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Photographs of Church Meetings among the U.S. Military in World War II

Robert C. Freeman, Dennis A. Wright, and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

In the dark days of World War II, U.S. service personnel found themselves suddenly far from home, uprooted not only from the physical safety of their native soil but also from the nourishment of loved ones and religious fellowship. In the spiritual desert of war, Latter-day Saints in the military did what they could to tap into the wellsprings of their faith, as these photographs of Mormon meetings attest.

The war that brought about unparalleled devastation around the world also resulted in unparalleled numbers of photographs, making World War II the best-documented event up to that time in history. Of these millions of photographs, the most familiar are the shocking images such as those of the attack on Pearl Harbor, which will be forever printed on the public consciousness. However, even in the midst of the brutality, some happy moments were recorded on film. We present here a few of those hopeful images, now returning to light from dusty albums, old trunks, and long-forgotten personal records, images memorable as testimonials to faith that shines through the long night of war.

Historical Context of the Photographs

All the branches of the military immediately established services to document every theater of war. The United States armed forces recorded every aspect of recruiting, training, deployment, and combat activities. Additionally, the U.S. Government allowed more magazines, newspapers, newsreel producers, news photo services, and wire services to cover the war than in World War I. Finally, individual service personnel also documented their own activities.

In this context, Latter-day Saints in military service made their own record. In the midst of the great conflict, members of the Church gathered to pray, sing, and perform the ordinances of the gospel, overcoming obstacles by ingenuity and faith.

Provenance of the Photographs

The images printed here come from an increasingly large collection resulting from the Saints at War project. This collection includes records in various media of the life stories of Latter-days Saints who served in the military during World War II.

The Saints at War project began two years ago when two faculty members in the Church History and Doctrine Department at Brigham Young University were moved by the work of recent historians retelling the story of World War II veterans. Professors Robert C. Freeman and Dennis A. Wright wanted to honor war veterans of their own acquaintance, including former scoutmasters, bishops, home teachers, schoolteachers, and owners of hometown businesses. Many of these were faithful Latter-day Saints who, after the war, returned home to build productive lives for themselves and their families.

The Saints at War project is the largest attempt to collect the stories of Latter-day Saint service personnel in World War II. The chief objective of the project is to create an archive at the L. Tom Perry Special Collections housed in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. This archive will preserve the personal histories, journals, letters, photographs, and other documents contributed by the veterans and their families. More than 1,400 life stories have been documented in the project; when cataloging is completed, the collection will be available to researchers. Some of the images from the collection were published in 2001 in the book *Saints at War*.¹

The images that follow give us glimpses of the worship and activities among Latter-days Saints that provided light to penetrate the daily darkness known as World War II. These photographs show soldiers and support personnel attending baptismal and sacrament meetings, conferences, and holiday gatherings. Published here for the first time, these images show some gatherings that may not have been noted by anyone besides the attendees and those who knew them.

However, at least two of the meetings shown here came to the attention of Church leaders in Salt Lake City. A small congregation of Saints stationed near San Francisco received a surprise visit from a General Authority (fig. 13). And, after reading a report of a 1944 conference in Foggia, Italy (fig. 5), the First Presidency sent a letter to four Latter-day Saint

