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Danish Doughboys: Danish American Soldiers in the US Army and Navy in World War I

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In the park just below Marselisborg Castle in Aarhus—the Queen’s preferred summer residence—stands the official Danish monument for Danes killed in World War I. It is a beautiful and solemn monument, placed in a scenic setting in the park that stretches from the small castle down to the Bay of Aarhus, with a view of Mols and Helgenæs in the distance. But wasn’t Denmark neutral in that war, you may ask? Why, then, a monument for the fallen in a war that the country did not participate in? It is a rather complicated story, which this article outlines by showing the connection between the approximately thirty thousand Danes and Danish Americans fighting in the American Army and Navy during World War I and the old country and its monument to the casualties in the war.

The connection between the monument and Danish Americans is obvious, though it has been more or less forgotten since the interwar era—at least until a few years ago, in 2011, when the descendant of one of the fallen Danish Americans commemorated on the Marselisborg Monument contacted the Aarhus city council about the erroneous text on the plaque at the entrance of the monument, on which the Allied war effort had somehow been completely obscured by the tragic duty required of Danish Schleswigers. The English text on the plaque originally read: “Memorial commemorating 4,140 Schleswigers of Danish allegiance who lost their lives during the First World War, 1914-1918, when they had to serve in the German army. They fought for a cause that was not theirs.” It was then changed to: “Memorial commemorating 4,140 soldiers who lost their lives during the First World War, 1914-1918. Mostly Schleswigers of Danish allegiance who were forced to serve in the German army. Danish emigrants who fought against
Germany are also included.” If not exactly more elegantly formulated, at least now it is fairly correct.¹

Marselisborg Mindepark, the official name of the park, was initially intended to be a memorial site for Danes who had done something exceptional abroad, and thus especially for Danish Americans, who make up by far the largest group of Danish emigrants. The idea of creating a memorial park in Aarhus grew out of the first Danish American celebration of American Independence Day in 1909, which was held in Jutland’s capital because of the Danish National Exposition of 1909. As part of this event, 1,128 Danish Americans met with thousands of Danes in Aarhus, celebrating the Fourth of July together, an annual tradition that has taken place at the Rebild National Park in northern Jutland since 1912.²

The idea of erecting a monument to the Danes who lost their lives during World War I was fostered by a bereaved father from the Aarhus suburb Aabyhøj, the veterinarian Knud Nielsen-Sørring (1868-1942), whose only son, Hans, was killed during the Meuse-Ar-
gonne offensive on October 15, 1918. Initially, the committee working for a monument, led by Nielsen-Sorring, wanted to place an obelisk at Rebild National Park, which had been purchased by Danish Americans in 1911 and given to Danish state. This plan, however, had to be abandoned because of countryside preservation clauses. The committee then looked towards Aarhus, and here, the city council accepted the idea. But, due to lack of funding, the original idea of an obelisk was abandoned, and Nielsen-Sorring’s committee was disbanded in September 1923.

The following year, a new committee for a memorial park at Marselisborg was formed, and a national competition for the design of the monument was arranged with the first round in April 1925 and the second in May 1926—followed by legal proceedings by two of the losing artists in 1927 and 1928. Finally, in August 1928, sculptor Axel Poulsen and architect Axel Ekberg’s monument was announced as the winner of the competition. Their monument consists of a large circular wall featuring four reliefs with symbolic representations of the war—Departure, Battle, Armistice, and Return—; a central inscription “1914-1918”; and, under a wreath, a poem by former Prime Minister J. C. Christensen that focuses on the eternal remembrance of these young men by their Mother Denmark, a figure that is also found on the first and fourth reliefs, where she sends her sons off to war and welcomes them back home again, mourning the death of one of them. Hence, the reliefs articulate a war motif to honor the Danish war effort on both sides. The last and maybe most important element of the monument are the 4,140 names of fallen Danes carved in the monument’s wall, among these Hans Nielsen-Sorring’s, at the top rim of the wall under the letter N.

The memorial park was inaugurated on July 5, 1925, by King Christian X, the day after many Danish Americans had celebrated Fourth of July at Rebild and were therefore able to take part in the ceremony in Aarhus. The focus then was still on Danish Americans, but it had recently been decided that it should also be the site of the monument for Danes who had sacrificed their lives in the recent war. On the day of the inauguration, a conservative member of parliament, Count Bent Holstein, published an article in the local newspaper Aarhus Stiftstidende, with the title “Vel mødt i Aarhus, Dansk Amerikanere!”
in which he welcomes the Danish Americans to Aarhus. He explains that “whether they [the Danish soldiers] fought and fell in one or the other army, it was with the name of South Jutland burned into their hearts.” Furthermore, he stated that the Danish Americans had come to Denmark “not as hyphenated Americans, but as real citizens of the United States.”

3 Holstein’s interpretation of the role of South Jutland as a motive for the Danish soldiers is debatable, but his focus on the Danish Americans as true American citizens is probably the obvious explanation for why their role in the war effort vanished from the collective Danish memory and historiography.

To cut the very long story about the monument short, it took nine years before it was unveiled on July 1, 1934—because of the lawsuits, a national and international fundraising campaign also among Danes in the US, etc.—and during this period of time, opinions on what should be commemorated shifted completely from the more inclusive memory of Danes fighting in the Allied armies to a more exclusive focus on Danish Schleswigers. About six thousand veterans and relatives of the fallen from South Jutland were specially invited to the ceremony, where they were given the opportunity to find the names of their loved ones on the monument wall before it was opened to the public, right after King Christian X had laid down a wreath. The king gave the opening speech, and other speakers and attendees included Prime Minister Stauning and ministers of the government, the mayor and bishop of Aarhus, and other dignitaries, together with about fifty thousand members of the public. There were also Danish Americans present, but focus was no longer on them or the Danish war dead in the Allied armies.

Danish Americans in the US Army and Navy

The first time I read about the thirty thousand Danes who fought in the US Army and Navy during World War I, I was researching for my PhD about the impact of this war on Danish culture and literature. I happened to come across a petition meant to be circulated among the Danish American soldiers in the trenches, urging President Wilson to work for the restoration of Schleswig to Denmark, based on the principle of self-determination. The headline of the short petition is “To the President of the United States,” and the short text, in Danish, English
and French, followed by some empty pages with lines to fill out with the soldiers’ names, regiments and signatures, is primarily a listing of historical reasons for giving “South Jutland,” as the area is called here with an intended Danish name, to Denmark. The area had been Danish for a thousand years until Germany annexed it after the 1864 war. The petition begins with a polite “Sir,” and then spells out what the writers want (in slightly faulty English):

We, the undersigned Danes and Danish Americans who are fighting at the front for the justice and peace and for the fate of the small nations, address ourselves most respectfully to the President of the United States wishing that entire South Jutland at the definitive peace should be reunited with her old fatherland she had been joined with for 1000 years.⁴

The petition concludes with this appeal:

We are now more than 30,000 natives of Denmark at the front who in this battle stake their life in order to show that Germanys unjustice towards Denmark and South Jutland had not been forgotten and we gladly sacrifice our life to set free entire South Jutland and regain her for Denmark. We who fight are the free intercessors for South Jutlands historic right, we can and shall appeal to our right without this anxious regard which the fear for Germany has caused in certain circles in Denmark.

Although it is available in the Danish Royal Library, I have not been able to find any trace of this petition in the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library nor in other American or Danish archives, which might be explained by the simple fact that the petition was issued in November 1918 and thus probably overtaken by the cause of events at the front with the Armistice on November 11. Nevertheless, it is interesting for at least two reasons: first, it states as a fact that there were more than thirty thousand Danes fighting at the front; second, it connects the war effort of these men and their reason for fighting with the pending peace negotiations and the cause of righting the wrongs of the Danish loss in the 1864 war.⁵
This number of Danes fighting for Uncle Sam as doughboys, as infantrymen in particular were known, seemed suspicious to me, as it balanced rather perfectly the number of Danes forced to fight for Germany—somewhere between twenty-six and thirty thousand, depending on how you calculate it—with Danes on the other side of the front lines. The number of Danes and Danish Americans in the US Army and Navy seems, however, to be fairly correct, if you assume that about 10 percent of the roughly three hundred thousand Danish immigrants and their descendants in the US volunteered or were called up. This number was also used by the Danish American pastor and historian Peter Sørensen Vig (1854-1929) in an article printed in the Danish American newspapers Nordlyset in New York on July 25, 1918, and Bien in San Francisco on August 2, 1918, but dated by Vig as July 8. Here, he claims that there were presently thirty thousand men of Danish descent in the US Army and Navy (in Nordlyset, the headline even states that they are men born in Denmark). Another Danish American historian, Thomas Peter Christensen, suggests twenty-five thousand in his A History of the Danes in Iowa (1924). Christensen’s numbers are, however, rather odd: he estimates that five percent of nearly five hundred thousand Danes in the United States participated, which results in the twenty-five thousand figure, but most other immigration historians mention around three hundred thousand Danes residing in the US at the time. But somewhere between these numbers seems to be a qualified assumption, naturally depending on who you define as Danish (Danish citizens, Danish-born but naturalized US citizens, or second-generation Danes born in the US, etc.).

