United States officially concludes Operation Enduring Freedom. In 2015, we begin our follow-on mission—Operation Freedom's Sentinel—to help secure and build upon the hard-fought gains of the last thirteen years." Secretary Hagel expressed his "deep gratitude to all U.S. personnel, both military and civilian, who have served in Afghanistan since 2001, many on multiple deployments. I also thank the thousands more who were a part of the mission at home and around the world. In fighting America's longest war, our people and their families have borne a heavy burden, and some paid the ultimate price."

The war in Afghanistan is by far the longest continuous military engagement in the history of the United States. As a special double issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine observed in 2019, "Exactly when the war in Afghanistan surpassed the Vietnam War as America's longest overseas war is debated—the comparison depends on which benchmarks you use. Last September [2018], however, the United States reached an indicator that clears away at least some of the confusion: The first cohort of Americans who were born after the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, became old enough to enlist in the war that followed," concluding that "Whatever else it is, the Global War on Terrorism is now a second-generation war." (See the Afghanistan timeline for additional details.)

CHURCH ORGANIZATION

When Church President Gordon B. Hinckley stood at the pulpit in the Salt Lake City Conference Center as the last speaker of the Sunday morning session during the October 2001 general conference, he said, "I have just been handed a note that says that a U.S. missile attack is under way. I need not remind you that we live in perilous times. I desire to speak concerning these times and our circumstances as members of this Church." He then continued:

You are acutely aware of the events of September 11, less than a month ago. Out of that vicious and ugly attack we are plunged into a state of war. It is the first war of the 21st century. The last century has been described as the most war-torn in human history. Now we are off on another dangerous undertaking, the unfolding of which and the end thereof we do not know. For the first time since we became a nation, the United States has been seriously attacked on its mainland soil. But this was not an attack on the United States alone. It was an

attack on men and nations of goodwill everywhere. It was well planned, boldly executed, and the results were disastrous. . . . It was cruel and cunning, an act of consummate evil. . . .

Those of us who are American citizens stand solidly with the president of our nation. The terrible forces of evil must be confronted and held accountable for their actions. This is not a matter of Christian against Muslim. . . . I ask particularly that our own people do not become a party in any way to the persecution of the innocent. Rather, let us be friendly and helpful, protective and supportive. It is the terrorist organizations that must be ferreted out and brought down. . . .

We are people of peace. We are followers of the Christ who was and is the Prince of Peace. But there are times when we must stand up for right and decency, for freedom and civilization, just as Moroni rallied his people in his day to the defense of their wives, their children, and the cause of liberty (see Alma 48:10).

No one knows how long it will last. No one knows precisely where it will be fought. No one knows what it may entail before it is over. We have launched an undertaking the size and nature of which we cannot see at this time.⁷

The first Latter-day Saint combatants arrived in Afghanistan during the earliest days of Operation Enduring Freedom. As an increasing number of military units, mostly American, deployed to Afghanistan in the following months, many of them included Latter-day Saint service member group leaders who were called and set apart by stake presidents in the United States (who assumed they had authority to call priesthood leaders to serve in Afghanistan). While well intentioned, this practice sometimes led to confusion as multiple military units, each with their own Latter-day Saint group leader, arrived at the same location in Afghanistan.

Initially, there was no centralized in-country Church organization or authority within the country. Rather, Latter-day Saint soldiers and civilians organized and met independently—similar to previous military conflicts. A major difference this time was that the military was operating within a Muslim country where proselyting was forbidden. The nature of the conflict meant travel between Church groups was difficult and often dangerous. One of the biggest initial challenges was determining where Church groups had been organized.

One of the first baptisms in Afghanistan took place in 2004. Alexandro Rangel, a twenty-one-year-old United States Marine, was baptized in "an improvised wading pool made by U.S. Marines near the flight line at the Coalition Forces Base at Bagram and surrounded on all sides by weapons and munitions of war." Latter-day Saint Chaplain Mark Allison noted, "As I made preparations for this battlefield baptism and knowing we lacked any white clothing, I spoke up at a meeting of fellow military chaplains and asked if any of them had white clothing I could borrow for a Latter-day

Saint baptism. My request was met with awkward silence, until suddenly Father Hubbs, a Roman Catholic priest and army chaplain, said, 'Yes, I have two white cleric robes you are welcome to use . . . if you don't mind using Catholic priest robes." One of the other attendees chided Father Hubbs, stating "You don't want to do that. The water will be dirty and will stain your white robes." To which Father Hubbs answered, "If that happens it will be for a good cause." Chaplain Allison later commented, "I will always be grateful to this colleague, priest and friend for his kindness shown on this occasion to Latter-day Saint military personnel."