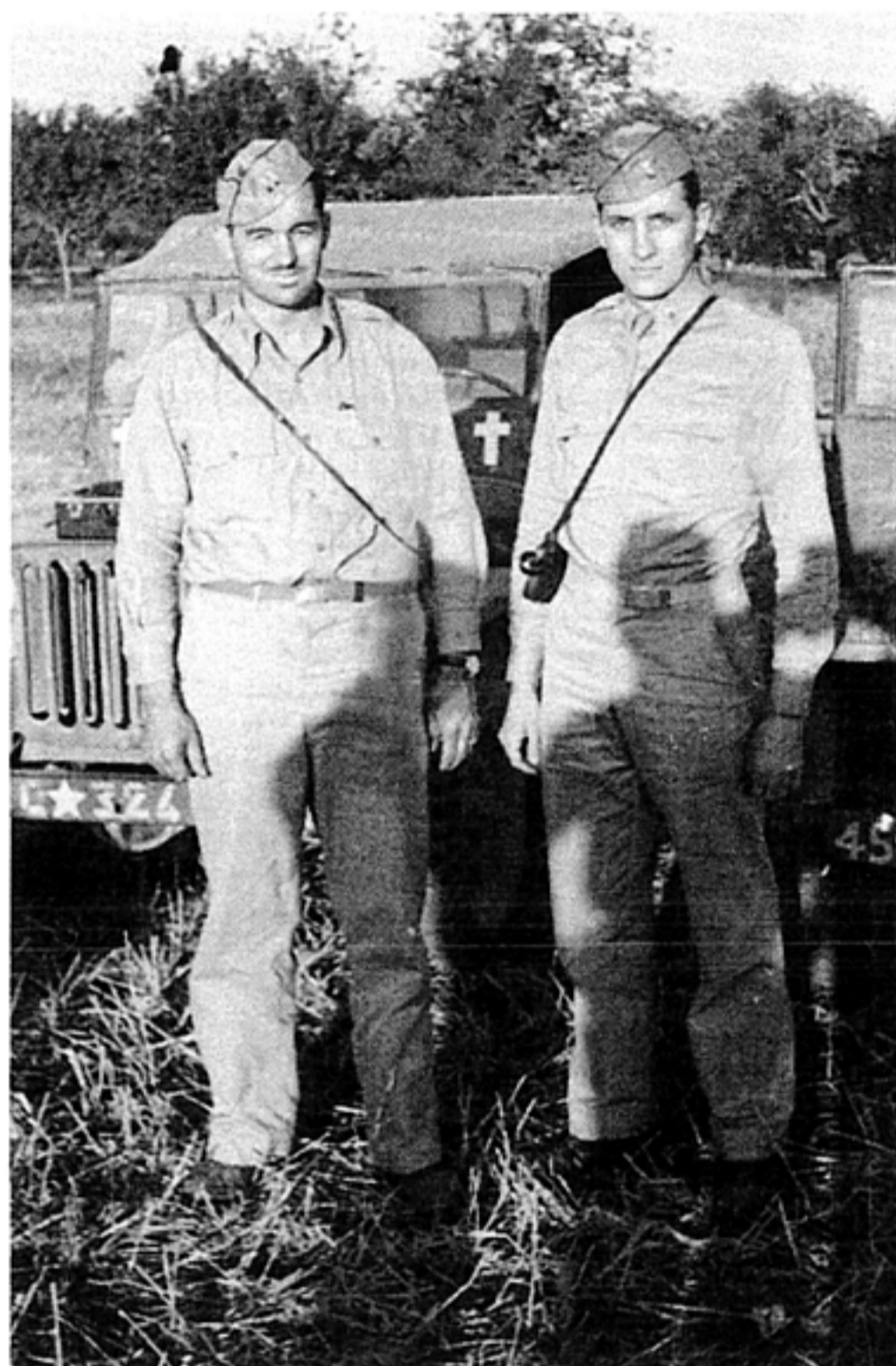
chaplains in the European theater, praising them and blessing them. Presidents Heber J. Grant, J. Reuben Clark, and David O. McKay wrote:

We rejoice in the loyalty and the steadfastness of you brethren who are in the Armed Forces and who are remaining true to your principles and to your covenants. We invoke upon your heads the blessings of our Heavenly Father and ask Him to bestow upon you His Spirit to help and to guide you. We pray that you may have the peace of the Master.²

In these photographs we see men and women caught up in a worldwide war, yet seeking the peace of the Master in worship, wherever they were.

