer designed not only to implore God's intervention but to strengthen the morale of the warriors. In addition, these shouted prayers fit the exact moment in the battles when battle cries would normally occur. Notice in verse 9 that the Gadianton Robber army has some kind of battle shout as well.

27 Historically, commanders often place their soldiers in hopeless situations — backed up to rivers or mountains that limited or removed escape routes — in order to focus attention on fighting through and conquering the enemy ahead. See Morgan Deane, "Forming the Formless: Sunzi and the Military Logic of Ender Wiggins" in *Ender's Game: The Logic Gate is Down*, ed. Kevin Decker (New York, Black Well Press: 2013), 81-82 (78-88).

maneuvers had their share of heat casualties, and the missile exchanges early in battle could produce serious wounds, but it was the clash of infantry that was the most deadly portion of the conflict. Soldiers could have their head or chest plates cracked in two (Alma 43:44), their arms cut off (Alma 17:37–38,²⁸ 43:44), javelins could pierce the hearts of unarmored opponents (Alma 51:34, 62:36), and soldiers could be scalped (Alma 44:12–14). Nephite writers used metaphors such as fighting like dragons (Alma 43:44), two lions hunting prey (Mosiah 20:10; Alma 14:29),²⁹ and perhaps a jawbone-wielding opponent to highlight particularly scary or fierce events.³⁰

Despite the chaotic noise that permeated the battlefield, some communication was still possible. If soldiers felt trapped, ferocious reactions or collapse could ensue (Alma 43:36, 39–43; 52:36; 56:52). To prevent this, commanders who sensed an oncoming collapse could inspire their men using the battle standards that reminded them of their duty and motivations (Alma 43:48). This implies that armies were big enough that command and control was needed outside of the chief captain's immediate area. The commander's voice couldn't reach all the soldiers in battle, so he had to use battle standards that the soldiers could see.³¹ Some parts of the army could collapse, while others kept fighting (Alma 44:15–16). Rumors (or real) information about bad news could spread panic and cause collapse or confusion (Alma 56:51). In some instances, the battle could end for some of the soldiers and continue for others when surrender was accepted for part of the army (Alma 44:15–16; 52:36, 39).

Historically, capturing prisoners was one of the most dangerous tasks on a battlefield. Ancient armies didn't have flex cuffs or riot gear

28 Some may not see the story of Ammon and those who came to scatter the king's flocks as a military conflict. However, there can be military conflicts short of war, and this clearly qualifies as a life-or-death situation that today we would easily classify as a "skirmish" or "military skirmish." This kind of hit-and-run raid on flocks is actually one of the oldest forms of warfare practiced by pre-modern societies.

29 The reference to Alma 14:29, while not overtly about a battle, has militaristic overtones, particularly when compared to Mosiah 20:10.

30 Some have drawn a tenuous connection between Lehi and the Semitic meaning of his name ("jawbone"). Lehi certainly inspired fear in his opponents. See Alma 49:17; 52:29. See also <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/LEHI>

31 Though it is possible that the armies were small and personally led, the same loud and chaotic battlefield that made pre-battle insults seem like an embellishment likely hampered verbal communication.

to contain prisoners using relatively nonviolent measures. The Nephites learned during the prison riot in the city of Cumeni that even unarmed men can be dangerous in large numbers (Alma 57:14), and shifting from combat to disarming and then controlling those individuals on a battlefield is difficult.³²

The end of the battle was not always clear but was usually signaled with the surrender, annihilation, or flight of one side. Wounded soldiers would find survival difficult but not impossible. At an old age Gideon withstood not only Nehor's words but, according to some authors, multiple blows from his opponent (Alma 1:9).³³ The heavy armor adopted by Moroni meant that the Nephites were much better protected in battle and fell only "now and then" (Alma 43:38). The Lamanite king was incapacitated from his wound, and the people of Limhi found him alive among the dead (Mosiah 20:12). Loss of blood was a frequent cause of collapse. Accounts of the Stripling Warriors (Alma 57:25), Coriantumr, Shiz, and the last contingents of "large and mighty men" suggest that soldiers commonly passed out from the loss of blood (Ether 15:9, 26–27, 29). Indeed, at the end of his battle, Coriantumr had to rest upon his sword before he delivered the fatal blow to Shiz; his fatigue likely caused a strike that didn't completely and cleanly sever the head, which would explain the account of upper body spasms and struggle for breath (Ether 15:30–31).³⁴

