

Bear River Massacre and the Ethical Implications for Large Scale Combat Operations

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One hundred fifty-six years ago, the U.S. Army California Volunteers found themselves protecting a remote area in the west while the majority of the army was struggling to fight in places like Bull Run and Shiloh. Utah settlers had experienced persecution in Missouri and Illinois and now had the U.S. Army watching over their conduct. The Northwestern Shoshone, like many other tribes of the plains, found their land overtaken by a rapidly growing population of settlers and emigrants passing through. Ultimately, these three parties found themselves intertwined in social, political, economic and cultural factors that eventually resulted in tragedy.

What transpired at Bear River remains the largest massacre of Native Americans west of the Mississippi. With estimates between 200 to 400 men, women, and children killed on the Utah-Idaho border the question arises: what caused the battle between Shoshone Warriors and American Soldiers to transform into a massacre? This essay explores this tragic event, not only as a historical case study but as a way to understand factors that led up to the massacre. As the U.S. Army pivots towards large scale combat operations today, this case study provides lessons for understanding both the operational environment and strategic roles that we can and should carry forward.

The U.S. Army

Colonel Patrick Connor was born in Ireland in 1820. However, he spent most of his childhood in New York after his family immigrated to the United States.¹ Patrick joined the First U.S. Dragoons at Fort Leavenworth at the age of 19 where he served for a few years before returning to New York to pursue other work.² When the Mexican War started, Connor left New York and joined the Texas Volunteers. He saw action at Buena Vista—fighting under General Zachary Taylor—where he was injured and left the service.³ Connor then went to California for mining but stayed involved with local militias. In 1861, with the fall of Fort Sumter, Connor volunteered his services for Union Forces and assumed command of the Third California Volunteer Infantry.⁴ His assignment was to protect the Overland Mail Trail between Fort Bridger, Salt Lake City, and Carson Valley from raiding forces of Native Americans. The California Volunteers resented their desert assignment, as the regimental chaplain recorded the desire was “to serve their country shooting traitors instead of eating rations and freezing to death around sagebrush fires...”⁵ Colonel Connor attempted to convince the General-in-Chief Halleck of the War Department to redirect his unit to the east where they could participate in the Civil War. The men of the Third Volunteers were so determined that they offered \$30,000 of their own money to cover the cost; however, General Halleck denied this request.⁶

Although names like the Sioux and Apache tribes are often thought of as the most violent tribes during this time in American history, in fact, the Shoshone tribe was responsible for more attacks on settlers and travelers than other tribes. Between 1840 and 1860, American Indians killed 362 emigrants. Ninety percent of which died along the south pass trail along the Snake and Humboldt rivers, by which the Overland Mail trail crossed.⁷ Colonel Connor moved the Volunteers from California over the summer and gained a reputation of being tough on Native Americans with a series of attacks along the Humboldt River en route to Utah. A report of an American Indian raid at Gravely Ford that resulted in the deaths of twelve settlers

reached Connor, who promptly dispatched Major McGarry to investigate. Connor gave orders to, “destroy every male Indian whom you encounter in the vicinity of the late massacres. This course may seem harsh and severe, but I desire that the order may be rigidly enforced, as I am satisfied that in the end, it will prove the most merciful.”⁸ It is important to mention that Colonel Connor did distinguish that only male American Indians be the subject of this order. Major McGarry carried out his orders which resulted in 24 American Indian deaths.

Initially, Colonel Connor planned to occupy the previously abandoned Fort Crittenden. However, while the regiment was moving along the Humboldt trail, Connor conducted an initial recon of the area and recognized the need to relocate his unit to the Salt Lake Valley. Therefore, he established Camp Douglas in Salt Lake City in October of 1862. This new location allowed his unit access to the resources of the Salt Lake while enabling him to keep a closer eye on the Mormons. In his letter to the Department of the Pacific Adjutant General, he noted his intent, “I intend to quietly entrench my position, and then say to the Saints of Utah, enough of your treason.”⁹ Further, in his letter, Connor describes his impression, “I find them to be a community of traitors, murderers, fanatics, and whores.” Colonel Connor and Brigham Young set the tone for their communities and, in large part, determined relationships between the Soldiers at Fort Douglas and the Mormons. Colonel Connor required that Mormons who conducted business with the Army take an oath of loyalty.¹⁰ In response, Brigham Young designated one representative from each congregation that was allowed to conduct business with the Army.¹¹

