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Nels Anderson's World War I Diary

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Allan Kent Powell, ed. *Nels Anderson's World War I Diary*.
Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Kenneth L. Alford

With the centennial of World War I beginning in 2014, *Nels Anderson's World War I Diary*, edited by Allan Kent Powell, is a timely and engaging firsthand account of America's involvement in "the war to end all wars." This account sees the war through the eyes of a Latter-day Saint private fighting with the American Expeditionary Force in Europe.

Anderson notes, "Writing a diary requires a lot of work and it requires a lot of scheming to find the time to write. Often I could get no candles to write by so had to get by a fire. Mine is the only diary I know of in the Battalion" (189). Powell added, "The keeping of diaries was, in fact, against army and navy regulations. . . . While some diaries were kept by soldiers in France, it is easy to understand why, under battlefield conditions, it was such a difficult endeavor and why so few diaries were kept" (267).

Like his diary, Nels Anderson's life was unique. Before enlisting in the army, Anderson was a hobo, mule skinner, ranch hand, railroad worker, carpenter, and teacher. In 1908, he was caught hopping a train near the Utah-Nevada border and was informally adopted by local Mormon families, who gave him encouragement and resources for three years of schooling. Baptized as a Latter-day Saint in January 1910, his new faith shaped many of his wartime experiences and observations. Near the end of the war, he reflected: "I joined the church 10 years ago today. I thought of that last night as I walked my post. My church has been a great help to me. It has filled me with a desire to be a good citizen. I am not the man I ought to be or could be but I mean to make a new effort when I get back. In the army I shall merely try not to lose ground" (163).

The United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, and Anderson enlisted one year later. He received initial military training at Camp Funston, Kansas, and was assigned as a combat engineer to Company E,

314th Engineers Regiment in the 89th Infantry Division.¹ During the following fifteen months, he faithfully kept a diary as his military service sent him to New York, England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany. Spending much of his time at the front, he participated in both the St. Mihiel (September 1918) and Meuse-Argonne (October 1918) offensives.

The book's editor, Allan Kent Powell, earned a PhD in history from the University of Utah and is well qualified to edit Anderson's wartime diary. Recently retired as managing editor of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and as senior state historian for the Utah State Historical Society, Powell has authored and contributed to several previous military histories, including *Utah Remembers World War II*, *Splinters of a Nation: German Prisoners of War in Utah*, and *A German Odyssey: The Journal of a German Prisoner of War*.

This book will appeal to military buffs, historians, social scientists familiar with Anderson's later work, and anyone who wants to gain a better understanding of the First World War. Powell keeps the focus on Anderson throughout the book—appropriately intervening to provide important insights and commentary. Military veterans will certainly find experiences, anecdotes, and observations that will cause them to smile as they recognize many of their own military pleasures and frustrations relayed through Anderson's eyes. Nonveterans, though, may find a few instances where they wish additional commentary had been added.

The diary provides readers with a genuine sense of “being there” as Anderson matter-of-factly shares what military life in and near the frontline trenches was like. For example, on October 25, 1918, he wrote, “I have got my self to believe that it is foolish to run for to run feeds fear and if the shells are going to get one they will get him any way. It is

1. Only three Latter-day Saint chaplains served on active duty during World War I, and one of them, Herbert B. Maw (who later served as governor of Utah from 1941 to 1949), was assigned as a chaplain in Anderson's division with initial service at Camp Funston, Kansas. World War I divisions contained up to twenty-eight thousand men, so it is unlikely that Maw and Anderson ever crossed paths during the war. See Kenneth L. Alford, “Joseph F. Smith and the First World War: Eventual Support and Latter-day Saint Chaplains,” in *Joseph F. Smith: Reflections on the Man and His Times*, ed. Craig K. Manscill, Brian D. Reeves, Guy L. Dorius, and J. B. Haws (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 434–55.

probably not the truth but such a fatalist philosophy is very convenient at such times” (130). Two days later he wrote:

The firing ceased after a while. . . . We had one killed, four hurt and several gassed which is quite a loss for being under cover. By that time the gas had soaked through the whole place and it was necessary for us to wear masks. I stopped to help carry wounded. It is hard work trying to carry a wounded man over a bad road at night with a gas mask on. We made a stretcher out of two sticks and a blanket that made the work more difficult for the sticks bent so. We left the dead man. He had several other dead men there to keep him company. . . . It seems hard to leave the boys unburied but its war (131).

A week later he wrote, “As we passed through this town this morning I noticed a nice gold ring on a dead German lying in the street. I thought it would make an excellent souvenir so I went around after supper to get it but when I took hold of his cold stiff hand I got ashamed of myself. It was a wedding ring I think and I am glad now I didn’t take it. I know that it would have been a reproach to me forever. I don’t need souvenirs that bad” (139). His diary contains a wide variety of emotions and thought-provoking comments.

The war ended on “the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month; 5 months to the hour almost from the time we marched on the good ship *Carpathia* (which was torpedoed on its way back)” (144). Anderson commented, “So this is peace and I am alive. I am so surprised. I don’t know how to act so I just sit and think. I don’t feel like yelling no one is yelling around here. How good it is to be alive. I had set aside all hopes and now they assert themselves one by one. I have a future again” (145).

Two weeks following the Armistice, as his unit prepared for occupation duty in Germany, Anderson wrote, “I want to get out of this. I am wasting my time now that the war is over. This is the best part of my life and I ought to be out making a name and a home” (151). His overseas deployment, though, would last another seven months; the last four months of this time was spent attending classes at a French university—an opportunity that presented itself after his commanding officer “called me up and told me that there was a chance to go to a French University if I knew French. I told him I knew French when as a matter of fact I can’t count to five” (204). Two weeks into his schooling, Anderson reported, “My prof asked me a question in French today. I answered ‘Pomme de terre’ potato and everyone laughed. I saw the point when they told me he asked me to name a kind of fish. That was beat by a major last week.

He was asked how old he was and he replied ‘Indiana.’ Many such happen every day” (223).

Anderson was discharged on August 2, 1919, and attended Brigham Young University, where he studied sociology. He served in several government positions during the 1930s and ’40s and authored numerous books and textbooks, including the influential book *Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah*.

Anderson ended his daily diary entries on Sunday, April 27, 1919, with this summary: “I have been in the army a year today. I have kept this diary faithfully all the while. . . . This has been the biggest year of my life. I am glad I have gone through it. My future will be richer by the experience I have had and the observations I have made” (250). Readers, too, will be richer by sharing Anderson’s experiences.

Kenneth L. Alford is Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. After serving almost thirty years on active duty in the United States Army, he retired as a colonel in 2008. While on active duty, Ken served in numerous assignments, including at the Pentagon, eight years teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and four years as professor and department chair at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. His most recent book, *Civil War Saints* (BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), looks at the Utah Territory during the Civil War. Ken and his wife, Sherilee, have four children and twelve grandchildren.