During the age of total war and mass armies involving millions of soldiers, thirty thousand Danes is but a mere drop in the ocean. When the US entered the war, nearly three years after it started in late July 1914, the country faced an enormous challenge of raising an army. In order to be able to raise a powerful army, even non-citizens had to be called up. The traditional reluctance against a standing army meant that, on April 6, 1917, the US Army could only muster 127,151 soldiers and the National Guard 181,620—not impressive numbers in the scope of the brutal modern war of mass slaughter. Before the war ended, however, these numbers had increased to 4.1 million in the Army and 600,000 in the Navy. Furthermore, the US faced the chal-
The challenge of forming an Army and Navy of many different nationalities, not least because of the enormous influx of east and southern Europeans during the age of mass immigration from the 1880s to 1914.

World War I in Danish and American Historiography and Collective Memory

Turning our attention back to Denmark, why has the participation of an equal number of Danes on the winning side been obscured altogether in Denmark by the tragic duty of the Danish Schleswigers in the German ranks? Of the two, the Danish Americans’ service would have been by far the most heroic and glorious war effort by proxy, so to speak, for the small neutral country to make its own. For one thing, World War I soon became a forgotten war in Denmark among the general public and historians alike, except for in the southern part of Jutland where the losses in the war are commemorated by monuments in every parish churchyard, letters and diaries from the soldiers have continually been published, and historians have been writing about the topic ever since the armistice. Second, the Danish Americans probably principally fought for their new country, and thus became even more American through the war effort. A third explanation is the role of the Danish Schleswigers, who were becoming an integral part of the Danish society during the interwar years, and in the process becoming the only Danish narrative about the war, it seems, as the history of the monument in Aarhus indicates. Finally, the much more direct experiences of the next war and the German occupation 1940-45 have completely overshadowed those of the First World War.

Still, even in neutral Denmark interest in the war was enormous while it was being fought. Danish newspapers printed all kinds of articles about the conflict, among these many soldiers’ letters from Danish-speaking North Schleswigers in the German army, who were regarded as eyewitnesses to the tragic, brutal, and yet exciting foreign world of the trenches. Harald Nielsen published a series of soldiers’ letters from the fronts, of which Sønderjyske Soldaterbreve (1915) became a regular bestseller with sixteen print runs. Nielsen also published two volumes of Danske Soldaterbreve (1917 and 1918) from Danes fighting in the Allied armies, albeit none of them from Americans; the same applies to J. Ravn-Jonsen’s Danske Frivillige i Verden-
One of the most popular Danish novels of the time, Erich Erichsen’s Den tavse Dansker. En Bog om dem, der gjorde deres Pligt (1916), which reached twenty-seven print runs and was published the following year in English as Forced to Fight: The Tale of a Schleswig Dane, was based on soldiers’ letters and tells the tragic story of the unwilling soldiers “forced to fight for the Huns,” as the first words in the English translation declare.

A Danish book about America and the war was already published during the war; journalist, founder and former editor of the tabloid B.T. Henry Hellssen’s Amerika rejser en Hær (America Raises an Army) was published in late October 1918—the author’s short preface dates it to August 1918—and thus does not deal with the end of the war when the American forces were seriously involved in the fighting or with stories from the front. The book consists of interesting, though not quite reliable, stories about modern America, “the society of superlatives,” as he labels it in the preface, or, to be honest, mostly snobbish gossip about American millionaires. Aside from being one of the leading Danish war correspondents, Hellssen had an interest in theater and worked as a chorus boy at a New York theater when he lived there in 1917-18. The first chapter of the book—eponymously titled—is almost the only part of it that deals with the war in any detail, especially the drafting of the many young men on the basis of the Selective Service Law, among them Danes and other Scandinavians.

Interest in war in Danish historiography has followed the general pattern of focusing on the 1864 war and the German occupation during World War II, even though there has been a lasting interest in World War I in Sønderjylland, and a growing interest for this war among Danish historians during the last couple of decades. Nevertheless, in 2014, the centenary of the beginning of World War I was largely overshadowed by the 150th anniversary of the war in 1864, which was commemorated with a much-debated, expensive TV series by Ole Bornedal. In 2020, the centenary of the plebiscites in Schleswig in February and March 1920, King Christian X’s ride across the 1864 border on June 10, and the official unification of the northern part of Schleswig with Denmark on June 15, 1920 were marked with a host of celebrations—or rather should have been: most of these arrange-
ments were cancelled or postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

The artist Joakim Skovgaard’s famous illustration for one of the many referendum posters from 1920. Mother Denmark welcomes her “stolen daughter” safely back on the bridge across the Kongeå, which formed large parts of the border between Germany and Denmark after 1864. The Danish flag, Dannebrog, now flies on both sides of the river, in front of a typical Danish farm and windmill in the background. Skovgaard uses the first stanza and the final line of Henrik Pontoppidan’s poem ‘Sønderjylland’ (1918) as text on the poster: “It sounds like a fairy tale, a legend from ancient times: A stolen daughter, deeply mourned, has come back safely! Hail thee, apple of our Mother’s eye, in the dawn of the new times!” Another part of the poem connects the war effort of the Danish Schleswigers with the reunion: “You were chained and mocked by wild boy.”
Similarly, the Danish American war experience seems to have been neglected by Danish American historians as well: P. S. Vig’s *Danske i Kamp i og for Amerika fra ca. 1640 til 1865* obviously does not deal with this war, due to the years of the title and since it was published in 1917—Vig’s preface is dated June 1917. Still, the very last page of the book actually does deal with the war that the US had entered a couple of months before. Here, a veteran from the 1864 war, Rasmus Hansen, sends his son Alfred off to war, which makes Vig conclude that the Danes are a people eager to fight for what they think is right. This is also his starting point in the book, before tracing this bellicose side of the Danish national character through American history—and after mentioning in the preface that one of his sons, Bennett C. Vig (1897-1962), who helped him write the book, had now, under the influence of the Danish warriors of old, joined the colors. Aside from Vig’s book, the abovementioned book by Thomas Peter Christensen and his *Dansk-Amerikansk Historie* (1927) only mention the war in passing. More recently, *The Bridge* published “a commemorative war-themed special issue” in 2014, which dealt with the Civil War (Anders Bo Rasmussen), the 1864 war (Julie K. Allen), and World War I through a selection of Georg Brandes’s many articles about the war from his book *Verdenskrigen* (1916), which was translated into English and published in the US in 1917—in May 1917, however, when the US had just entered the war, so his book does not treat the American involvement in it. One welcome exception to this trend is John Mark Nielsen’s article, “1918: The End of the ‘War to End All Wars,’” about his grandfather’s experiences in the war, which appeared in *The Bridge* in 2018.

Finally, Danish immigration literature does not deal with the Danish Americans and the war in any detail either: Kristian Hvidt’s dissertation *Flugten til Amerika* (1971) is limited to 1914, Erik Helmer Pedersen’s *Drømmen om Amerika* (1985) only has a few pages about World War I, and the same applies to Ole Sønnichsen’s *Rejsen til Amerika* (2013 and 2015). In Danish literature about World War I, the Danish involvement on the Allied side has received scant attention: Claus Bundgård Christensen and Martin Bo Nørregård’s *Verdenskrigens danske billeder 1914-1918* (2012) contains nine pages about Danes in the Allied armies, which, compared to other Danish books, is actually impressive, and hence, Kristian Bruhn’s short article “Danskere i allieret
tjeneste under Første Verdenskrig" (Siden Saxo, no. 4, 2014) is the most serious attempt to make an overview of the Danish effort in the Allied armies. Bruhn estimates that there were a total of 4,035 Danes fighting in the Allied armies, of which 1,957 were in the US Army (not counting those who did not get to the front). Of the Danish men in the other Allied armies, 291 died, and while 274 of those in the American Army died. Bruhn’s number of Danes in the US Army is obviously too low, but on the other hand, the thirty thousand men at the front in the petition mentioned above must be far too high, judging from the number of men who never left training camps or died en route to Europe.

Who were the Danish Doughboys?

