

Establishing Zion in the Heat of Battle

Kenneth L. Alford, ed. *Saints at War: The Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq*. Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020. 301 pp. Hardcover: \$29.99. ISBN: 978-1-9443-9487-5.

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On April 13, 2021, President Biden announced that the United States would be withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, indicating a shift in American foreign policy in the Middle East. *Saints at War: The Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq* is, therefore, a timely publication recording the contributions of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Gulf War, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The volume is the next installment in the *Saints at War* series, a project dedicated to archiving the military experiences of Mormon service members.

The structure of the book lends itself to undergraduate student instruction as well as the military history enthusiast. Each of the three sections is introduced by a timeline chronicling developments in a particular conflict alongside “Church and world events.” The colocation of information supports one of the major themes of *Saints at War*, the evolution of Church organization in dynamic combat situations. Following the timelines are brief “overviews” addressing the origins of a conflict and the LDS Church’s status in the countries involved. However, the bulk of each chapter is comprised of photographs and narratives of service members, service member families, civilian contractors, and religious leaders impacted by the wars in question.

There are seventy-five accounts included. They overwhelmingly reflect a male, active-duty army combat arms officer’s perspective. The editor, Kenneth Alford, does not reveal the methodology for contributor selection, and the reader is left wondering whether this focus is

purposeful or accidental. Combat arms specialties include infantry, armor, combat aviation, air defense artillery, combat engineers, special forces, and field artillery. While these branches are central to any war fought by the United States military, the focus upon them obscures the role of combat service and combat service support occupational specialties—the only positions that were, up until 2015, open to women. There are seven female contributors to *Saints at War*, only two of which are soldiers. The remaining five are the widows of Latter-day Saints killed in combat, an artist who commemorates the deaths of veterans in portraiture, and civilians who served alongside spouses employed in war zones. The focus on the spousal relationship as a part of these women's wartime experiences adds an important perspective but also replicates the "separate spheres" mentality that pervades many military histories in which women's place in war is detached from actual fighting. Three themes repeatedly occur in the narratives of combat experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan: the importance of priesthood organization to the maintenance of spirituality in a combat zone, the protection and comfort offered by personal revelation, and the parallels soldiers drew from the Book of Mormon and twenty-first-century conflicts.

In Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the LDS Church had yet to create an infrastructure that could account for, track, and organize deployed service members in the region. It "operated primarily as several separate service member groups and individuals" (8). The situation in Afghanistan would begin in a similarly chaotic manner, with service members called to be group leaders by their home stake presidents, leading in some instances to overlapping realms of responsibility in the war zone. This changed in 2006 when Eugene Wikle was called as the senior service member group leader for the entire country. The Kabul Afghanistan Military District was organized in 2008, complete with a Relief Society, with civilian Carol Thompson called as the first woman district Relief Society president in a war zone. Many of the accounts included are those of the group leaders Wikle set apart, and they tell the unfolding of a more organized Church hierarchy spread

over hundreds of miles and bound by a common purpose and email. Of particular spiritual importance to many of the veterans included in the volume was the 2009 district conference comprising talks from Salt Lake City and combat zone leaders that was disseminated via DVD. The lessons learned in Afghanistan were applied in Iraq, and the Baghdad Iraq Military District was formed in 2009. While *Saints at War* focuses heavily on the technicalities of Church organization in the region, it does so with a spiritual purpose. Soldiers, airmen, and marines within a district are empowered with priesthood keys that are not present in service member groups. The importance of priesthood keys is related in the story of “Brother Abraham,” identified as the “first Afghan member of the Church to reside in his native country” (153).

The World War II adage “there are no atheists in fox holes” was also true for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many soldiers in the volume relay instances in which their example encouraged their compatriots to study the scriptures, hold ecumenical services together, and care for one another. Also numerous were the instances in which soldiers credited personal revelation with preserving an individual’s or a unit’s safety. This was especially true regarding the imminent danger IEDs (improvised explosive devices) posed to the convoys necessary to sustain a large-scale, long-term military presence. Photographs of damaged Humvees and armored vehicles paralleled recollections of miraculous escapes. However, not every soldier’s life was spared, and the most poignant recollections in *Saints at War* were written by Jenny Taylor and Rikka Jacobsen, widows of the conflicts.

Though the anthology comes close to orientalism in its depictions of an unchanged Afghanistan and Iraq, much of this projection of timelessness is due to service members’ comparisons of modern warfare to events in the Book of Mormon. Soldiers processed the lives they were required to take, the suffering they witnessed, and the constant danger to themselves and those in their charge through their internalization of the actions of Helaman, Captain Moroni, and the “stripling warriors.” For example, special forces operator Colby Jenkins commented, “my

knowledge of the Book of Mormon, in particular, paid tremendous dividends during my deployment. It helped me to better understand the nature of the enemy we faced. The evils the AQAM did to the Afghan people and the manner in which they lived and fought often paralleled the Book of Mormon's Gadianton robbers" (101). Kenneth Alford is to be commended for incorporating narratives that depict modern soldiering as a complex mixture of serving local peoples and fighting an enemy Mormon soldiers humanized, while overcoming feelings of guilt at harming others and surviving the loss of comrades. Much of this complexity is revealed in the moments in which veterans render themselves vulnerable to the reader. These reflections temper the potential of the projection of a sanitized and idealized Mormon masculinity achieved through combat service.

Saints at War is an important contribution to the growing field of Mormon military history and the larger field of military history struggling to address the methodological challenges of preserving the past in an electronically obsessed present. The decline of letter writing and the increase of instant communications like email and cell phones have altered the remnants left behind by veterans. Unarchived inboxes endanger the preservation of military histories. Kenneth Alford demonstrates how such accounts can be written while including the perspectives of Church leaders, civilian contractors, and homefront voices, showing the pervasive impact wars have on nations beyond the battlefield.

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