The Mormons

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons, had a tenuous relationship with the U.S. government throughout its migration across the United States. In Missouri, their economic practice of communal resourcing, friendly attitudes towards Native Americans, anti-slavery beliefs, and claims they belonged to the one true religion put them at odds with their neighbors.¹² A series of mob attacks from local Missourians led to the formation of a Mormon militia to defend itself. A series of contentious interactions precipitated in 1838 when Missouri Governor Boggs issued an extermination order to the state militia, “The Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the state.”¹³ The Mormons were forced from the state and relocated to Illinois.

Once in Illinois, the Mormons experienced a period of peace. The same issues that caused them problems in Missouri surfaced again, although the Mormon destruction of a printing press accused of printing defaming material was a breaking point.¹⁴ Joseph Smith turned himself over to authorities and while awaiting trial in Carthage was killed by a mob. Under the direction of Brigham Young, the settlers moved west, arriving in Utah in 1847. While moving across the plains, the Mormons provided 500 men to the U.S. Army to support the Mexican War effort.¹⁵ Brigham Young chose the Utah Territory because it belonged to Mexico and believed the Saints would be able to establish their Zion without federal government intervention.¹⁶ This belief was short-lived, as the following year the Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty ceded the Pacific southwest—including the Utah area. Washington, D.C. appointed Brigham Young as the territorial governor, and once again the religion, commerce, and politics of the Mormons were intertwined.

Nearly a decade after arriving in Utah, President Buchanan sent 2,500 soldiers from Fort Leavenworth to Utah to replace Brigham Young as the territorial Governor and enforce federal law.¹⁷ In fact, before the civil war, the largest concentration of U.S. Forces was located at Fort Crittenden in Utah.¹⁸ Despite the tension between the Army and Mormons, the residents of the territory appreciated the protection the Army offered from the American Indians in central and southern Utah. This relationship existed until the army abandoned the fort at the start of the civil war. When news of the California Volunteers march towards Utah came a year later, it came with added tension as President Lincoln had signed the Morrill Act making the practice of polygamy illegal.¹⁹

The Mormons in Northern Utah, particularly the Cache Valley, had established a working relationship with the Shoshone Indians, adhering to Brigham Young's philosophy that it was "manifestly more economical, and less expensive to feed and clothe them than to fight them."²⁰ As the flow of settlers continued to grow in the valley, the Shoshone resources became increasingly strained. Although incidents of Mormon settlers encroaching on Shoshone land and theft of Mormon settlers' property by Shoshone natives occurred, the overall atmosphere was relatively calm in comparison to the Black Hawk and Ute Wars being fought elsewhere in the state.

The Shoshone Indians

The first notable interaction of settlers and the Shoshone took place in 1805 with Lewis and Clark.²¹ The seven groups Shoshone were divided into seven groups: Eastern Shoshone, Fort Hall Shoshone, Bannock Shoshone, Lemhi Shoshone, Boise Shoshone, Bruneau Shoshone, and the Northwestern Shoshone. These groups spanned present-day Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah. Just as the geography varies vastly across this span of land, so did the livelihood of each of the groups. The Northwest Shoshone, the tribe, primarily involved in this paper, were located in the Weber, Cache, and Malad valleys of Utah.²² Blessed with fertile land, access to the Snake River, and horses, the Northwestern Shoshone were able to transition from grass huts and sagebrush clothing that their neighbors to the west were accustomed.²³

Confusion existed within the Department of Indian Affairs over the jurisdiction for the Shoshone Tribe as the borders between the territories of Oregon, Washington, and Utah were still vague. While the Northwestern Shoshone received gifts from Salt Lake, the Lemhi and Fort Hall Shoshone received very little from their representatives located far away in Oregon and later Washington.²⁴ The Northwestern Shoshone experienced rapid change to their territory as the California, Oregon, and then the Montana Trails crossed through. Estimates from 1849 to 1862 have nearly 240,000 emigrants and 1.5 million animals crossing the area consuming firewood, killing large game, and overgrazing the land with severe impacts to Shoshone.²⁵ By 1862, the Shoshone people were starving, and the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Utah lamented that no agent existed to represent these people from Fort Laramie, Wyoming to California.²⁶