When President Wilson declared war on Germany, the Danes in America supported the war effort—at least judging from the reaction in the Danish American newspapers. "Endelig!" (At last!), exclaimed the central headline on the front page of Bien that very day, April 6, 1917. Even though headlines and editorials of other Danish American newspapers were less rapt and unrestrained, all the articles I have read supported the serious step taken by the government. When the various Liberty Loan and War Saving Stamps campaigns were launched, the newspapers printed full page ads, often linking the war effort at the front and at home with Schleswig and the war of 1864—this even goes for the socialist Chicago paper Revyen. Furthermore, Danish Americans also supported the war effort with Fourth of July parades, as well as organizing associations and societies in support of the war, the largest one being the Jacob A. Riis League of Patriotic Service, and through smaller initiatives like knitting socks and sweaters for the soldiers at the front ("Do your bit! Knit! Knit! Knit!" as a headline on the frontpage of Nordlyset, November 29, 1917, encouraged readers).

But how did the young Danish and Danish American men react to being called up? How did they describe their experiences in the Army and Navy? What did they fight for? These are some of the questions I am looking for answers to in letters, diaries, and other similar sources from the soldiers. Looking for names and individual stories among some thirty thousand participants is, however, rather like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. And how can one string the individual stories together into any sort of general and objective history
about the Danish American war experience? Obviously, it does not make sense to speak about a war experience in the singular.

The material I have been examining to shed light on this forgotten chapter of Danish and Danish American history includes: 1) letters and other personal and military documents in Danish and American archives; and 2) Danish American newspapers and magazines, which printed a multitude of letters from training camps and eventually from “over there.” Some of the newspapers are digitized and available online, others are available at Statens Avissamling (the National Newspaper Archive) in Aarhus or at Udvandrerarkivet (the Danish Emigrant Archive) in Aalborg. In addition to the holdings of the Danish Emigrant Archive, the most important Danish archival sources I have used are those from Rigsarkivet (the Danish National Archives) about Marselisborgmonumentet and the so-called “C.F. Schiøppfes Samling, Danske, som Officerer i fremmed Krigstjeneste (D.S.O.-I.F.K.),” a huge collection of material about Danish officers in foreign service. In the US, I have accessed files from the National Archives, which were unfortunately grossly damaged by a fire in 1973, and Danish American archives in the Midwest. From all these sources, I have collected names—e.g. by looking for typical Danish -sen names, when the documents do not explicitly mention Denmark—and personal documents, especially letters from the rank and file, to be able to examine the war experiences of normal men. The names, though, were often changed by the immigrant himself or in error when being written down, for instance, by the registrar at the local board registering men eligible for military service under the Selective Service System, on boarding lists when embarking the troop ships for Europe, etc., just to mention another methodological and practical problem. In the following, I will give some examples of Danish doughboys I have found in these different sources.

As a good example of the typical Danish (and Norwegian) names, and most likely the Danish family with the most sons serving Uncle Sam during the war, Peder Christensen and his wife have to be mentioned. They lived in Racine, Wisconsin, but originally came from Tømmerby near Brønderslev in northern Jutland, where their seven sons were all born. Their names are Joseph, Carl, Anskov, Valdemar, Otto, Henry, and Johannes, and they all wore the uniform though only
two of them were in the field, the Danish American Christmas magazine *Misteltenen* of 1920 reports. But to find more information about, for instance, Carl Christensen is difficult: a search for a typical name like his in the military sources at Ancestry.com, using the keywords “World War I” and born in Denmark, results in 2,094 hits. Even if you find the right person, these files mostly do not reveal much about the person aside from their dates of registration and possibly dates of leaving and returning to the US.

Another angle could be to find famous or high-ranking Danish Americans fighting in the war. The ones I have found in this category include Captain Parley Brigham Christensen (1877-1918), Co. I, 325th Infantry, 82nd Division, from Ephraim, Utah, who was killed in action at Saint-Juvin, Champagne-Ardenne, France, October 11, 1918. Prior to this, he had fought in the Spanish-American War in the Philippines in 1898-99. His father, the painter Carl Christian Anthon Christensen (1831-1912), emigrated from Denmark to the US in 1857 after joining the Mormon church, and settled in Salt Lake City, Utah. Captain Christensen’s remains were returned to the US in 1921 at the request of his wife and reburied in the Salt Lake City Cemetery.

Major Axel Rasmussen (1879-1918) from Sherwood, Oregon, but born near Odense, Denmark, also seems to have been a regular hero—or, perhaps, simply an adventurer. He served in the US Cavalry as a bugler in the Spanish-American War and fought in Cuba and later in the Philippines; during the Mexican Revolution in 1910-11 he fought for Madero; and during World War I, he joined the American Legion of the Canadian Army in September 1915 and fought in France with the Ninety-Seventh Battalion before being transferred to the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in October 1917. In a long, rather sentimental article in *Misteltenen* in 1918, he is described as a giant and chivalrous soldier, “[a] man of about 40 years old, standing six feet six inches tall, of magnificent physique, handsome and big-brained,” whom his men will miss very much, as their letters say. Here it is also stated that he could not wait until the United States entered the war but went to Canada to join up there, “saying that he could strike a blow for old Denmark while fighting under the British flag.” *Misteltenen* quotes from a letter in English to his brother, who lived with their parents in Portland, Oregon, written April 28, 1918:
What I am going to do after the war, I don’t know. There is mighty little use of planning so far ahead under present circumstances, and I have been exceedingly lucky so far. Nearly all of the oldtimers in the 97th battalion that were transferred to other outfits in France are out of the game for good—killed or wounded; some sick and others, sad to say, among the missing.

Rasmussen then tells about the times he was wounded, the last time in March 1918, when he was gassed, which was the worst of them all. “I am not over that yet,” he says, and continues about the war: “It is beginning to tell on me—I mean I am getting considerably older,” he admits.19 He was killed in action six days later in the trenches at Amiens, France, May 4, 1918, and posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross with the following citation: “For extraordinary heroism in action while serving with 28th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, A.E.F., at Rocquencourt, France, 4 May 1918. Major Rasmussen proceeded to his post of command in spite of heavy bombardment in order to save important papers and while thus engaged was killed by shell fire.”20

Lieutenant Niels Drstrup, who was born in 1876 in Saltum, Vendsyssel, Denmark, and emigrated to the US in 1896, died in 1957 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Drstrup served with the Third Nebraska Regiment in the Spanish-American War, and enlisted as a seaman in the Navy in 1900. In April 1914, he took part in the occupation of Veracruz, Mexico, serving on the USS Utah, for which he received the Medal of
Honor and the following citation from the Secretary of the Navy: “For several hours he was in charge of an advanced barricade under heavy fire, during the afternoon of April 24, 1914, and not only displayed utmost ability as a leader of men, but by his marked composure and courage, he exerted a great steadying influence on the men under him.” During World War I he served on the USS Columbia, doing convoy duty from New York to England, and after the war, he served as captain of a minesweeper, the USS Grebe, in the North Sea, sweeping the mine barrage placed by the US Navy between Scotland and Norway, for which he won the Navy Cross.21

Sosthenes Behn (1882-1957), who was born on St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies to a Danish father and French mother, joined the US Army in June 1917, served with the Signal Corps in France from July 1917 to February 1919, first as a captain and later receiving the rank of lieutenant colonel. He commanded the 322nd Field Signal Battalion during the battles at Château-Thierry, Saint-Mihiel, and the Argonne in 1918 and was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, among other medals, for his meritorious service during the war.22 His brother Hernand Behn (1880-1933) served as lieutenant in the United States Naval Reserve Force from April 1918 to February 1919. The brothers went on to found the successful company International Telephone & Telegraph (ITT) in 1920.23

Another curious story is the long-distance runner, lithographer, socialist, and conscientious objector Rudy Constantin Hansen (1888-1977), born in Copenhagen to the suffragist Lycinka Hansen. Rudy immigrated to the US in 1910 to avoid conscription in Denmark. During the war, he volunteered for the US Army and was promoted to lieutenant for bravery. Maybe he changed his mind about military service because he could obtain American citizenship this way—when he signed his petition for naturalization at Camp Meigs, Washington, DC, on June 6, 1918, he referred to the Naturalization Act of May 9, 1918 and obtained his American citizenship six days later, on June 12. On his registration card from the first round, however, dated June 5, 1917, aside from stating that he lives in Chicago and works as a commercial artist, he claimed exemption because his mother and a child were dependent on him.24
Finally, there are at least two high-ranking Danish military doctors who should be mentioned. The first is Ejnar Hansen (1869-1938), who was born in Horsens, Denmark and immigrated to New York in 1896 after doing his military service as a doctor in the Danish Army. In September 1917, he joined the US Army as a captain and was in charge of a military hospital at Camp MacArthur in Waco, Texas. After the war, he was promoted to major. His father had fought in the 1864 war at Dybbøl as a volunteer, which might have influenced Hansen’s approach to the war. The second is Knud Hartnack (1874-1940), who was born in Kolding and immigrated to the US in 1897, working as a journalist and editor of *Nordlyset* and *Chicago Posten* before resuming his study of medicine. In June 1917, he joined ranks as an army surgeon and served initially at Camp Dodge as a first lieutenant. In March 1918 he was promoted to captain and served at the front in the Elsace region with the Eighty-Eighth Division from August 1918 until August 1919. In 1934, he was discharged as a lieutenant colonel and moved back to Denmark.²⁵