FIG. 1. Vernon Cooley and Eldin Ricks. Along with at least one other chaplain, they had stewardship over 2,000 Mormons in the European theater near the end of the war. They were involved in the 1944 conference at Foggia (see fig. 5). As part of their duties, the chaplains wrote newsletters filled with encouragement and spiritual advice to the Saints stationed in Europe.

They also wrote to the families of those in their charge: “The fact that many L.D.S. men seemed to ‘take the Church for granted’ at home may not necessarily be an indication of their attitude now. Many have *found* themselves overseas.” They even gave advice on how to support the troops. For example, reading the scriptures on the same schedule as their loved ones in the military “shortens the miles separating them.” Eldin Ricks, R. G. Gibbons, and V. A. Cooley, letter “To the Family and Loved Ones of the L.D.S. Man over Here,” no date. Photo electronically repaired.



Courtesy Saints at War archive, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

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1. Robert C. Freeman and Dennis A. Wright, *Saints at War* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2001).

2. Heber J. Grant, J. Reuben Clark, and David O. McKay, letter to Chaplains Eldin Ricks, R. G. Gibbons, Timothy Irons, and Vernon A. Cooley, December 27, 1944.



Courtesy Saints at War archive



Courtesy Saints at War archive

FIG. 2 (*left top*). Latter-day Saints at a church meeting in France, winter 1944–45. Sitting, left to right: PFC Merle R. Lindsay, Pvt. Murrie Godfrey, George A. Lund, PT Reed R. Burr. Standing, left to right: Pvt. William G. Rollins, Pvt. Albert Haskell, Pvt. WW Guarld Obray, TEC 5 J. M. Heslop, Carlos L. Dodge, and Pvt. Henry L. Barber. All except Heslop were members of the 3187th Signal Service Battalion.

FIG. 3 (*left bottom*). Latter-day Saint chapel, B-26 Marauder Base, Sardinia, 1944. Ken Earl recounts the resourcefulness of his comrades in building this chapel:

Each week everyone was issued cigarette rations, beer rations, and if available, some candy or other goodies. We usually gave the contra-Word of Wisdom items to friends, but then in January 1943, we had the bright idea of using them to build an LDS Chapel down at Decimo where the 319th and 320th were located. We got permission for a particular location, and then traded our cigarette and beer rations in return for labor, brick, mortar and a tile roof. When the building, which was probably 12 x 20 feet in size, was completed in April 1944, I invited LDS Chaplain Eldin Ricks to come over from Naples on one of our B-26's and dedicate the chapel. He did so and we had a large turnout of LDS servicemen from the three groups for the dedication. We used it for our services from then on until we moved to Corsica. (Ken Earl personal history, Saints at War archive, 34)

FIG. 4 (*below*). Latter-day Saint soldiers holding church services in a field near Salerno, Italy, late July or early August 1944. Led by Chaplains Vernon Cooley and Eldin Ricks, this meeting took place just before the division left for the Southern France invasion. Four of these men, pictured in front of a jeep named “Deseret,” can be identified: Albert Huber (back row, far left), Elmer Picket (back row, second from left), J. L. Crawford (first row, far right), and Lt. Rex Oxford (first row, second from right), a nonmember friend of Crawford’s. It was not uncommon for nonmembers to attend meetings with their Latter-day Saint friends during wartime.



Courtesy Saints at War archive



Courtesy Saints at War archive



FIG. 5. Latter-day Saint conference, Foggia, Italy, December 1944. Evidence of war clearly shows behind the men and women assembled here. Despite the gloom of their surroundings, those who attended felt “all the joy that can come from an L.D.S. gathering” during the two-day conference.

Over a hundred men and about twenty women attended the “dancing party” held on Saturday night. In a newsletter from Church headquarters in Italy, one observer wrote, “The conduct of the party resembled those of a Priesthood quorum dance at home. Nothing but the OD uniform reminded one of the real world that the men had left.”

