

# *Seasons of War*

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Thank you, President Samuelson. I consider it an honor to speak today to the students of our great university. I am grateful that my family has joined us, and I appreciate that my sons accepted the invitation to offer the prayers for this devotional. One of the great blessings in my life has been a supportive family. I enjoyed the musical number and am grateful for the abundant talent exhibited in student performances. In keeping with the spirit and intent of our university devotionals, I pray that what I will share now will be helpful as you prepare to live in an uncertain world.

At one point in my reading of the Book of Mormon, I pondered why the Lord called a warrior to prepare a sacred text. He could have chosen a merchant, a teacher, or some other from any of a number of professions. Nevertheless, he did not. He chose a warrior, Mormon, who during his lifetime had beheld “a continual scene of wickedness and abominations” (Mormon 2:18). I wondered how these experiences particularly prepared him to author a book of scripture for our day. I found some insight in his son’s report of what Christ had revealed about our day. Because of this knowledge, Moroni felt that he could “speak unto [us] as if [we] were present” (Mormon 8:35).

It appears that Mormon and Moroni understood that we, like them, would live in an age

characterized by wars and the rumors of war. Certainly our own latter-day prophecies speak “of wars, and rumors of wars. . . . For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (JS—M 1:28–29).

In a time of wars and rumors of war we cannot expect to escape the realities described by Mormon and Moroni. Throughout our history members of the Church have accepted the call to the battlefield. Those who have fought understand all too well what Mormon felt when he reported that “it is impossible for the tongue to describe, or for man to write a perfect description of the horrible scene of the blood and carnage which was among the people” (Mormon 4:11).

My purpose today is not to debate the issues related to past wars or the conflicts that currently rage throughout the world. Nor is my intent to provide further evidence of the horrible scenes of war evident in our time. Rather, my intent is to invite you to consider what President Hinckley described as the “silver thread” of war.

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*Dennis A. Wright was a professor of Church history and doctrine when this devotional address was given on 15 March 2005.*

In 1966 there were over 2,000 Latter-day Saint servicemen in Vietnam. Elder Gordon B. Hinckley visited the troops in Saigon to hold a district conference. During this visit a servicemen’s conference was held in Saigon, where Elder Hinckley dedicated the land of Vietnam for the preaching of the gospel. This trip was only one of several he made to Vietnam to strengthen the Latter-day Saint servicemen stationed there.

During his address at general conference in April 1968, he spoke of his trips to Vietnam:

*One cannot have been to Vietnam as I have on a number of occasions, and felt in some small measure the dreadful sorrow of the land, without making a plea for peace a part of his daily prayers. This war, like others, is fraught with terrible evil and unspeakable tragedy. I minimize none of these.*

*But notwithstanding the evil and the tragedy, I see a silver thread shining through the dark and bloody tapestry of conflict. I see the finger of the Lord plucking some good from the evil designs of the adversary. I see coming out of this conflict . . . an enlargement of the Lord’s program. . . .*

*I hope that some of you parents who grieve over your sons who could not go on missions because of the demands of the draft will derive some small measure of comfort from the assurance that your sons may perform an effective missionary labor through their examples, and that they may assist in lifting the veil in lands of darkness in which the gospel must someday be taught. [CR, April 1968, 21–23]*

The “silver thread” that Elder Hinckley described was woven in by efforts of faithful Latter-day Saint servicemen, young men of the age to serve missions who had responded to their nation’s call. Their acts of faith and courage provide us with numerous examples that can help us prepare to meet our own unique challenges in these last days.

Ariel Barrus, an LDS veteran of World War II, has given a lifetime of service to the Church.

He is one of many faithful LDS servicemen who wove the silver thread into the tapestry of World War II. Personal accounts of veterans such as Brother Barrus are found in the *Saints at War* archive housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections of the BYU Harold B. Lee Library. In drawing from these accounts for my presentation, I wish to recognize the contribution of my colleague Dr. Robert C. Freeman, whose work in preserving the accounts of our LDS servicemen has been monumental.