The “Danishness” of the two doctors is indisputable, whereas the national identity of some of the other soldiers I have been examining is less straightforward. In the Schiöpfes collection, Americans taking part in World War I are often American citizens, according to the files, so here they also had considerations about who to include. As Rudy Hansen’s case shows, you could gain citizenship by serving in the military, and thus, you might be a Danish citizen when joining up and become American in the process, while others later returned to Denmark and regained their Danish citizenship. I have not come across letters or other personal material from most of the men mentioned in this section of the article, and they are primarily included as examples of the variety of “Danes” fighting for the US. The next section will give some examples from the actual letters.

**Danish American Stories from the Great War**

How did Danish American soldiers experience their new life in the ranks? What did they write home about? Unsurprisingly, their letters deal with typical topics found in millions of other letters from this war. Initially, a high-spiritedness is dominant, possibly as a means of supporting the war effort and, not least for the hyphenated Ameri-
cans, a way of showing their loyalty to their new country—and this is the case in private letters as well as the ones printed in the newspapers. They write about things like the excellent and plentiful food, tobacco, etc., provided by Uncle Sam and the jolly life in the ranks. In personal letters not meant for the newspaper readers, however, a lack of understanding and critique of military customs as seen through the eyes of the citizen soldiers soon emerge. As time passed, serious topics like the Spanish flu and the effects of being gassed at the front are often discussed in the letters.

Unfortunately, the personal letters I have found so far in the archives only deal with camp life and life at the front lines after the Armistice, so the examples below from the front are all from different Danish American newspapers. The Danish Emigrant Archive in Aalborg holds some letters and other material from or relating to Danes who took part in the war. Some of the documents on this topic are not particularly interesting, unfortunately. A bricklayer named Kristeen Bundgaard, born May 7, 1884 in Lyngby south of Aalborg, emigrated in 1906 to Racine, Wisconsin. His name is spelled Christen on the registration certificate that attests that he “has submitted himself to registration and has [...] been duly registered this 12th day of Sept. 1918”; the same folder contains the form notifying him that he has been selected for immediate military service, beginning on November 12, 1918. His war must have been over before he even got into the uniform. He later became an American citizen, but, already in March 1923, he moved back to Denmark permanently, it seems according to other documents in his files, and in 1948, he regained his Danish citizenship.26

The Danish Immigrant Archives at Grand View University in Des Moines and the Emigrant Archive in Aalborg hold some interesting collections of letters to and from the Lutheran pastor, teacher, and author Kristian Østergaard (1855-1931) and his wife Kristine in Tyler, Minnesota. Five of their sons joined the Army or Navy during the war, but only two of them verifiably served in Europe. Hjalmar Østergaard (1887-1972), who was born in Denmark, though a naturalized US citizen, became a first lieutenant in the US Army and served with the Headquarters Company of the Thirty-Ninth Infantry in France from the end of October 1918 to July 30, 1919, when he debarked from Brest
aboard the *Leviathan*, arriving in Hoboken on August 6. His brother Harold Østergaard (1893-1972), Company D, 116th Supply Train, enlisted in May 1917 and left Brest April 8, 1919, with the First Replacement Depot as sergeant first class—the files do not say when he arrived in France. Another brother, Erling Østergaard (1897-1980), was at the same camp as his youngest brother, Vermund (1900-1970), who served in the Navy, but it has not been possible to find other information about Erling’s service. The couple’s fourth son, Frede Østergaard (1894-1918), died at Camp Leavenworth on October 25, 1918, presumably from the Spanish flu.

Kristian Østergaard writes to his daughter Gudrun, May 10, 1917, that he and his wife did not approve of their sons’ decisions to enlist, but they had to accept it:

> Well, then two of your brothers want to join the Army, but it is not according to their parents’ wishes. We cannot sacrifice our children. But when they want to sacrifice themselves in the fight against tyranny, they are allowed to do so. And while we cannot refrain from being sad about the prospect of having them sent to the sickening slaughter, we must welcome their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice.27

Another letter from Kristian talks about the death of his son and collecting his casket at the camp, but without further critique of the sons’ decision to join the armed forces.

The largest collection of letters—about seventy in total—is from Vermund, writing from Fort Bliss in Texas, Camp Perry in Ohio, and, primarily, Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he attended the Naval Radio School, which was located at Harvard during the war. Quite ironically, he barely made it to sea, at least not as far as Europe, but maybe that is simply the fate of a sailor from the Midwest. His letters, most of which are to his mother, contain typical topics for soldiers’ letters: small complaints about the difficulties of getting adjusted to military and camp life, lost clothes, lost letters, a lack of money etc., but not much about war aims or his personal reasons for fighting—Schleswig is not at all a topic here. An exception is a rather matter-of-fact description of a photo session with his comrades in their blue uniforms and flat hats, spelling out “AMERICA’S ANSWER” (probably
one of the famous mass formations with soldiers forming patriotic messages) in a letter from Camp Perry dated July 6, 1918. When he writes about the pride of parents with sons serving Uncle Sam, he admonishes, “Mother, don’t be so modest, the flag with the five stars is to honor us boys, but even more for you and dad.” On July 11, 1918, he expresses pride that he and his four brothers are part of the war effort (“for min egen part, naar jeg tænker over det kan jeg ikke være andet end glad og stolt over at jeg og de andre fire er med i ’et”).

Vermund stayed at the Naval Radio School in Cambridge until spring 1919, from where he often writes to his mother about being torn between his longing for home and a longing to finally go to sea and see the war and the world. In one letter he says that it might be because of “old Viking blood” (December 28, 1918). Later, he writes that if he is lucky, he might celebrate his nineteenth birthday on his way to France to pick up a load of soldiers (March 12, 1919). His high spirits do not last long, though; in the next, short letter, he is in the hospital with the flu, which he already has had once before in August 1918, and he stays in hospital for the next five weeks or so. Hence, no journey to France. On June 18, 1919, he writes to his mother from a US receiving ship in Camp Hingham, Massachusetts: “There is still no prospect of getting either back or forth. Can’t go to sea and can’t go home and my life here is not gay. I am alright in a way, but it is so dreary.” The last letters are mostly about waiting to be discharged and going back to civilian life, which happened sometime in August 1919, it seems.

On June 28, 1919, Vermund writes to his mother about his hopes that they all can meet during the summer and compete in telling lies about achievements that never happened (“Jeg tænker nok vi kan mødes i sommer engang allesammen saa at vi kan lyve om kap om bedrifter der aldrig blev udrettet.”) In the last letter in the collection, dated July 22, 1919, he complains to his mother that he nearly thought they had forgotten him—he feels that he writes twice as often as they do, and they only have two military persons to write to (he uses the rather odd phrasing “militære personer,” maybe as a way of addressing the fact that they had not been at the front in Europe). “But the war is over, and people already start forgetting. It is not myself that I think about, but the soldiers who come here from France don’t get the
same welcome anymore.” There are rumors about soldiers at nearby Camp Devens having asked permission to wear civilian clothes when they are off duty because people have forgotten about the war and don’t want to be reminded about it, he writes.

Already July 8, 1918, however, in a letter to one of his sisters—it does not say whom, but from a later letter it seems to be Sigrid—he complains a bit about the monotony of camp life: “We sometimes get a bit discouraged and downhearted here in camp. The routine work and military restrictions sometimes tend to make us forget what we really are here fore [sic].” He was taking a wireless course at the camp, but, he complains, “it’s also slow. I have at least four months of training left and I want to go to sea before things are over with.” This letter, signed “Brother V., Co C, 7th Reg., Camp Perry,” is written in English, so it seems that even an educated and highly Danish-minded family like the Østergaards were adapting to English in the younger generation, which might be an obvious explanation for the disappearance of the Danish doughboys from Danish and Danish American history.