At the first conference session on Sunday morning, 131 men and women heard a chaplain advise them to “trust in the Lord with all thy heart” and “keep your powder dry.” That evening, “ladies presented in MIA fashion a lively program in word and song.” One of the men in attendance said, “These meetings are not only a pleasure, but a necessity.”

The newsletter reporting this conference also shows details of weekly Church meetings at four European locations, including Florence and Marseilles. Letter from LDS Headquarters, Italy, December 7, 1944.



Courtesy Saints at War archive

FIG. 6. Latter-day Saint conference, Kunming, China, 1945. “A two-day program of services and reunions,” this was the first church conference in China. In the spirit of volunteer service typical of Latter-day Saints everywhere, three enlisted men, all returned missionaries, came forward to conduct the meeting when the chaplain assigned to the conference did not arrive. The attendees, who arrived “by airplane, truck and jeep,” were granted special weekend furloughs by their commanding officers. “China Scene of Conference,” *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, October 20, 1945, 12.



Courtesy Saints at War archive

FIG. 7. Latter-day Saint conference, Kunming, China, 1945. “Saturday evening there was a banquet in an army mess hall which was brightly decorated with Chinese lanterns and evergreens. A short entertainment was presented.” “China Scene of Conference,” *Church News*, October 20, 1945, 12.