I believe that from the examples of faithful LDS servicemen we can understand basic principles that will enable us to endure our particular season of war. For the purposes of this devotional, I would like to limit my remarks to three important principles. I believe these will help us live in a time of wars and rumors of war. The first principle recognizes that “without faith [we] can do nothing” (D&C 8:10).

I have in my hand a letter written during World War II by a young soldier to an LDS chaplain, Eldin Ricks, that illustrates his simple faith.

Let me read from the letter Chaplain Ricks received from Boyd Colby:

*Our church on Sunday is swell. That is what we go the week for. I have had to miss twice, and those weeks seemed like they never would end.*

*My home is in Manti, Utah. From my bedroom window I can see the temple. I think that it is the most beautiful sight that there is.*

*If you should see any boys from my hometown, would you give them my address? Would you please send me the Book of Mormon and Principles of the Gospel? [Letter to Eldin Ricks from Boyd H. Colby dated 14 February 1944; *Saints at War* archive, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah]*

In the letter, Brother Colby requested the pocketbooks prepared by the Church. They were of a size that would fit the front pocket

of an infantry field jacket. Since their introduction in World War II, they have provided an invaluable source of faith for LDS servicemen throughout each succeeding conflict.

James D. Martin, an aircraft mechanic during the Korean War, described how the Lord blessed him because of his faith:

*Because the men of the squadron did not keep the standards, which I was striving to diligently keep, . . . I often wished that I could find the companionship of other LDS men. . . . One night after everyone had gone to bed, I went to the squadron line shack. . . . I knew that no one would be there at that time of night and I would not be bothered. There I poured out my heart to God as I had never done before. I pled with Him to help me find the companionship I felt so desperately in need of. I begged His forgiveness of my sins and weaknesses. Tears freely flowed. As I left the room, I felt a peace and calm I had never felt before. I knew that somehow the Lord would help me. [James D. Martin, interviewed by the author; Saints at War archive, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU]*

One of my first interviews with an LDS serviceman was with Horst Hilbert. As a young member of the Church in Germany, Horst was part of the largest congregation of Church members outside North America. Like other German members, he feared that as a soldier he would be forced to fight his American brothers. He prayed that this would not happen. He laughed as he explained that the Lord answered his prayers by sending him to the Russian front.

Horst described how his family gathered in prayer before he entered the German army. He recalls how that experience gave him the faith and courage he needed at a particularly difficult moment during the war. Finding himself hiding in a small shed surrounded by Russian soldiers, he knelt in prayer asking for protection. Trusting in his faith and that of his family,

he prayed while bullets whistled around him without harming him.

Following the retreat from Russia, American forces captured his unit and placed the men in a fenced POW compound. Horst caught the attention of a guard and asked him in English if there were any Mormons in the camp. Surprised that Horst could speak English, the guard said he knew one.

“Get him, it is important,” Horst said excitedly.

Soon a GI appeared smoking a cigarette.

“Are you the Mormon?” Horst asked with some surprise.

“Yes, but I am not really active,” he replied.

Upon further questioning, Horst learned that several other Mormons met to worship each Sunday. He made contact with one of these men, who obtained permission for Horst to attend their church service. Tears came as Horst described kneeling for the first time in years before a makeshift sacrament table:

*There I was [he described] in my dirty German uniform passing the sacrament to my American brothers. I knew at that moment that for me the war was over. I was so grateful to my Father in Heaven for my membership in the Church and the blessings that were mine that day.*

Upon returning home after the war, Horst related his experiences on the Russian front to his family. He was surprised when they questioned him in detail about his experience in the shed. Seeming satisfied, his father then told of the night when his wife woke him, worried about their son. Waking all the family, they had knelt in prayer pleading with the Lord to spare their son. Horst believed that his family had prayed at the same time that his life was threatened. (From notes by Dennis A. Wright of interview with Horst K. Hilbert, Mesa, Arizona, October 1971; see also Robert C. Freeman and Dennis A. Wright, *Saints at War: Experiences of Latter-day Saints in*

*World War II* [American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2001], 135–36.)