The letters of another Danish-speaking soldier, Joseph Hansen (1896-1962), Company D, Seventh Motor Supply Train, from Rowan, Iowa, tell a different story. He was a natural-born American, according to his draft registration card of June 5, 1917, and he writes in English to his family, so he is possibly not the most relevant person to include here. But, unlike Vermund Østergaard, he actually went to France, after initial training at Camp MacArthur in Waco, Texas, and he explicitly refers to himself as Danish, so he must qualify as such. In a long letter about life at Camp MacArthur he writes on June 1, 1918: “A lot of the officers here have the southern accent, and it’s kinda fun to hear them talk. There is one Dane in this squad beside myself, and one in each of the tents on either side. There is also one here from Ringsted by the name of Carl Mortensen.” Besides writing about Danes and camp life, he occasionally asks about crops and livestock at home, comparing it to what he sees in Texas, which is an ever-present theme in letters from country people in the ranks—also among the Danish Schleswigers. In this eleven-page letter, he even mentions the enemy, and in a fairly stereotypical way: “The Huns are trying to do their worst before we get too many Americans over there.” This is not typical for the private letters I have come across, whereas it almost
seemed compulsory to write things like that in the ones printed in newspapers.

Later, Corporal Joe Hansen made it to France, seemingly after the Armistice, where he drove a Packard truck and worked hard at cleaning up ammunition and such from the battlefields in the area between Toul and Metz, about fifty kilometers from Verdun, as he writes to his brother on January 5, 1919. The first letter from “over there” is dated November 18, noting that now that the hostilities have ceased, they are working harder than ever. He stays in France at least until April 15, 1919, which is the date of the last letter in the packet.

Danish Soldiers’ Letters from “Over There” in the Newspapers

As mentioned above, some of the Danish American newspapers printed whole series of letters from the front. *Bien*—along with *Den danske Pioneer* the only remaining Danish newspapers in the US—contains the best example, with a series called “Danske Soldaterbreve fra ‘Over There’” (Danish soldiers’ letters from ‘Over There’), that was printed between June 21 and November 8, 1918 in twelve parts with at least twenty letters, all except the last part printed on the front page.32

“The list of honor” from the front page of *Bien*, August 30, 1918, with a photo of Alfred Nielsen, the son of Mr. C. Nielsen, the author, who was the first Dane from San Francisco to be wounded, according to the text.
Taking a different approach, Revyen in Chicago printed letters from Harald Nielsen’s *Sonderjyske Soldaterbreve* on the front pages even before the US entered the war and continued well into the spring of 1918. Already in October 1917, *Nordlyset* encouraged enlisted men among its readers to send descriptions of their experiences, after which the newspaper frequently printed short letters from different training camps, for instance from Corporal Georg Jordahn, Company L., 124th Infantry, who was training at Camp Wheeler, Georgia. He starts out by saying that he has missed *Nordlyset* a lot since he left the palms at Palm Beach. He reports that they are treated well and working hard to become able “to send Kaiser Bill and his hordes to H.” In the same issue, the abovementioned Dr. Ejnar Hansen, serving as a captain with the Medical Reserve Corps, writes from his base hospital in Camp McArthur that there soon will be 1,280,000 men training in the thirty-two camps across the country, and that the men in his camp mostly come from Wisconsin and Michigan. He notes that one comes across people called Jensen, Petersen, and Sørensen all the time, not to forget Hansen. He has, however, not come across anybody called Opffer yet, the article says, referring to the editor, who had three sons in the army. The food is all right, though rather drab, Hansen notes, and they go to bed at eight in the evening, which seems to be the most shocking thing for the Danish doctor: “Life is the same from one day to the next, measured and uniform like the movement of the pendulum of my old grandfather clock.”

The majority of the letters are from the last phase of the war, when the doughboys started reaching the front in large numbers, as Bien’s series indicated. In the first part of the series, on June 21, 1918, Adolf F. Lassen writes to his mother in San Francisco from “somewhere in France, May 12” about delayed letters and letters being censored (therefore he uses a typewriter to make it easier for the censor), the weather (much like Seattle’s), and about their journey over there—which involved fourteen days at sea, four days at a rest camp in France and then four days on a train—as an explanation for delayed letters or him not writing. He is typing a report to Washington, and complains, at the end of the letter, about his mother saying that she will put a sign on her door stating that she has a son fighting at the front—so far, he
fights with the pen, not the sword, he says, jokingly, so he does not approve of her idea.

The front page of *Nordlyset*, October 17, 1918 features a collection of “Breve fra vore Soldater” (Letters from our soldiers), as the headline runs. Among these, a short letter from the editor’s son, Emil Opffer Jr. (1896-1988), a merchant seaman, journalist, and editor, who was serving as a private in Battery A, Fifty-Third Artillery. He writes to his friends at home in New York that it has been a long time since he has received any mail, but that is probably because they move so much about. He is doing fine and, despite what he has read about having horrible nightmares at the front, he dreams about dances and feasts: feasts when he has been starving, dances when he is dead tired. As a final propagandistic salvo, he praises the Salvation Army for their work in France, although the artillerists rarely see them because they are always with the infantry in the trenches. Emil Opffer Jr. was born in Nyborg, Denmark, like his brother, Ivan, but they were raised, among other places, in Mexico and New York, where the family lived from 1905. Emil served overseas from August 25, 1917, to March 11, 1919, and was honorably discharged June 4, 1920.35 He later had an affair with the poet Hart Crane (1899-1932), who moved in with Opffer and his father in Brooklyn in 1924 and wrote his famous poem about the Brooklyn Bridge there.

Emil’s brother, Private Ivan Opffer (1897-1980), was a painter and illustrator famous for his caricatures and portraits of writers, e.g. James Joyce, and other notable figures. During the war, he was with the American Army Camouflage Corps and served in France and Germany from September 25, 1918, until September 4, 1919.36 Letters from him were occasionally printed in his father’s paper, for example the short “Over Sky!,” a pun on the usual “Over There” headline, which appeared May 22, 1919, sent from Coblenz, Germany. Here, he describes a flight with Lieutenant Roger from the Ninth Aero Squadron, which took part in the Third Army’s occupation of the Rhineland. He also wrote about more serious topics, for instance about being sick with the Spanish flu. In this article, “Døden om Bord” (Death on board), which appeared on the front page on October 9, 1919, he describes his dramatic journey across the Atlantic, sick with the flu even before boarding the steamer, and, using the racist language of the time
that I will not quote, he says that African American soldiers were particularly likely to die from the disease.

The October 17 issue of Nordlyset, quoted from above, also contains letters about more serious topics, for instance one from J. Smedegaard, who writes from his hospital bed:

Dear friends, I am in hospital in Southern France after I got wounded in the battle at the River Vesle, when we had captured Chateau Thierry. Some wounded comrades lay in no-man’s-land, writhing in agony, and I wanted to help bring them back, but on the way, I got wounded myself. The German soldiers look very cowed, and as soon as we get near them, they throw down their rifles and put their hands up. Our boys are always in the mood to charge. Two of my brothers are at the front. One of them is a pilot. Greetings to all the friends in the US. 37

This slightly messy letter is interesting, though rather predictable, for its brief description of his willingness to risk his own life to save his comrades, as well as the stamina and high spirits of the Americans vs. the despondency of their enemies. Smedegaard was born in 1875 in the village Sejerslev on the island Mors in the north of Jutland, and immigrated to the US in 1889, when he was fourteen years old. Another letter, from Kay L. Mogensen (1891-1933), was also written from a hospital bed, at Whipple Barracks, Prescott, Arizona, on October 8, 1918—he had been gassed at Château Thierry and sent back to the US after spending three weeks in a hospital in France. The short and powerful headline “Gasset” (Gassed) was often used, especially in Nordlyset.

The front page of Nordlyset from May 9, 1918 features a story from Albert Jensen, 165th Infantry, whose letter to a friend had previously been printed in Bronx Home News and was presumably then translated from English to Danish—I will not try to translate it back again. But to paraphrase Jensen, he starts out thanking his friend for the articles he has sent— it is good to know that you are not forgotten, he writes, even though he is four thousand miles away from his dear old New York. Then, after expressing his hope that the war will soon be won and peace restored, he describes his experiences in combat, alternat-
ing between an initial characterization of the situation over there as a complete hell and cheerful, propagandistic descriptions of hand-to-hand fighting with the Germans, throwing grenades at them (you have to be careful that you don’t have glue on your fingers and keep it too long—then no doctor in the world can help you, not even Ejnar Hansen!). The effects of the gas attack, however, are not pleasant—afflicted soldiers suffer infernal torment, despite being taken well care of at one of the Johns Hopkins Hospitals. After Albert Jensen’s letter, there is a short notice about another Dane, Eugen Petersen, who also had been gassed. The notice mentions that Petersen’s father, a former firefighter from Copenhagen, has three stars in his flag, i.e., three sons fighting for the US.