Courtesy Garry Marshall and Saints at War archive

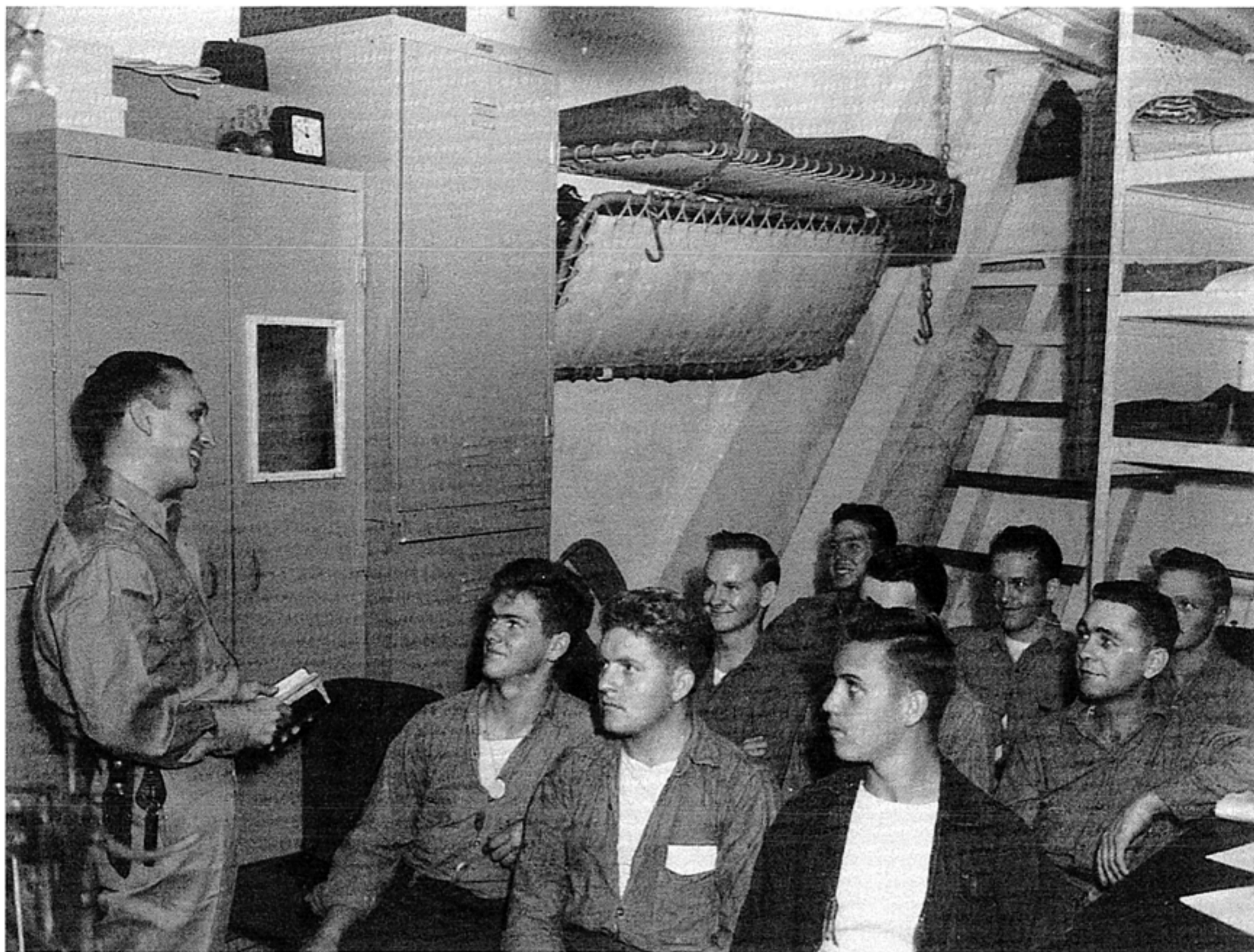


FIG. 8. Latter-day Saint religious service in the sail locker room of the U.S.S. *Tulagi*, Sunday, February 18, 1945. The ship had been anchored at the Ulithi Atoll for almost two weeks while waiting for the marine landing on Iwo Jima. Jack Marshall, Navy machinist mate 3rd class, personal history, Saints at War archive, 32–33.