Chiefs Sagwitch, Bear Hunter, and Pocatello were the local leaders for the Northwestern Shoshone. As the tension for competing resources increased in Cache Valley, so did the tension between the Shoshone and the U.S. Army. In September of 1862, Major McGarry left Fort Douglas with a contingent of the cavalry in response to a report that the Shoshone in Cache Valley had a kidnapped boy from two years prior in Idaho. A two-hour skirmish took place, which resulted in the capture of Chief Bear Hunter.²⁷ Major McGarry demanded the release of the boy in exchange for the release of Chief Bear Hunter. The following day the Shoshone turned over a boy. However, it is doubtful it was the same child as this boy had forgotten all English in two short years. A subsequent revelation indicated that this boy was most likely Chief Washakie's nephew, of the Eastern Shoshone, given up to gain the freedom of Chief Bear Hunter.²⁸ In retaliation, the Shoshone punished the Cache Valley settlers, demanding more goods and stealing livestock.

Once again in December of 1862, a report of stolen livestock near Brigham City caused Connor to deploy Major McGarry. Once again Major McGarry captured four Shoshone and demanded the livestock returned in exchange for the release of the Shoshone captives. When the remaining Shoshone fled, McGarry had the four prisoners tied to the ferry rope, shot and left in the river.²⁹ Once again the Shoshone responded with increased demands on the Cache Valley residents and travelers along the Montana trail. Tensions finally culminated in January of 1863, when eight men traveling through Cache Valley had their livestock stolen and one of them, John Henry Smith, was killed. One of the men in the company gave a sworn statement to Chief Justice John Kinney in Salt Lake who then issued a warrant for the arrest of Chiefs Bear Hunter, Sanpitch, and Sagwitch.³⁰ Justice Kinney directed the territorial marshal Isaac Gibbs to coordinate with Colonel Connor for his assistance to arrest the chiefs. Colonel Connor had already been planning an expedition and in response to the warrants expressed, "my arrangements for our expedition

against the Indians were made, and that it was not my intention to take any prisoners, but that he could accompany me.”³¹ Meanwhile, the Shoshone had settled down for the winter in the Franklin Idaho region of Cache Valley.

The Bear River Massacre

Despite the cold conditions of Utah in January, Colonel Connor decided to make a hasty advance north explaining, “Feeling assured that secrecy was the surest way to success, I determined to deceive the Indians by sending a smaller force in advance, judging and rightly, they would not fear a smaller number.”³² Colonel Connor split his element into two groups, with Captain Samuel Hoyt and K Company of infantrymen in advance, while Colonel Connor and the remaining body departed two days later. The movement plan included two elements traveling separately and then meeting at Franklin, Idaho just twelve miles away from the Shoshone encampment for final preparations. Choosing a winter assault in the west was uncommon, as the Soldiers were “ill-equipped for such extreme weather; covered only in typical cavalry garb of the times reinforced by extra blankets. Twenty-five years would pass before the army routinely issued cold-weather gear suited for the mountain blizzards of the West.”³³

Colonel Connor directed that 20 days of rations be carried in 15 wagons with K Company along with two howitzer cannons and 100 rounds for them.³⁴ He also instructed every soldier to pack their haversack with three days of rations pre-cooked. With split elements following separate routes on different timelines, Colonel Connor had the Soldiers carry the food that they would need for the movement to the battle site. The infantry marched just over a hundred miles, with snow a foot deep, stopping at Mormon settlements on the way.³⁵ Despite the harsh conditions for the infantry, the cavalry experienced a far more difficult movement.