Private Sigurd Moll, San Francisco, in a letter from “somewhere in France” in August 1918, briefly tells about the way the English and French welcomed him and his comrades, a typical spirit-boosting topic, though here with an interesting addition. In France, the calamities of the war were much more evident than in England, Moll writes, concluding with a rhetorical exclamation: “I wonder if people in the US fully understand how lucky they are that the war is not being fought over there!” You find similar formulations in many letters from the Danes in the German army, when they compare the devastated areas to their native Schleswig, expressing the hope that the war never will come to the north and actually sometimes using this as a reason for fighting: to avoid that the war would come to their native place.

The bimonthly magazine *Ungdom* (Youth), published by Dansk Sammensluttet Ungdom or D.S.U. (Association of Danish Youth) in Cedar Falls, Iowa, also contains a lot of letters from soldiers. Most of them, like letters in other magazines and newspapers, are short descriptions of episodes—dramatic, trivial, humoristic, etc.—from the soldier’s time in the army. One letter, however, is significantly longer—four and a half pages—and is written in English unlike the other letters in the magazine: “A Letter From The Battle Line” is attributed to Søren Dahl, Company B, 341 Machine Gun Battalion, American Post Office 761, US Army, originally from Omaha, Nebraska. The letter was written in France on November 8, 1918, but was only received by the editors on January 23, 1919, the introduction to it explains, and was therefore printed in the February 1, 1919 issue. *Ungdom* did not cease
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publishing letters from the front after the armistice was declared, and the same goes for many other Danish American publications.

In Bien, there was a temporary lull in interest in the war or rather in the publication of soldiers’ letters after the “Danske Soldaterbreve fra ‘Over There’” series ended on November 8. No letters are printed in January, but on February 14, 1919, the topic is taken up again, with a different headline. Here, three letters are printed under the joint headline “Efter Vaabenstilstanden” (After the Armistice); the first is from Berendt Randlow from Oakland, California, who writes from Aubun, north of Verdun, to his father. He volunteered at the age of eighteen and was sent to France in June 1918, where he had been at the front since September with Battery B., Army Park Artillery. The second letter is from Sergeant Sven Klitgaard, who writes to his mother back home in Alameda, Ca., from Føhsen in Germany [Föhren, north of Trier], while the third is the beginning of a series of descriptions of Joseph Axen’s experiences during the war with the title “Min Rejse til Fronten” (My Journey to the Front), which is continued in the next four issues of the paper.

On the front page of the issue for March 24, 1919, Private Christian B. Mellsen, Company A, 315th Machine Gun Battalion, Eightieth Division, tells about his experiences at the front in France. “Mellem Bomber og Granater” (Between Bombs and Grenades) is the headline, and, as it suggests, it is a rather dramatic story. Mellsen starts out by stating a difference between before and after the Armistice: then, there were strict limits to what you could write about the conditions in France and the journey over there, whereas now, the soldiers have been granted more freedom in that regard. He uses this relative freedom to describe what he has experienced in a long letter to the members of “Freja,” Branch Number 6 of the organization Dania, written “two hundred kilometers east of Paris, January 19, 1919”—maybe paradoxically showing the limits to what you could write. He writes that he hasn’t heard from them since last time he wrote, in the middle of October, nor received any letters since he arrived in France. But then, during wartime, letters get lost, he states, cutting short this possible critique of his friends.

After he left Salinas, California, Mellsen was a recruit in Camp Kearny north of San Diego for a mere fifteen days, then he was de-
tached to the 143rd Machine Gun Battalion, Fortieth Division, and soon on the way to France. His battalion left New York on August 8, 1918, aboard the Mentor as part of a convoy of twelve steamers loaded with soldiers and guarded by a battleship and a destroyer that was joined by about twenty-five English destroyers when they approached the danger zone near the British Isles. After twelve days at sea, they arrived in Liverpool, went south by train and rested for a couple of days in a camp, before they crossed the Channel at night for Le Havre, France. From there, they travelled by cattle truck to southern France, where they started training for the battlefield—not for long, though, since a hundred men soon were picked out to fill up the ranks after recent losses in the Eightieth Division at the front. On October 10, they were issued gasmasks, steel helmets, pistols, and ammunition. He and his comrades were all thrilled by the aspect of soon seeing the actual battlefields, he writes, “but we just didn’t know what we were letting ourselves in for.” This is not the last example in his letter of a rather critical approach to the war, which, for obvious reasons, would not have been tolerated before the Armistice. This candor actually makes the letters printed in the immediate aftermath of the war somewhat more interesting than the stereotypically patriotic ones written and printed while the war still raged.

Late the same day, October 10, they said goodbye to the rest of the company and travelled north, again three days by cattle truck, to Nix Vill [Nixéville-Blercourt, most likely] three miles west of Verdun, where they were assigned to the 315th Machine Gun Battalion of the Eightieth Division. About a week later, they were sent up to a forest ten miles behind the line of fire, where they stayed for some ten days, awaiting orders, and experienced nightly bombings by enemy planes. In the early afternoon on October 30, they marched up to the front, arriving at their positions at 2:00 a.m., when they were ordered to dig themselves in. After an hour, the enemy started shelling them, and then follows a hair-raising description of the fighting. Private Mellsen returned to Hoboken, New Jersey, from France on May 30, 1919.

Joseph Axen (1898-1940), who served in an anti-aircraft company, writes about the war in a much more stereotypical way, even after the fighting was over. He writes that he tries to shoot down the barbarous Fritz without mercy, after seeing German planes attack a Red Cross
field hospital and kill wounded men and nurses there. In the fourth part of “Min Rejse til Fronten,” Axen writes about the damaged and looted churches, castles, and towns they recaptured from the fleeing Germans, and ends with the rhetorical question, “Can we feel pity for that kind of barbarian after the war?”

Nevertheless, it must have been a story that appealed to the editor’s and the readers’ understanding of the conflict, even after the Armistice, since it was published on the front page of not just one but five issues of the newspaper.

As opposed to the mundane news of some of the soldiers mentioned here, other Danish soldiers’ war experiences were much more dramatic. I already mentioned Private Hans Nielsen-Sorring (1894-1918), Company M, Seventh Infantry, Eightieth Division, who was killed in action during the Meuse-Argonne offensive at the village Cunel on October 15, 1918. Alfred Madson (1889-1918), originally Madsen and also called Madison in the newspapers, from Sheffield, Illinois, 332nd Infantry, Thirty-Third Division, was killed during the same battle, which is not that surprising since this was the bloodiest and longest battle the AEF took part in during World War I—two-thirds of all American deaths occurred in the last three months of the war.

He was wounded on October 9, 1918, rescued from the battlefield by his future brother-in-law, Alfred C. Larsen, also of Sheffield, Illinois, only to be fatally hit by a bullet in the head while Larsen carried him back to safety. He had been in France since the end of May 1918, and on the front line for over three months. Alfred Larsen survived the war and returned to Sheffield to marry Madson’s sister, Eva. As the fifth Sheffield boy killed in France, Madson’s remains were laid to rest in the Sheffield cemetery in September 1921, an article in the Sheffield Times reports: “The flag-draped casket was conveyed to the home and cemetery with impressive military ceremonies,” including an honor guard, all under the charge of the American Legion.

Ole Frandsen Andersen (1894-1918), or Ole Frands Andersen, as his draft registration card says, was another Dane killed during the last stages of the war. He immigrated to the US in 1910 with his brother Hans, where he joined his uncles at Weeping Water, Nebraska, and later went to live in South Dakota. He joined the US Army and was killed in France during the Meuse-Argonne offensive on November 1, 1918. His body was later moved back to Denmark and buried at Lille
Heddinge Churchyard, near Rødvig where he was born. Every year on Armistice Day, an honor guard from De Danske Forsvarsbrødre at Stevns and HVK Stevns commemorates his memory.\(^{43}\)

Even on the very last day of the war, despite the Germans having signed the terms of the Armistice already at 5:10 a.m. on November 11, fighting continued until the historic and symmetrical moment of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month was reached. It has been estimated that the fighting on the last morning of the war resulted in nearly 11,000 casualties, of which 2,738 died.\(^{44}\) At least one of these was Danish: Private Kristian Jensen (1892-1918) from Scranton in Greene County, Iowa, born in Borup, Denmark, who fought in Company C, 316\(^{th}\) Infantry Regiment, Seventy-Ninth Infantry Division, was killed in action on November 11, and is buried at the

Private Kristian Jensen. 
Photo courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.
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enormous Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery in France. Already in 1921, his brother, Peter Jensen of Newell, Iowa, informed the authorities that he did not want his brother’s remains brought back to the US. His short file at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) also includes a letter to his mother Ane Marie Jensen back in Denmark in 1929, offering a pilgrimage to his grave in France. It does not say if she accepted this offer.45 His name is included on the monument wall at Marselisborg.