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In 2006, when Eugene "Gene" J. Wikle, a retired U.S. Air Force officer who served as a senior civilian adviser to the Afghan Air Force, arrived in Afghanistan there were six Church members who met for church each week at Camp Eggers in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital. By February 2007, there were twenty-one members, and Wikle was called as the service member group leader. Two months later, Elder William K. Jackson set Wikle apart as the senior service member group leader for the entire country. Discussions began in December with the Church Military Relations Office in Salt Lake City regarding "the possibility of creating a military district in Afghanistan." ¹⁰

The Kabul Afghanistan Military District of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized on July 1, 2008—"the only combat district in the Church." Eugene J. Wikle was called as the district president—possibly "the only district president in the Church who [did] not have his eternal companion with him." 12

There were approximately 400 members in the Kabul Afghanistan Military District when it was created—soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, government employees, contractors, visiting university professors, nongovernmental organization employees, and humanitarian workers from more than a dozen countries. The Kabul Military Branch

at Camp Eggers was the first branch established (organized on Friday, August 29, 2008). The branch consisted of U.S. embassy personnel, military service members, civilian and contractor military advisers, university faculty, general contractors, and others. A total of four branches were initially established at coalition military bases that had larger numbers of Latter-day Saints.

Service member groups, varying in size from several dozen people to a few members, were created wherever Latter-day Saints were stationed. The district organization was extremely fluid, with dozens of service member groups. Between troop rotations and work reassignments, there was seldom a week in which one or more service member groups were not either organized or closed. Carol Thompson was called as the district Relief Society president—the first woman to be called to that position in a war zone.¹³

Organizationally, administratively, and procedurally, the Church in Afghanistan was unique. Thursday and Friday are the Islamic weekend, and the U.S. embassy in Kabul is closed on Fridays. The Kabul Branch, which had a higher percentage of civilian and nonmilitary Latter-day Saints than other Church units in the country, held its weekly church meetings on Friday. The other branches and service member groups usually met Sundays on U.S. or coalition military bases.¹⁴ Many Church meetings were held in base or camp chapels. Others met anywhere available space could be found. Some Church meetings were held in tents or even outside at smaller forward operating bases. Most units held weekly two-hour meetings, as work requirements permitted few of the Church members to attend an entire three-hour block of meetings. Many branches and groups held more than one sacrament meetings every week to accommodate the varied schedules of their members.¹⁵

In 2009, talks intended for a district conference were videotaped separately in Kabul, Afghanistan, and Salt Lake City, Utah; assembled on a single DVD in Salt Lake City; and sent to Presi-

dent Wikle for distribution in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Elder Jeffrey R. Holland was the last speaker on the first district conference DVD for the Kabul Afghanistan Military District. As he reached the end of his address, he stated: "Brethren and sisters, we've had a wonderful district conference with you. As I said at the beginning, I only wish we could see your faces. I wish we could have stood with you to sing as we stood here to sing, wish we could shake your hand. More than that, I wish we could lay our hands on the head of each one of you, and give you a blessing. So, in lieu of being able to do that personally, I'm going to do it apostolically. I'm going to do it by the authority that is mine, through this telecast, and onto this DVD." Elder Holland then announced that "by the power of the holy priesthood that I hold, and the authority that I've been given, I pronounce a blessing on each one of you within the sound of my voice, and the reach of this telecast. I do it as if indeed my hands were upon your head, and with the power of the priesthood upon you just that efficaciously." He blessed "each one of you, that although you are in harm's way daily, that you will have the power of heaven upon you, including the attendance of angels, on your right hand, and on your left. I bless you that you will know that you are being prayed for at home and abroad, and especially by the leaders of the Church here at headquarters, all of us. And we pray for your loved ones, wherever they may be, wherever home is." He blessed district members to "be men and women on a mission, and that you'll strive to help others to embrace the gospel, and live their religion. I bless you that such a time of war, and such a period away from home, will be a strengthening time, not a debilitating time in your life, in the formation of your character, and in the strengthening of your faith. I bless you that you will draw nearer to God, and that you will know how much all of us need Him, in good times or bad, in wartime, or in peace." He then extended his apostolic blessing, stating, "I bless you that you will not worry about your loved ones, and . . . I pronounce in this blessing, a blessing on them, as if they were in this congregation."¹⁷

Church service in Afghanistan was difficult, but Latter-day Saints found if they would "pray always, and be believing" then "all things shall work together for your good" as the Lord has promised.¹⁸ As President Wikle observed, "I have yet to ever hear the testimony or receive an e-mail from a Latter-day Saint who has said that their experience in Afghanistan has not uplifted them [and] has not strengthened their testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹⁹

Kabul Afghanistan Military District

Organized July 1, 2008			
	District President	Called	Released
1.	Eugene J. Wikle (Retired military, civilian contractor)	July 2008	June 2011
2.	Lloyd Oaks (Colonel, U.S. Army Reserve JAG Corps)	June 2011	August 2011
3.	Allen Nelson (Civilian contractor)	August 2011	July 2012
4.	Joseph Lorenzo "Ren" Allred (Civilian contractor)	July 2012	December 2014
Deactivated December 31, 2014			

Table 2. Kabul Afghanistan Military District