It is interesting to note that Elder Neal A. Maxwell reported a similar experience. While he was under fire on a Pacific island, his mother woke her family to pray for her son, whom she felt was in danger. Elder Maxwell said of this experience, “Mothers just know” (Neal A. Maxwell, interviewed by the author).

Sustained by their faith, young Latter-day Saints have faced the most difficult of experiences. They have succeeded because of their faith in Christ and their testimony of the gospel. It is natural that armed with such faith they would learn to trust in the Spirit.

Our first principle was that we can do nothing without faith. The second principle I would like to illustrate is the counsel of the Lord to trust that the Spirit will lead us “to do good” (D&C 11:12).

Wilford Fischer served as a marine in World War II. His assignment was to find enemy targets and radio their position for naval bombardment. When I first met Brother Fischer, he was somewhat frail with age. As the interview progressed, his eyes brightened and his countenance changed as he bore witness of how the Spirit had blessed him during the battle of Saipan.

Brother Fischer related that “one by one we knocked out the enemy artillery except for one large 16-inch gun.” During this time Wilford felt an impression to move his men from their location in the trees. He ordered his men into an open spot on the hill. They complained because it was so hot in the jungle sun. Nevertheless Wilford persisted, and they obeyed. As soon as they settled in their new location, Japanese mortar shells began to fall on their former position in the shade below. Wilford’s patrol would have all died had they not moved. With tears in his eyes, Wilford shook his head and testified, “If I had not listened to the Spirit that day, it would have cost all of our lives. I am so grateful for

the Spirit that helped me that day to save the lives of those wonderful young men.” (From Wilford A. Fischer oral interview notes, Provo, Utah, November 2000; *Saints at War* archive, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU; see also *Saints at War: Experiences of Latter-day Saints in World War II*, 2001, 321–23.)

In our effort to understand how the Spirit leads us to do good, we need to recognize that it sometimes works in mysterious ways. The account of Brenner Hall, an army marksman in World War II, known by his friends as “Dead-eye Dick,” illustrates this point.

Fearing that a German patrol of two soldiers would discover their position, Brenner and his comrades decided to confront and capture them. One German soldier attempted to fire on the Americans and was immediately gunned down. The second turned and ran. The leader of the American unit turned to Brenner, a company sharpshooter, and asked him to shoot the fleeing German. Brenner took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. Much to the surprise of his friends, Brenner repeatedly missed his target.

Another American patrol captured the fleeing German and returned him for questioning. As the GIs approached the house, they shouted out that they had caught Brenner’s friend. Still smarting from the embarrassment of having failed to hit his target, Brenner demanded to know what they meant.

“Well,” they reported, “he must be your friend, because we found him praying on his knees, and you are the only one that we have seen do that.” “He must be your friend,” they teased.

Speaking through an interpreter, the German soldier explained that he had a friend in Arizona. No one was more surprised than Brenner when the German told of his friend, a Mormon elder from Mesa, Arizona, who had baptized his family before the war. Brenner recognized the name of his high school friend

and knew that he had served his mission to Germany.

"I know that guy," Brenner exclaimed.

"Hey," one of the GIs laughed, "Brenner's a Mormon, too."

"Brudder Hall!" the German said with a big smile. Brenner embraced the German soldier as a brother in the gospel, thankful that for once he had missed every shot. (From Brenner Hall video interview in DVD and VHS versions of *Saints at War* [American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2001].)

The final principle I would like to illustrate is the Lord's desire to establish the Church through our individual efforts (see D&C 31:7).

One characteristic of our LDS servicemen has been their desire to share the gospel with their comrades.

One of the more creative examples was that of Roland Wright, a fighter pilot in World War II. He named his plane *The Mormon Mustang* in an attempt to create interest in the Church.