Also included on the Marselisborg Monument is Private Arent A. Bruhn (1895-1918), Company D, 127th Infantry, Thirty-Second Division, who was born in Elk Horn, Iowa, but lived in Enumclaw, Washington. He too was killed in action during the Meuse-Argonne offensive on October 19, 1918, and buried at Bois de Bantheville, where he was killed—“Struck by shell. Death instantaneous,” as the brutal language of military bureaucracy reported—and later reburied at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery in 1925. At this point, his family did not want his remains moved back to the US, which they must have requested earlier on, before his grave was located in 1925. Maybe they had somehow accepted their loss or did not want to reopen the wound—to be able to identify his son, his father, Otto Bruhn, was instructed by the Quartermaster General, in a letter dated December 31, 1923, “to secure from your local dentist a chart showing all treatment performed for this soldier prior to his entry into the Service.” For a grieving parent, I imagine this would be a very disturbing thing to do. Instead, Bruhn was reburied at the beautiful cemetery in France and his mother, Mrs. Margrethe Bruhn, went on a pilgrimage—as part of the War Department’s program “Pilgrimage, War Mothers and Widows”—to visit his grave there in May-June 1930, as his rather long file at NARA reports.46

Remembering Hans Nielsen-Sorring in Denmark

The National Archives in St. Louis also contain a fairly lengthy burial case file on Hans Lindberg Nielsen-Sorring, which mostly contains correspondence between his father Knud and the American military authorities, requesting information about the fate of his son and later arranging for his remains to be moved back to Denmark.47 Knud Nielsen-Sorring had suffered from heart problems since childhood
and had had a nervous breakdown in 1917; since this happened before Hans joined the Army in May 1918, the breakdown was more likely due to his being overworked than worries about his son. However, the death of his only son, and the initial uncertainty as to what had happened to him, must have made things even worse for Knud. Still, he worked untiringly first to find out what had happened to Hans, then to have his remains moved back to Denmark, and along with this, to erect a Danish monument for the war dead, as mentioned in the introduction.

When the family was finally informed about his death, they inserted a short notice in the local Aarhus papers saying that today, April 16, 1919, they had been notified by the American Ministry of War that their beloved son and brother, Hans, was killed in action at the front in France, on November 5, at the age of twenty-four. The date given by the authorities was not correct, however, which complicated Knud Nielsen-Sorring’s attempts to find out more. In January 1920, he requested that his son’s remains be brought to Denmark, if possible, otherwise “that his body remains in the soil of France.” In November 1921, the authorities approved his wish and his son’s remains were reburied on April 15, 1922 at Dollerup Church, the church belonging to the village Sorring between Aarhus and Silkeborg, where his mother and two brothers, who had died as infants, were already buried.

In the article “Den faldne Soldat” (The fallen soldier) in Aarhus Amtstidende, on April 19, 1922, N. A. writes about Hans Nielsen-Sorring (1894-1918). Killed in action October 15, 1918. The caption to his portrait in Aarhus Stiftstidende on April 17, 1919, says, “He died for his new country.”
Nielsen-Sorring’s burial a week prior. He starts out by describing the grief of the bereaved father and says that he had had an epitaph by sculptor Ølsgaard put up in the church the year before in memory of his son. A great number of mourners attended the funeral, following the dead soldier’s casket to the grave. The casket was draped in the American flag, while the church was decorated with Danish flags, as a marker of the two nationalities involved. The vicar, Mr. Knudsen, spoke of the three phases in the young man’s life, of which the third, his time as a voluntary soldier in the US Army, was highly interesting, as it, in the vicar’s interpretation, connected his service with a fight for Denmark:

When America got involved in the war, the young man felt himself confronted with a very serious choice: “Stay, where you are, in favorable conditions, or volunteer and fight for the cause that is not America’s, not France’s nor England’s alone, but also the cause of your own small native country.” He chose to volunteer.50

At the graveside, a teacher named Asbæk thanked the fallen soldier for not forgetting his native country, but willingly sacrificing himself to guard it, when he thought it was in peril. And then, he connected the Danish American war effort with the Danes fighting in the German ranks to the interests of Denmark even more explicitly than the vicar:

We should be grateful that so many young Danes both in America and South Jutland did their duty and fought in honor of the Danish nation; for they have contributed to the war ending with such a good result for us, and we have the right to hope that Denmark will last as long as the Danish youth rate the dictates of duty highly and willingly go where ever their conscience commands, even when it is a matter of life and death. Let us pay tribute to Hans Nielsen Sorring’s memory.51

Hence, the reunion of North Schleswig and Denmark was due to the Danes fighting on both sides, in this man’s view, which is quite similar to the story told on the reliefs of the Marselisborg Monument.
But what did Hans Nielsen-Sorring think about these matters? Why did he join up, why did he fight? Unfortunately, I have not come across letters from him among the many letters in the Danish American newspapers or in the archives, and other information about him is scarce, so it is only possible to guess at his motives. In America, he lived in Racine, was single, and worked for the Racine Rubber Company as a "Tire Maker," according to his registration card of June 5, 1917. He enlisted in the Army on May 26, 1918—in Chicago, a letter of August 11, 1919, in his NARA file says—and embarked for Europe from Brooklyn aboard the *Navasa*, July 22. He was still a Danish citizen when he registered in 1917 but had declared his intention of becoming a US citizen. His name appears twice in *Racine County in the World War* (1920), but only with the inaccurate death date, November 5, 1918, that his family was given initially, and the information that he had lived at 523 College Avenue, had been a private in the US Army's 161 Depot Brigade, had trained at Camp Grant in Illinois, and that other service and dates were not available.

After the war, his father desperately tried to get information of his son's fate in the war and wrote in a letter that the family had not heard from him since he left for France. In a short letter to the War Dept. in Washington D.C., dated December 22, 1919, Nielsen-Sorring says that he has "received information that in that company were only 2 Danes, and that the other man was a very close friend of my son." He hopes that they will either forward his letter to this man or give him the name and address of this other Dane. He never succeeded in finding this man, and, like the brief formulation above of a man being killed instantly, this is something that you often find in these letters: relatives hoping to find the person that heard their loved ones' last words, or who saw what happened to them. If such a witness can be found, he invariably tells the bereaved that death was instantaneous, their son didn't suffer. Despite the scarcity of news that his father's hard work resulted in, at least Hans Nielsen-Sorring found a final resting place in the village where he had been born and from which his father had taken his name. 52

To conclude, this article represents only the initial, tentative steps for a book about the Danish doughboys and sailors fighting for Uncle Sam during World War I, the story about an almost completely forgot-
ten group of soldiers and their motives for fighting. It has been positive to discover that there is a lot of material available at the archives, when you start digging into the haystacks. It is less positive, though, that hardly anything has been written about this group, unlike for instance about Danes fighting in the Civil War, so a lot of basic research still needs to be done. Likewise, it is a problem that I have not found any substantial material from the soldiers “over there” in the archives and so far have had to rely on letters and interviews from the newspapers. So, if you have material of this sort in the attic or storeroom—letters, photos, diaries from any of the Danish doughboys—please contact me!

Endnotes

1 Unfortunately, Aarhus Kommune, which maintains the park and monument, apparently does not file information about details like the plaque text. Furthermore, the text still does not include men from the Danish Navy, volunteers in the German Army like the author and actor Stellan Rye, who was killed in action at Ypres, November 14, 1914, or the only woman among the many men: the nurse Johanne Marie Ohrt, who died in 1915 from dysentery at the field hospital on the Eastern Front of which she was in charge. For the history of the monument, see Poul Harris, Århus i friluftskunst og mindesmærker (Aarhus: Fonden til Bevarelse af Friluftskunst og Mindesmærker i Århus, 1983); Inge Adriansen, Erindringssteder i Danmark (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, 2010); and my article “Changing Narratives of War: The World War I Monument in Aarhus,” in Michael Böss, ed., Conflicted Pasts and National Identities: Narratives of War and Conflict (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2014), 138-50. Lars Erik Bryld, associate professor in the Department of Clinical Medicine, University of Copenhagen, has compiled a pdf with the names on the monument, available at https://www.bryld.dk/hent-filer/.