In short then, the battle itself was a trying experience filled with the credible and likely loss of life and limb. Soldiers faced physical trials before they even entered battle, then had to muster the courage and physical exertion to survive, stay mentally strong against fear and rumors, and continue swinging their weapons to outlast the enemy. The battlefield could be so brutal that dying was often one of the better outcomes. As I will discuss shortly, those that fled were chased, the

32 At Agincourt, for example, the English were castigated for capturing and then killing French prisoners when it seemed the battle might turn against them. As the battlefield changed from one of victory to near defeat and back to victory, the loss of control among the capturing and captured forces makes this somewhat understandable, if still morally questionable (Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 108–12).

33 John W. Welch cites the multiple blows as a suggestion Gideon wore armor, a suggestion with which I concur. See John Welch, "The Trial of Nehor," *The Legal Cases of the Book of Mormon*, (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 224, fn18.

34 M. Gary Hadfield, "Neuropathology and the Scriptures," *Brigham Young University Studies* 33 no. 2 (1993), 325.

captured sometimes faced brutal conditions, and the wounded faced a grueling task just trying to survive.

After the Battle

Fleeing combatants were sometimes pursued until they reached wilderness areas or other natural stopping points (Alma 2:37, 51:32), and some hid in the woods (Mosiah 19:9–12). The blood and bodies of the dead — and likely the blood of the wounded — could attract wild animals or scavenger birds (Alma 16:10; see also Alma 2:37–38). Soldiers fleeing from the battlefield could undermine the morale and even induce the collapse of the places to which they fled, as Lehi and Teancum found (Alma 62:32).³⁵ Nephites sometimes used prisoners to fill labor parties (Alma 53:1, 3–4). Other times, Lamanite prisoners joined peaceful and tributary groups like the people of Ammon (Alma 62:27) or were allowed to take a covenant and depart in peace (Alma 44:15). As wickedness permeated the land leading up to the final battle at Cumorah, both the Lamanites and the Nephites used their captured prisoners as human sacrifices and what could be viewed as religious tokens (Mormon 4:14, Moroni 9:10).

For the surviving but wounded members, even of the victorious army, the hardships were not over. Outside of exceptions such as the ancient Romans,³⁶ ancient medical practice was rudimentary. Nephites did have an understanding of medicinal herbs used to cure fevers (Alma 6:40) and they had ritual healers.³⁷ Alma the Elder was wounded

35 This is a strategic and not a tactical example. Even so, the verse indicates a snowball effect where the fleeing people from one city cause the collapse of another and another.

36 Christon Archer, John Chris, Holder Herwig and Timothy Travers, *World History of Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). 95. “Imperial soldiers lived well ... on average they lived five years longer than civilians. All forts had effective sanitation and fresh water, while large ones had a hospital. Military doctors had effective forceps, scalpels, surgical saws, and medicinal herbs. Doctors used opium to kill pain and conducted sophisticated and successful procedures like amputation and removing arrows from chest cavities. Through ligatures, tourniquets, and surgical clamps, doctors handled hemorrhages and minimized infection, gangrene, and blood loss from cuts to major arteries. Not until the days of penicillin did any soldiers have better medical care than the Romans.”

37 Mark Alan Wright, *Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon*, *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings Expound Symposium, 2011*, (Salt Lake City: The Interpreter Foundation, 2014) 243–257.

in battle and recovered enough to lead the nation and preach for years.³⁸ In a miraculous case, the Stripling Warriors fainted from their loss of blood, but not a single person died. They returned to fight Lamanites in later battles without the years of convalescence required by others (Alma 57:25). Coriantumr received numerous serious wounds, to the point that he was thought dead. His wounds were serious enough to help bring him to repentance (Ether 14:30–15:3).³⁹ Earlier, a simple thigh wound had been enough to keep him from battle for two years (Ether 13:31), so his convalescence for those more serious wounds must have been intense and lengthy.

