

REVIEWS

“Once More into the Breach, Dear Friends . . .”

Robert C. Freeman and Dennis A. Wright, *Saints at War: Korea and Vietnam* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2003), 500 pp.

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“I was not a man of war, but one of peace” (259). This epiphany came to Stephen G. Biddulph, an LDS combat Marine in Vietnam, as he described a sobering attack he had participated in behind enemy lines. Near a burned-out village among the rubble and chaos and stench of war lay a dead enemy soldier, a diary in his pocket. Biddulph took the diary and later obtained a rough English translation, reading it one night by flashlight. As he read, he realized that the dreaded enemy had been a warm human being who loved his family and homeland; he had hated war but was there to repel the American invaders; he was a brother, despite cultural and political differences.

In the earlier Korean War, Richard D. Wilson, a seventeen-year-old Marine full of youthful exuberance, began his personal account with this stirring epigraph: “Fighting a war without having your scriptures is like being baptized without going in the water” (184). But his youthful enthusiasm is tempered when he meets a good family man, a Bi-

ble-reading Marine, a likeable person who loved God. Wilson saw him one day carrying his Bible in an open area when a mortar exploded a few feet from him, killing him instantly. And then the hard questions came to Wilson, the questions that every sensitive, thinking person struggles to answer. That day a naive combat Marine became subdued as he spoke this profound truth: “It took me a long time to deal with that event—if I ever have!” (184).

These are just two excerpts from hundreds of personal accounts of Latter-day Saints either in combat or in support roles during the Korean and Vietnam wars. The book itself is a sequel to *Saints at War: Experiences of Latter-day Saints in World War II* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2001), a “triple combination” now, as Freeman and Wright take us once more into the breach with this new “mini-archive,” a compilation of historical materials (both secular and religious), photographs, maps, time lines, feature stories, newspaper clippings, and other memorabilia both preceding and interspersed among individual veterans’ accounts arranged alphabetically by surname. A few LDS General Authorities tell their stories of war: Joe J. Christensen, Russell M. Nelson, Hartman Rector Jr., and Lance B. Wickman. Included also are accounts

by revered warriors Bernie Fisher, Arden Allen Rowley, and Larry Chesley.

But the most rewarding experience is sifting through the accounts of hundreds of virtually unknown veterans to find the often-buried gems—those ideas, issues, images, single sentences, selected passages and, occasionally, full accounts of most value to each reader. I remember Douglas P. Bush's account of his patriarchal blessing—not for its actual words, but for what the patriarch years later told him he had seen in vision while giving the blessing but did not tell him or his mother at that time. I also remember Ronald Billings, seeing the explosion and hearing the screams of a young Marine, "Mommy, Mommy!" And "Tad" Derrick and his Mormon Meteor jet aircraft. Yes, and Stanley Shultz and his jeep named Mahonri Moriancumer. But the spiritual accounts of Judy and Michael Kigin, Virgil N. Kovalenko, and Kent Hansen impressed me the most.

The book's target audience is primarily women (70 percent of the shoppers in LDS bookstores), buying it as a gift for men in their sixties and seventies who are interested in discovering what faithful Latter-day Saints can accomplish, even amid the trials, heartache, and brutality of war. The release date for the book and the *Saints at War: Korea Documentary* (DVD and VHS) was Veterans' Day, November 11, 2003. The documentary features LDS members of the 213th Armored Artillery Battalion, an activated National Guard Unit from

southern Utah, one of the most celebrated units in "The Forgotten War." Keith Pendleton called the members of this battalion "Second Helaman's Army" (136) because they were led by a faithful LDS colonel, Frank Dalley, and all of the 600 men returned home safely.

Both the book and documentary have been extracted from the much larger Saints at War Archive, the only living archive of LDS veterans' wartime experiences. More than a thousand veterans who have never spoken publicly about their experiences are choosing to speak now. Some of the accounts in this book focus almost uniquely on combat experience; these veterans seem to reflect the mindset of the fictional character Frederic Henry who feels that the only things that have meaning in war are "the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."¹ But I found the accounts of the latter-day spiritual warriors much more satisfying. All of these accounts (both oral and written), along with journals, diaries, newspaper clippings, and other memorabilia, are housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections Department at BYU's Harold B. Lee Library.

On November 8, 2003, three days before the release of the book and documentary, a special conference for LDS servicemen and women was held at BYU as a tribute to all veterans of twentieth-century military conflicts, with

1. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner's, 1969), 185.