2 For the story behind Rebild National Park, see Henrik Bugge Mortensen, Rebild Bakker. Dansk-Amerikanske forbindelser (Skørping: Forlaget Rebild, 2012), in Danish and English.

3 Bent Holstein, “Vel mødt i Aarhus, Dansk Amerikanerne!,” Aarhus Stiftstidende, July 5, 1925.

4 Til Hr. Præsidenten for Amerikas forenede Stater (To the President of the United States of America), Aalborg, 1918, digitized at the Royal Library, https://www.kb.dk/.

5 Another petition from the Danish American Schleswigers, not the soldiers though, did have an important impact: President Wilson found time to answer the spokesperson, the Reverend K. C. Bodholdt, on November 12, 1918, that their appeal for justice would not go unheeded. See Max Henius:
A Biography, published by Max Henius Memoir Committee, Chicago, 1936, 90-94.

6 See Ole Sønnichsen, Rejsen til Amerika—Drømmen om et nyt liv og Jagten på lykken (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2017), 7. This number does not include Danish speakers from Schleswig, for whom no exact number is available. In the encyclopedia Sønderjylland A – Å (Aabenraa: Historisk Samfund for Sønderjylland, 2011), Leif Hansen Nielsen suggests that up to 45,000 people from North Schleswig emigrated between 1860-1910, most of them to the US (395).

7 Vig’s article can be found online in Bien here: https://box2.nmtvault.com/DanishIM/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=8d575c30-3cdb-4525-9e99-50d8866ec8af/iaehdim0/20121204/00001009. Unfortunately, the scanning is not perfect.


11 The first chapter, “Amerika rejser en Hær,” was published May 30, 1918, in Berlingske Tidende, evening edition, and later, June 26, 1918, on the front page of the Esbjerg newspaper Vestkysten.


13 For more information on this poster or the plebiscite, see the article “Sønderjylland” at the Henrik Pontoppidan society’s official site, accessed July 7, 2020, http://www.henrikpontoppidan.dk/text/kilder/digte/eventyr.html.

14 Bennett C. Vig did not register until the next year, June 5, 1918, and there are no other traces of his military service at Ancestry.com.

15 I am grateful for travel grants from the DAHS and Autorkontoen in Denmark, which enabled me to do research at archives in the Midwest in October 2019.

16 Misteltenen. Julemagasin for Danske i Amerika, Omaha, Nebraska, 1920, 30. See picture of the brothers there or in Walter L. Haight, Racine County in the World War, Racine, Wisconsin, W.L. Haight and F.P. Haight, 1920, 593.


21 Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen, C. F. Schiöppfes Samling, H. nr. 628. See also “Drustrup, Neils” at https://homeofheroes.com/distinguished-service-cross/service-cross-world-war-i/navy-cross-world-war-i/navy-cross-wwi-navy-navy-cross-wwi-navy-d-to-g/.

22 See https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/17257.

23 See Dansk Biografisk Leksikon, “Sosthenes Behn,” https://biografiskleksikon.lex.dk/Sosthenes_Behn and Det Danske Udvandrerarkiv, A302-2, second page in the digitized material, https://www.udvandrerarkivet.dk/soegeside/detaljevisning/?no_cache=1&tx_niddua_pi3%5Br%5D=320782&tx_niddua_pi3%5Bs%5D=2&tx_niddua_pi3%5Bc%5D=2.


26 Det Danske Udvandrerarkiv, file A6173-2 P Indkaldelses ordre til den amerikanske hær, digitized at https://www.udvandrerarkivet.dk/soegeside/detaljevisning/?tx_niddua_pi3%5Br%5D=33900&tx_niddua_pi3%5Bs%5D=2, and A6173-6 P Dokumenter vedr. KBs repatriotisering, digitized at: https://www.udvandrerarkivet.dk/soegeside/detaljevisning/?tx_niddua_pi3%5Br%5D=33900&tx_niddua_pi3%5Bs%5D=6. The year of immigration explains his absence from the draft board in the Danish conscription register (the stamp §13), see https://www.sa.dk/ao-soegesider/ billedviser?bsid=19834#19834,1616452.

27 Det Danske Udvandrerarkiv, file A308-14: K breve til datteren Gudrun, http://www.udvandrerarkivet.dk/soegeside/detaljevisning/?tx_niddua_pi3%5Br%5D=320933&tx_niddua_pi3%5Bs%5D=14. “Ja, saa vil to af dine Bredre gaa med i Hæren, men ikke efter deres Forældres Ønsker. Vi kan ikke ofre vore Børn. Men naar de vil ofre sig selv for at kæmpe mod Tyranniet, saa har de Lov til det. Og mens vi ikke kan lade være med at søge over Udsigten til at faa dem sendt ind i det modbydelige Slagteri, saa maa vi jo glæde os over deres Mod og Offersind.”

28 Danish Immigrant Archives, Grand View University, Des Moines, MsC 08: Kristian Østergaard Family Papers, box 2, folder 5: Letters to Kristian and Kristine Østergaard. This is the same source for all his letters.
Ibid. “Der er endnu ingen udsigt til at komme hverken frem eller tilbage. Kan ikke komme til søs og ikke hjem og min tilværelse her er ikke gemtlig. Jeg har det godt nok paa en maade men det er saa kjedsommeligt.”

Ibid. “Men krigen er jo ovre og folk begynder allerede at glemme. Det er ikke mig selv jeg tænker paa men soldaterne der kommer her fra Frankrig faar (?) ikke længere den samme velkomst.”

Danish American Archive and Library, HNP 2008, Box 19, Packet 2, Joseph Hansen.

Unfortunately, the Digital Library of Danish American Newspapers and Journals available at the Museum of Danish America website does not include the issues of Bien after no. 46, November 15, 1918, and the rest of that year, so I cannot say if there were more—assuming that these issues were published. See https://box2.nmtvault.com/DanishIM/jsp/RcWebBrowseCollections.jsp.

Nordlyset, October 11, 1917, 8.


Nordlyset, October 24, 1918, 4: “Mon Folk i U.S. tilfulde forstaar, hvor lykkelige de er, at Krigen ikke udkæmpes derovre!”


Joseph Axen, “Min Rejse til Fronten,” Bien, March 7, 1919, 1. “Kan vi nu efter Krigen have Medlidenhed med den Slags Barbarer?”


Sheffield Times, September 30, 1921. Danish American Archive and Library, HNP 2008, Box 12, Olivia Hansen Madsen/Henry Hansen, packet
4. Alfred Madson. The files contain a photo of Alfred Madson, newspaper clippings, photocopies of honor rolls etc., but no soldiers’ letters.


45 NARA, St. Louis, Burial Case Files, Kristian Jensen. See also https://www.abmc.gov/decedent-search/jensen%3Dkristian.

46 NARA, St. Louis, Burial Case Files, Arent Bruhn. See also https://www.abmc.gov/decedent-search/bruhn%3Darent.

47 NARA, St. Louis, Burial Case Files, Hans Lindberg Nielsen-Sorring. See also Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen, 10063, Komiteen for Mindesmærke ov. Faldne. Sager vedrørende opførelsen af Marselisborgmonumentet (1920-1925).


49 Jyllands Posten, April 17, 1919, 7.


51 Ibid., 5. “Ved Graven bragte Lærer Asbæk afdøde en Tak, fordi han ikke glemte sit lille Fædreland, men villig ofrede sig for at værne det, da han mente, det var i Nød. Vi bør være taknemmelige, for at saa mange unge Danske baade i Amerika og i Sønderjylland fulgte Pligtens Bud og kämpede saaledes, at det blev til Ære for den danske Nation; thi de har bidraget til, at Krigen fik saa heldigt et Udfald for os, og vi har Ret til at haabe, at Danmark faar Lov at bestaa, saa længe dansk Ungdom sætter Pligtens Bud højt og villigt gaar, hvorhen deres Samvittighed byder dem, selv naar det gælder Livet. Ære være Hans Nielsen Sorings Minde blandt os.”


53 Some of the most interesting material I have found so far at the archive in Aalborg is a typewritten extract from Knud Moe’s (1888-1965) diary with the headline “Minder fra Krigen” (Memories from the War), so this kind of material obviously exists. Furthermore, Moe is the only Danish American participant I have come across that has published his memories: I smeltediglen. En dansk præstesøns udvandrersaga (1965) (In the melting pot. The emigrant saga of a Danish vicar’s son). I wanted to focus on soldiers’ letters here, however, so Moe’s story has to wait for another occasion.