An Exploration of the Experiences of Utah Soldiers During World War II

Cynthia L. Hottes (L. Ray Gunn)
Department of History

World War II deeply affected Utah. One group that was especially impacted by the war was those Utahns who served in the military during WWII, and so it is important to explore their experiences. This paper examines why Utah soldiers served in the military during the conflict, their reactions to the various people they met all around the globe (including other Americans), their observations on fear and death that pervaded combat, and a look at what they felt about their time in the service, whether it was a positive, negative, or at the very least, an educational experience.

This study, besides using a variety of secondary sources, utilized transcripts of oral interviews, a variety of Utah newspapers, personal memoirs, published collections of veterans' experiences during WWII, and the Utah Historical Quarterly.

As with any exploration of the feelings and intentions of humans, this study could not synthesize a single construct of the Utah soldier during WWII. Such a model would be impossible to construct as the experiences of Utah soldiers ran the gamut. Thus, this study sought to explore predominant reactions that Utah soldiers had during their time in the service during WWII. All Utah soldiers did not have the same impressions concerning the contact they had with foreign friend and foe. Feelings ranged from indifference to intense hatred. Their contact with other Americans had a tremendous, often educational, impact on Utah soldiers. Utah soldiers who experienced combat discovered that death and fear were omnipresent during war. Utah soldiers served for a variety of reasons, including the draft, patriotism, a sense of duty, financial reasons, and even to realize personal ambitions. Ultimately, not all Utah soldiers felt that their WWII experiences were positive ones, but quite a few of them recognized that it was an educational and transformative experience.