Connor and the Cavalry departed after nightfall two days later in an effort to prevent forewarning the Shoshone. Typically, cavalry would ride forty miles in a day, however, Colonel Connor pushed the cavalry an impressive 68 miles through freezing conditions.³⁶ Soldiers noted how cold it was and that their whiskey rations froze in their canteens.³⁷ As Soldiers fell casualty to frostbite and hypothermia, Colonel Connor was forced to leave them in small towns along the way. By the time Colonel Connor had reached Brigham City, he had lost 75 Soldiers to frozen feet and other cold weather injuries but still had to traverse the divide with snow over four feet deep.³⁸

The Infantry made it to Franklin on January 28, 1863, six days after leaving Fort Douglas. Despite Colonel Connor desire to surprise the Shoshone, Chief Bear Hunter spotted the infantry while he was in Franklin trading. Although he did not see the more significant part of the force, including the cavalry, the Shoshone knew the military was in the area.³⁹ When Colonel Connor arrived that afternoon, he relayed his plan to cross the frozen river and surround the Shoshone village before sunrise. Connor instructed Captain Hoyt to leave for the village at 1:00 a.m.⁴⁰ Captain Hoyt had difficulty finding a local guide to assist his element in crossing the river until local leadership convinced Edward and Joseph Nelson, to help Captain Hoyt at 3:00 a.m.⁴¹ This delay caused the cavalry to pass the infantry four miles from the river. Also at this time, the Third Volunteers heavy wagons and howitzers got stuck in snow drifts and would eventually stay in place six miles from the battle—never to be used.⁴²

The Shoshone bands of Chiefs Sagwitch and Bear Hunter were camped down in the bluffs of the Bear River and Battle Creek. This area was a regular winter stop for the Northwestern Shoshone as it provided shelter from the winter blizzards and natural hot springs for heat.⁴³ Lea Neaman’s oral tradition history mentions that this area also served as a place for spiritual rejuvenation and healing.⁴⁴ The steep bluffs, coupled with the dense vegetation of willow trees provided both cover and concealment. The swift Bear River was between 70 and 150 feet wide, with a 3-4 foot depth and floating pieces of ice that presented a formidable barrier to the U.S. Army.⁴⁵ Foxholes around the village had been dug by children the previous summer as an area for the children to play, would provide additional cover for the Shoshone that morning.⁴⁶ The week

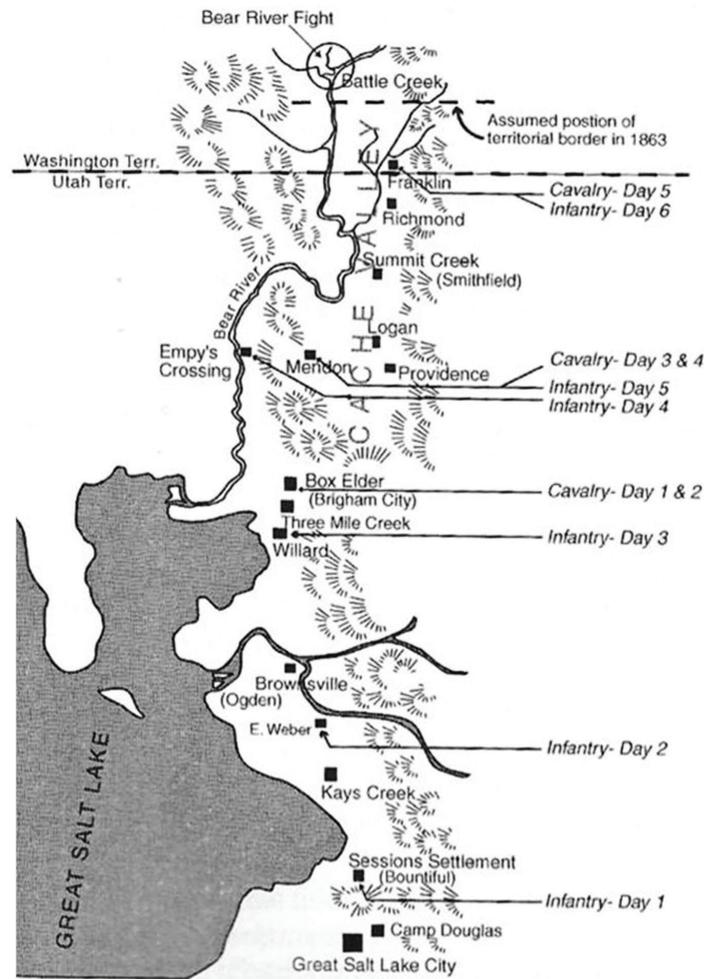


Figure 1. Connor's movement of the infantry and cavalry to Bear River.
 (Used by permission, Dr. Robert McPherson, Utah State University.)