Courtesy Saints at War archive

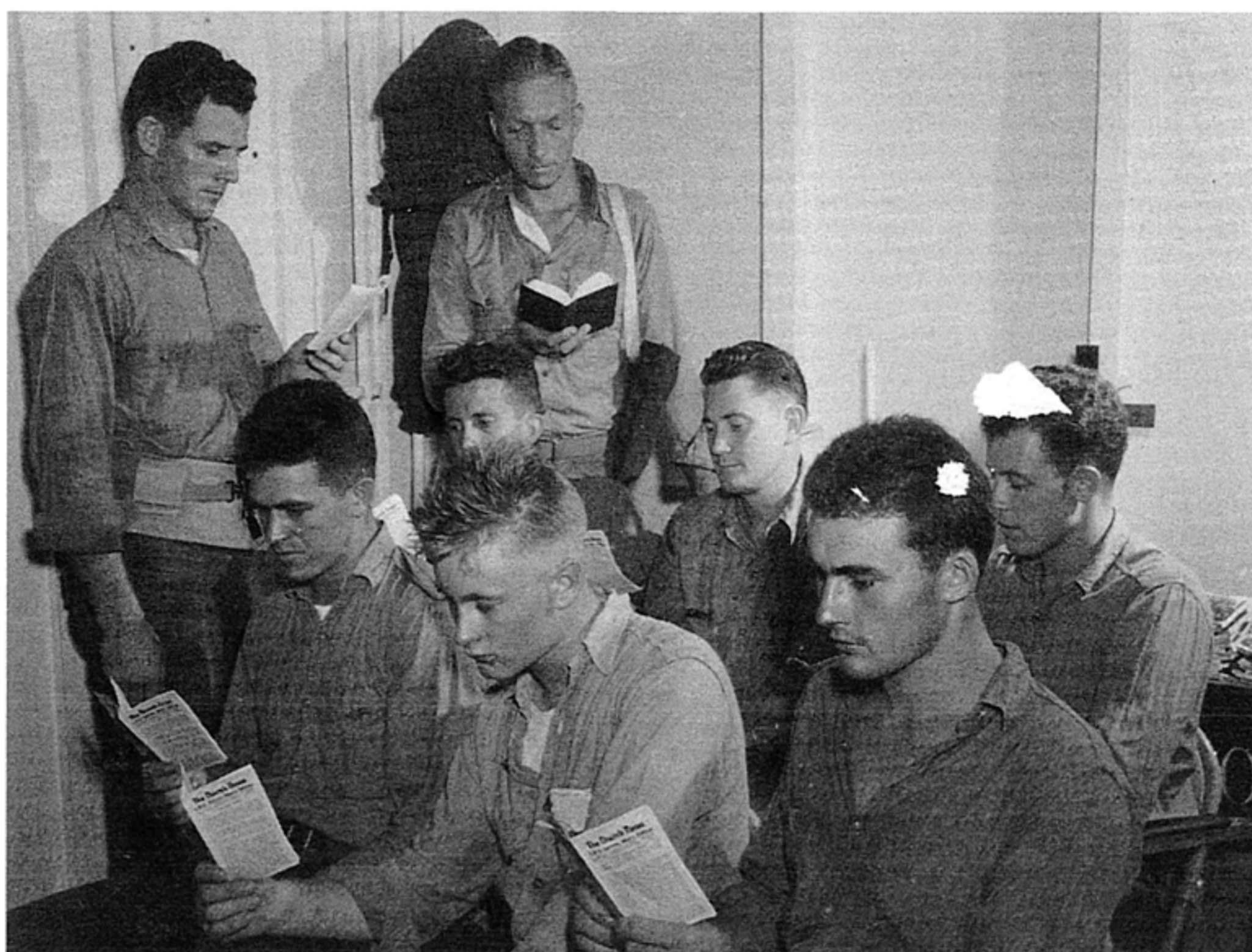


FIG. 9. Aboard the U.S.S. *Block Island*, August 1945, reading a pocket-size edition of the *Church News* printed for the military. Don Arlo Taylor (standing, far left) served as the group leader of seventeen Latter-day Saint men on the aircraft carrier. Curtis Butler (second row, far right), was a Methodist. The only other person identified in this photograph is Charles Pierce (first row, far left).



Courtesy Earl S. Duerden and Saints at War archive

FIG. 10. Latter-day Saint meeting, Leyte, Philippine Islands, November or December 1944. Earl Duerden is third from left, second row. Charles Soberg is standing, back row, wearing a cap. Maxine Tate (Grimm), middle front row, of Tooele, Utah, was the only female member of the Church in the Philippines at that time. By assisting in organizing church meetings and area conferences, she gave “hundreds of LDS soldiers a chance to gather for Sunday meetings.” An American Red Cross worker assigned to boost troop morale, she carried “her portable pump organ throughout the country, eager to provide music for Church meetings.” Soon after the war, Sister Tate was instrumental in reopening the Philippines for official missionary work. Sheridan R. Sheffield, “‘A Genuine Pioneer’ in the Philippines,” *Church News*, February 13, 1993, 11–12.



Courtesy Earl S. Duerden and Saints at War archive

FIG. 11. The first Latter-day Saint conference in the Philippines, 1944. Earl Duerden is the blond, fourth from the left on the second row.

Courtesy Evelyn Fink and Saints at War archive



FIG. 12. Baptism in the ocean at Saipan, summer 1945.

Courtesy Evelyn Fink and Saints at War archive



FIG. 13. Latter-day Saints meeting in the base chapel at Alameda Naval Air Station near San Francisco. Evelyn Fink (second row, far left) expresses what were undoubtedly the feelings of all those who attended such wartime gatherings, either at home or abroad: “We were all going through a trying time in our . . . lives and found strength in meeting and praying together.” This small congregation received an unexpected visit from Elder Harold B. Lee. “How did he know about our little group?” Sister Fink later wrote. “Were the Brethren in Salt Lake City mindful of us? How wonderful it was that he would come all the way from Salt Lake City to bless our little group with his presence.” Letter to Saints at War archive from Evelyn Fink, December 6, 2001.