The survival of these individuals suggests some kind of medical care on the battlefield, though the majority of cases refer to off-field treatment. When Coriantumr fell from his wounds he was carried away from the battlefield. When the people of Limhi found the Lamanite king they took him and “bound” his wounds (Mosiah 20:13). In the aftermath of the battle, and with limited resources, the wounded elites from the victorious army would have been treated first, the common soldiers next, and the enemy wounded treated last — assuming they survived the delay and didn’t crawl away to die.⁴⁰ Even if the wounded were able to sleep while suffering from intense untreated wounds, they still would have been kept awake by the moans of the dying and the stench of the dead (Alma 16:11, Ether 14:23).⁴¹ Those cries were added to by the living who rent the air with their howling cries of mourning (Ether 15:16–17).

While military actions are frequently considered a man’s domain, the battle fronts were not devoid of women or even children. Historically, women and children accompanied armies to battle. They acted as camp followers and performed vital logistical functions such as providing

38 See Alma 3:22 and 4:20. It is roughly three years before Alma is mentioned as active, though it could have been sooner.

39 The cited verses refer to the large carnage that spurred him to repentance. The time away from fighting (because of his wound) likely helped him contemplate his life, and his almost personal destruction likely helped as well.

40 The Zulus, after the Battle of Rorke’s Drift, crawled miles before dying from their wounds. Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 298.

41 It takes only a few days for the dead to stink, and it takes at least that long for the last of the wounded to receive help. Also keep in mind that when people die, they lose control of their bowels. With thousands dying in battle, that would be a terrible amount of human excrement. Combine that with various infections and oozing wounds from the wounded, which also smell, and I think it very safe to say the wounded faced a horrible stench even fairly soon after battle.

food to the army, washing uniforms and linens, and other non-combat functions that allowed the army to function at peak efficiency. Military historians such as Ross Hassig and Alexander Engles suggest that an army had camp followers that numbered 33% to 50% of the size of their forces.⁴² In addition to providing essential services, they were vital boosts to morale, as at least some soldiers could avail themselves of the company of women or their families. (This also likely included sexual services, similar to the harlot who distracted Corianton from his ministry; see Alma 39:3.)⁴³ Alma 56:28 references women and children accompanying the army consistent with this historical practice. These women likely acted as basic versions of medical personnel to apply medicinal herbs and restore the wounded. In some cases, such as Alma 55:17, women and children were armed, and it is implied that others served on the battlefield as Moroni explicitly threatened (Alma 54:12; see also Mormon 6:7, Ether 15:15).

When the tactical necessities such as chasing the fleeing, accepting the surrender of the defeated, and treating the wounded were finished, there were yet more post-battle activities to be done. In particular, picking the dead, disposing of the bodies, and recording the number of dead were most important.

Dead bodies would be picked of any valuables,⁴⁴ a common form of enrichment for soldiers, outside of looting. The people of Limhi went through the battlefields and had some kind of contact with dead bodies. At the least, they were “casting” their bodies into the sea (see below), but they could have been searching dead bodies for valuables. In either case, the close contact is how they found the Lamanite king among the dead (Mosiah 20:12).

42 Donald W. Engels, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 13. Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 64.

43 “Comfort women” or “camp-following prostitutes” are a rather common historical practice. (Even today it is not uncommon to find “red-light districts” in the towns adjacent to military bases.) If somebody is “distracted” from the ministry because of a harlot, it is safe to say that barracks soldiers (who, I can testify based on eyewitness experience, have significantly fewer moral compunctions than missionaries) would likely be distracted as well.

44. After the massive Roman defeat at Cannae for example, Hannibal’s forces collected the rings of over 80 Roman consuls, ex-consuls, quaestors, tribunes, and scores more from the equestrian class. See Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 105.

Particularly loathed and feared enemies were killed in especially noteworthy ways, and their dead bodies desecrated. (Possible examples include the “ignominious death” of the enemy of the state, Nehor, in Alma 1:15; the hanging of Zemnarihah in 3 Nephi 4:28; and might be what Mormon described as the “horrible scene of blood and carnage” where everybody “delighted” in bloodshed in Mormon 4:11.) In some cases, such as the dead bodies that were strewn across the land (Ether 4:21–22), it appeared as though there had been such a crush of manpower on the field, and so many people mobilized for warfare, that there was not a single grave digger available.