before the massacre Chief Pocatello's band had been present for the Warm Dance, had the Army attacked then it would have more than doubled the slaughter. Additionally, two nights before the tragedy, an elderly man named Tin Dup had a vision in which pony soldiers killed his people. He told the Shoshone of his dream, and some of the families decided to leave with him.⁴⁷

Major McGarry and the cavalry crossed the river with instruction from Connor to encircle the enemy and then begin the fight while the infantry would follow behind.⁴⁸ Upon crossing the river, McGarry realized he had an open field of 500 yards to the Shoshone village with thick brush obscuring his view of the village.⁴⁹ A group of Shoshone Indians appeared and taunted McGarry's forces by screaming and displaying a woman's scalp.⁵⁰ Although according to Shoshone accounts, Chief Sagwitch saw the mist from the cavalry horses' breaths and had to wake the village.⁵¹ Sagwitch instructed his people not to fire on the Army, as he believed they would only demand the guilty party and then depart. McGarry's forces rode forward and received a volley of fire from the Shoshone Indians. With one in four soldiers remaining behind to hold the horses, the cavalry found themselves pinned down. It was here the U.S. Army suffered the most casualties with 14 killed and 20 wounded within 30 minutes.⁵² McGarry withdrew his forces out of range, at which point Connor arrived with the rest of the army. Colonel Connor directed McGarry and the cavalry to maneuver around the north side of the Shoshone Camp, while Captains Clark and Quinn were sent the south to prevent

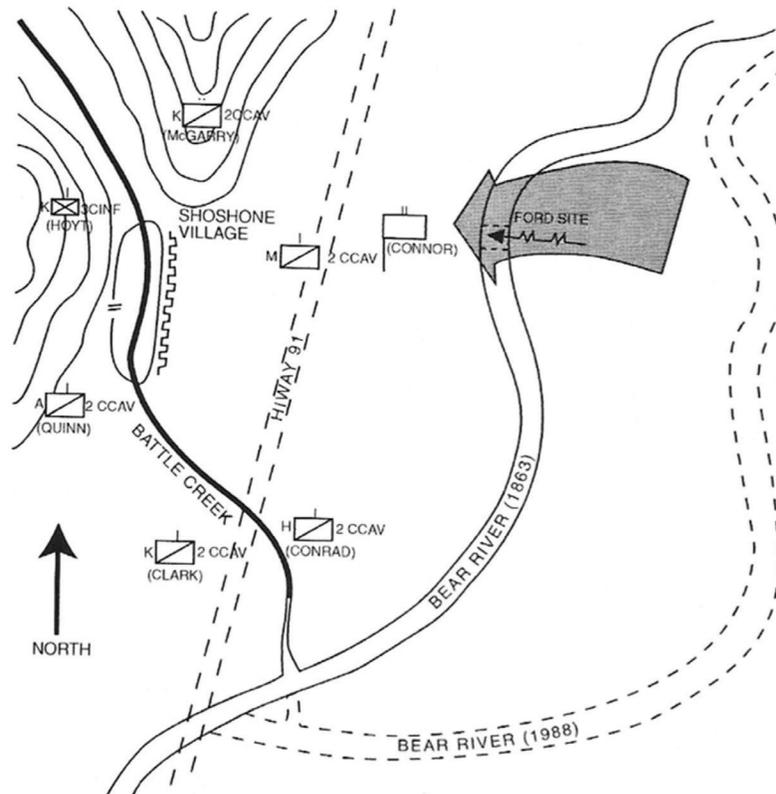


Figure 2. Encirclement of the Shoshone Village.
 (Used by permission, Dr. Robert McPherson, Utah State University.)

any escape, while he and Captain Price's forces would pin the enemy against the Cedar Bluffs that served as a backdrop for the village.⁵³ Once the U.S. Army moved into position, the battle quickly ended with the Army sending a barrage of fire into the village.

As the soldiers moved into the village, they discarded their rifles and began using pistols. Shoshone warriors had run out of ammunition as some were killed attempting to mold bullets in the midst of the battle. At this point, the contest had ended, and the massacre of men, women, and children began. Shoshone accounts describe Chief Bear Hunter's vicious death at the hands of the soldiers.