Stan Shultz used a similar approach during the Vietnam War. When assigned a Jeep for his use, Stan discovered it covered with graffiti. After painting over the crude words and phrases, Brother Shultz decided to rename his Jeep after the brother of Jared. It was his effort to create opportunities to discuss the gospel.

Wherever the LDS servicemen went, they organized units of the Church. They often met in the open or in buildings provided by the military. When occasion permitted, they even built their own chapels. While simple, the first LDS chapel built in Korea served the purposes of the LDS troops stationed nearby.

Even on the deck of a battleship in World War II, LDS sailors managed to hold a sacrament meeting. On the USS *Cambria* in 1944, John A. Larsen was the presiding group leader.

In addition to these activities, member servicemen also organized choirs, produced newsletters, and made every effort to provide a Church experience even in the most difficult situations. By establishing the Church in such

difficult settings, they wove in the silver thread that proved to be a crucial lifeline for those seeking the truth in a time of darkness.

Virgil N. Kovalenko was a U.S. officer assigned as a consultant to the Vietnamese air force. During much of his tour of duty he also served as the president of an LDS servicemen's branch.

He related how he was able to establish the Church in his assignment by responding to a member referral card sent by a wife who desired her husband to join the Church. Virgil told of his gospel discussion with John Parr. Following the discussion, his new friend walked Virgil home:

*As we went inside the Spirit told me, "You need to close this day with prayer." So I said, "John, would you mind if we end the day with prayer?" . . .*

*We knelt down on the cold concrete floor . . . and I asked him if he would mind saying the prayer, which he did. At the end of that prayer . . . we shook hands and embraced. And just as he was going out I said, "Well, John, you've heard the truth tonight. Your spirit has heard the testimony of the Holy Ghost."*

*He looked me right in the eye and said, "Yes. I know."*

*I said, "Well, that means then that you're responsible for what you've heard and you have to make a decision, don't you?"*

*He said, "Yep. I'll let you know."*

John called a week later and said he wanted to be baptized. A baptism was arranged for the base swimming pool for Saturday morning at 6:00 a.m. Afterward he received the Aaronic Priesthood and was able to pass the sacrament the next day. He did not tell his family, preferring to wait until he saw them when he met them in Hawaii for R&R (rest and recuperation).

*On the Sunday that John arrived, his wife heard noises in the kitchen and went out to see her husband dressed in a suit and tie, . . . fixing himself*

*some breakfast. She was used to him sleeping in on Sunday and then watching football all day while she took the children to [church]. She asked him where he was going. He replied, "Where else should I go on a Sunday morning? I'm going to priesthood."*

He then explained that he had been baptized in Vietnam and now wanted to prepare to take her and their young son to the temple. (From Robert C. Freeman and Dennis A. Wright, *Saints at War: Korea and Vietnam* [American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2003], 347, 350–51.)

John D. Russell, a World War II army paratrooper, told of another effort to establish the Church. One time during some extremely hard fighting, John curled up in a foxhole trying to get some sleep. Two soldiers nearby asked him if he wanted to join them for church. He was dumbfounded that these two rough, tough guys would even mention church at a time like this. They spoke with sincerity and in terms that really touched him. John watched as they broke up K-ration crackers into pieces and put them in a helmet. They then said a prayer and passed the helmet, each taking a piece of cracker. John followed their example. Then they passed around a canteen after saying another prayer, and they all took a drink. Following this they took turns sharing how they felt about their faith. John tried, unsuccessfully, to fight back tears even though he knew little about their religion.

When the war ended, John returned to Council, Idaho, where he met a young girl named Betty. They dated for a couple of weeks. Betty invited John to her church, and he accepted, not knowing which church she attended. During the meeting he watched two young men administer the sacrament. He recognized the Spirit that came over him and knew that this was what he had felt in the foxhole in Europe.

"What church is this?" he asked. "I want to know more!"

He joined the Church, and he and Betty were married and sealed in the temple.