It is a common phrase in the Nephite records of their wars that the dead were unable to be numbered or were so great they could not be numbered (Alma 3:1, 30:2, 44:21; see also 3 Nephi 4:11 and Mormon 4:17 where the armies themselves were so large they were not numbered). This is a nice literary device and also implies that instead of individual graves for the dead, bodies were gathered into mass graves with shallow coverings or cast into the sea (Alma 16:11; 44:22; Mormon 3:8). In extreme cases, particularly towards the end of the wars, the bodies were left to rot in piles (Mormon 6:15; Ether 14:21–22).

Surviving a battle often left both long-term physical and psychological scars. Our knowledge of conditions like PTSD is rather new, but suffering from it is not a uniquely modern experience. Shakespeare suggested that victorious soldiers would reminisce every St. Crispin’s day, and those who didn’t participate in battle would “hold their manhood cheap” or feel less like a man for missing the battle.⁴⁵ Yet in reality, those who survived battle still suffered a great deal. Many people lost limbs, walked with a limp, or held battle scars. Captain Moroni died at the relatively young age of 43 shortly after the war (Alma 43:17; 63:3), allowing for the possibility that Moroni’s life was cut short because of the rigors of the campaign, the lingering effects of his wound, and the stress of nearly 20 years of constant combat and campaigning (Alma 52:35).

Lisa Hawkins and Gordon Thompson employed a methodology used to describe survivors of the Holocaust and found that both Almas, Amulek, Jacob, and especially Mormon and his son Moroni showed elements of being survivor witnesses to incredible carnage.⁴⁶ On a larger

45 Henry IV, Act 4, Scene 3.

46 Lisa Bolin Hawkins and Gordon Thomasson, *I Only Am Escaped to Tell Thee: Survivor Witnesses in the Book of Mormon*, FARMS Preliminary Report (Provo: FARMS, 1984), <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/PreliminaryReports/Hawkins%20and%20Thomasson,%20I%20Only%20Am%20Escaped%20>

scale, war and captivity left their scar on the Nephites. The people of Limhi fought and lost so many times that King Limhi had to make special arrangements to support the remaining widows (Mosiah 21:17). Alma the Younger constantly referred to the captivity of their fathers (Alma 5:6; 29:11; 36:2, 29), and Nephite leaders repeatedly referred to standing fast in that liberty they had gained (Mosiah 23:13; Alma 58:40; 61:21). Moroni seemed particularly active and aggressive in dealing with threats to Nephite power, including militarizing his appeal to the people in Alma 46 (vv. 13 and 21 refers to putting on armor and weapons), preemptively attacking threats to liberty (Alma 46:30), and seizing Lamanite lands during a time of nominal peace (Alma 50:7). This seemed to have vast popular support, which suggests the people had similar fears.⁴⁷

Summary

So what was battle like? As military historian Victor Davis Hanson wrote in reference to the Roman Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE:

The terror of battle seems not the mere killing of humankind, but the awful metamorphosis that turns on a massive scale flesh to pulp, clean to foul, the courageous to the weeping and defecating, in a matter of minutes ... the thousands of plumed swordsmen in perfect order [in that battle] were transformed nearly instantaneously from a majestic almost living organism into a gigantic lifeless mess of blood, entrails, crumpled bronze, bent iron, and cracked wood.⁴⁸

The soldiers, often pulled from their occupations as farmers to fight part time, also faced boredom and guard duty. They likely participated in rituals before warfare to help bolster morale, honor tradition, and gain divine favor. Marching to war during the dry season facilitated their movement across the landscape, but the heat brought fatigue and sun stroke. After quickly marching they arrived to the battlefield and its chaotic polyphonic chorus of sounds. The infantry soldier then faced a charging enemy and the danger of limbs hacked off, armor split in two,

Alone%20to%20Tell%20Thee,%20Survivor%20Witnesses%20in%20the%20Book%20of%20Mormon.pdf

⁴⁷ These might be somewhat controversial claims, but I explain and defend them in great depth in *Evil Gangs and Starving Widows: Reassessing the Book of Mormon* (book forthcoming)

⁴⁸ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 102–103.

losing a great deal of blood, and possibly death. They felt fear within battle and faced capture or chase upon retreat. The wounded faced a long period of suffering before they were treated, and many, like Moroni or Alma, carried both physical and psychic wounds with them for the rest of their shortened lives.

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