Perhaps it was the cruelest death in the White-Indian struggle. Knowing that he was one of the leaders, the soldiers shot Bear Hunter; they whipped him, kicked him and tried several means of torture on him. Through all of this the old chief did not utter a word, as crying and carrying on was the sign of a coward....One of the military men took his rifle, stepped to burning campfire and heated his bayonet until it was glowing red. He then ran the burning hot metal through the chief's ears. Chief Bear Hunter went to his maker a man of honor.⁵⁴

Sergeant William Beach of Company K described the action as the soldiers moved into the village.

The Boys were fighting Indians and intended to whip them. It was a free fight every man on his own hook....Midst the roar of guns and sharp report of Pistols could be heard the cry for quarters but their [*sic*] was no quarters that day....The fight lasted four hours and appeared more like a frolick [*sic*] than a fight the wounded cracking jokes with the frozen some frozen so bad that they could load their guns and used them as clubs.⁵⁵

The U.S. Army shot any Shoshone Indians who attempted to escape in the river. Multiple accounts of soldiers exist describing acts of violence against children and Shoshone women. One report from a Mormon local explains, "Several squaws were killed because they would not submit quietly to be ravished, and other squaws were ravished in the agony of death."⁵⁶ Elva Schramm, a descendant of Chief Bear Hunter, recounted, "They'd grab these little children by the legs like a jackrabbit and they'd hit their heads on the ground."⁵⁷ Another account depicted a soldier finding a dead Shoshone woman with a baby clutched in her arms who, "in mercy to the babe, killed it."⁵⁸ Mae Parry Timbimboo, a descendant of Chief Sagwich, described one woman's escape.

One Indian lady, Anzie chee, was being chased by the soldiers. She jumped into the river and went under an overhanging bank. By keeping her head up under the bank she was saved. She watched the battle from her hiding place at the same time trying to nurse her shoulder and breast wounds she had received...She also told of throwing her own baby into the river where the child drowned and floated down the river with the other dead bodies and bloody red ice."⁵⁹

Colonel Connor reported that 160 women and children were taken captive after the battle and that he left them provisions as the army withdrew with its wounded and killed.⁶⁰

While accurate accounts of the U.S. Army casualties exist, 22 enlisted killed, one officer died and 40 wounded not including the 75 who suffered cold weather injuries during the movement, no exact numbers for the Shoshone Indians exist.⁶¹ Low estimates put the Shoshone Warrior deaths around 130, with 90 women and children killed, while higher estimates exceed 400. The U.S. Army received support from Mormon scout Porter Rockwell, who was able to procure 18 sleds from Cache Valley to help evacuate the wounded and dead to Fort Douglas.⁶² The U.S. Army spent a couple of days in Cache Valley as they had to solicit the help of locals to clear a path through the divide back to Brigham City. When Colonel Connor returned to Salt Lake, he received praise from his superiors, with General-in-Chief Halleck rewarding his success with a promotion to Brigadier General.⁶³

It is worth noting that the following year Colonel John Chivington asked Brigadier General Connor for advice on how to deal with a band of Arapaho and Cheyenne in Sand Creek, Colorado.⁶⁴ Colonel Chivington used a similar approach of a winter attack in the early morning and massacred 130 men, women, and children. However, this time it was nationally condemned and resulted in multiple government investigations. It is not clear why the far bloodier massacre a year before was largely ignored.

Large Scale Combat Operations

The United States Army currently has over 178,000 soldiers deployed around the world conducting operations across the range of military operations. The U.S. Army's strategic roles support the joint force by shaping operational environments, preventing conflict, conducting large-scale combat, and consolidating gains. Lieutenant General Michael D. Lundy provided a foreword for FM 3-0, *Operations*, in which he stated, "The Army and joint force must adapt and prepare for large-scale combat operations in highly contested, lethal environments where enemies employ potent long range fires and other capabilities that rival or surpass our own."⁶⁵ With this pivot in training and readiness towards large scale combat operations (LSCO), other missions along the range of military operations do not appear to be going away. Although we may reasonably assume that if the country were to find itself engaged in LSCO most of these other missions may be suspended, it is unlikely that all of them would be. Much like the men of the Third California Volunteer Infantry, equipped, trained, and prepared to fight on the large battlefields of the civil war, soldiers prepared to execute a multi-division and possibly multi-corps level fight could find themselves conducting a variety of operations below the threshold of LSCO.