"How grateful I am," he declared, "for those young men who invited me to my first sacrament meeting in that foxhole so far away." (John D. Russell, interviewed by the author, in *Saints at War* archive, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU; see also *Saints at War: Experiences of Latter-day Saints in World War II*, 2001, 175–76.)

A horrible scene unfolded at the end of the Vietnam War. About 250 Vietnamese nationals such as Brother Thach and his family had joined the Church.

What hope did the members of the Church have as the North Vietnamese army swept southward over their homeland? They could not turn to their American allies for help because they had fled the land, leaving the members to an awful fate. The president of the Saigon branch, The Van Nguyen, wrote of this moment:

*On Sunday, April 27, 1975, with the enemy at our very gates, members of the Saigon branch met to discuss our collective fates. Cut off by the war from our lines of Church authority, we were afraid and felt utterly helpless. We reverently and humbly bowed our heads for opening prayer and then sang "Come, Come, Ye Saints" from the depths of our souls. Our tiny branch, so far away from the main body of the church, conducted its own funeral. . . . As we drew together at this perilous moment, we only knew that each of us, in addition to the gospel, had one thing in common: life as we knew it was over. . . .*

*. . . As the highest ranking Church leader residing in Vietnam, my job was to effect the evacuation of as many branch members as possible—hopefully all of them—before Saigon fell. Even though my feelings of inadequacy nearly overwhelmed me, I was determined to do all I could to ensure the safety of those who had embraced the gospel in Vietnam.*

*I could only place my trust in the Lord to help me do the right thing.*

*While the sacrament was blessed and passed, I could not help but reflect back on the events in my life that brought me to this awful crisis. I paused in the serenity of the sacrament to ponder my unenviable situation. In a long moment of self-pity, I tried to say in my heart, "All is well, all is well," but instead I recalled the words of the Savior as He hung upon the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [Personal account of The Van Nguyen in The Van Nguyen and David L. Hughes, "The Saigon Shepherd and the Scattered Flock," unpublished manuscript, 11–12; in *Saints at War* archive, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU; see also The Van Nguyen and David L. Hughes, *When Faith Endures: One Man's Courage in the Midst of War* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2004), 1–18]*

In the years that followed, the Vietnamese members of the Church were unable to practice their religion. Some fled their homeland while others quietly endured. However, the story does not end here. Following the end of the war, a group of American servicemen organized an effort to identify and assist the scattered Vietnamese members of the Church. These valiant Latter-day Saint veterans helped many members reestablish contact with the Church and in some cases find refuge in other countries. President The Van Nguyen and some of the members of his branch now live in the United States, free to enjoy their membership in the Church. Other members still in Vietnam have recently organized branches of the Church there. It is no surprise that President Hinckley has returned to Vietnam and met with the emerging membership there.

This effort to establish the Church has continued in the conflicts of the present day. The

silver thread still winds its way through the crimson tapestry of war as LDS servicemen exercise their faith in present conflicts around the world. These faithful young men listen to the spirit that leads them to do good and are successful in establishing units of the Church wherever they serve.

Recent Church activity in Afghanistan is evidence of this effort in our present conflict. A young marine corporal accepted baptism there after hearing the gospel from a friend while stationed at a remote firebase.

In conclusion I would like to express my gratitude for the privilege to address you. I am strengthened by your faith and awed by the responsibility that is yours. You will live in a period of time characterized by wars and rumors of wars. I pray that, like the young Latter-day Saint servicemen we have talked about today, you will stand firm in your faith and hearken to the spirit that will lead you to do good. Remember it is by your hands that the Lord will establish His Church throughout the earth.

While it is true that you may not be called to the battlefield, the Lord will have need of your faith in the difficult times we will face in the last days. It is your heritage to weave the silver thread through these challenging times and, by doing so, bring hope to our Father's children. The Lord has uniquely prepared you, like others before you, for this, your finest hour. May the Lord bless you to be true to your divine appointment.

I wish to now stand as a witness of the reality of the only true and living Church, restored by the Prophet Joseph Smith to prepare the world for the glorious Second Coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I invite you to stand with me in this witness, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.