Could manning, equipping, and training Soldiers for LSCO encourage commanders to escalate their role into prevailing in large scale conflict where they have trained to be more comfortable? Both shaping the operational environment and preventing conflict are roles that typically precede prevailing in large scale combat. Commanders who have deliberately prepared for LSCO must be able to demonstrate the ability to adapt to lower intensity roles. FM 3-0 clearly outlines the purpose of these other strategic roles and the importance of restraint within them. With shaping the operating environment the field manual provides, “optimally, shaping activities ensure regions remain stable, a crisis does not occur, and there is no need for an escalation of force.”⁶⁶ While in regards to preventing conflict activities, FM 3-0 poses that, “care should be taken to avoid undesired effects such as eliciting an armed response should adversary leaders perceive that friendly [flexible deterrent options] or [flexible response operations] are being used as preparation for a preemptive attack.”⁶⁷ Commanders must be able to understand their mission within the context of the Army’s strategic roles and be able to communicate this to their subordinates to prevent unintended escalation. Although Colonel Connor did not operate under the current operations framework, this case scenario provides an example of how a flexible response operation can rapidly escalate into tragedy.

Colonel Connor arrived in Utah in an already complex situation, with multiple cultural and social issues converging in his area of operations. Although tempting to judge Colonel Connor against the values and understandings we have today of the situation, we should instead reinforce the importance of the commander’s role in the operations process. A commander’s ability to understand the situation and complex relationships that exist will only become more critical as cultural, social, and military relationships continue to collide with greater complexity than ever before. FM 3-0 articulates that, “leaders must consider all factors that make up their [operational environment], including social factors initiating and sustaining a conflict. Failure to do so may lead to faulty plans that do not address the desired end state.”⁶⁸

The Mormons, Shoshone Indians, and California Volunteers all contributed to the Bear River Massacre, although a vast majority of the responsibility lies with the U.S. Army and Mormon settlers. The traversing emigrants and encroaching Mormon settlers had nearly stripped the Shoshone territory of its life-providing essentials. Their inability to sustain themselves drove Shoshone Indians to raid Mormon farms and Overland Mail route stops, sometimes resulting in the deaths of emigrants and settlers. The Mormons had been forced to Utah by multiple state militias resulting in distrust for the government and military. Their contentious relationship with the military, coupled with increasing tension in Cache Valley over expanding settlements, led them to allow the situation to come to a boiling point. Colonel Connor’s harsh approach to American Indian affairs, combined with a genuine disdain for Mormons and desire for large scale combat on the battlefields in the east, contributed greatly to the inferno that occurred in January of 1863.

The Bear River Massacre provides modern day practitioners an example of the army conducting operations in multiple roles in separate theaters and the unfortunate outcome of needlessly escalating the situation. This case also provides an opportunity to reinforce the importance of the commander’s activity to understand the operational environment and the complicated relationships that accompany it. As the Army moves forward with this evolution in readiness, FM 3-0 offers an approach that could incorporate these lessons, “Soldiers must conduct realistic training that prepares them for combat by including unexpected tasks and *moral-ethical* challenges that help develop *agile, adaptive and innovative leaders*. Training scenarios should require Soldiers to make right decisions consistent with moral principles of the Army Ethic, including the Army Values.”⁶⁹

End Notes

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- 18 Ibid., 19.
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- 20 Ibid., 25.
- 21 Ibid., 14.
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- 27 McPherson, *Staff Ride Handbook*, 24.
- 28 Madsen, *The Shoshoni Frontier*, 173.

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- 30 Ibid.
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- 32 McPherson, *Staff Ride Handbook*, 28.
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- 47 Ibid., 144.
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- 49 Madsen, *Glory Hunter*, 82.
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- 56 McPherson, *Staff Ride Handbook*, 52.
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- 58 Madsen, *The Shoshoni Frontier*, 193.

59 Hart, *The Bear River Massacre*, 147.

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61 Madsen, *Glory Hunter*, 85.

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