

Not His Battle to Fight (a sequel to *Weltblutpumpe*)

July 23, 2022

Flensburg, Denmark

If a soldier deserts from an unjust army during an unjust war, is he a traitor or a hero? And, if the soldier deserts the army, is it worth the risk he takes? Andreas Bekker must have pondered these questions carefully before he made his decision to reject the German army in 1917.

Andreas Bekker was conscripted by German forces in 1914. He fought in the Battle of Verdun but defected as that bloody battle raged on. Andreas abandoned his post and walked home to Denmark, 830 kilometers through German occupied territory. He hid in the forest and travelled in darkness to reach his family and safety. Andreas' homeward journey took more than a year.



During our trip to Denmark, we traced Andreas Bekker's footprints. We stood where he once stood, one hundred years earlier. As we travelled Andreas' path, we pondered the questions he surely asked himself. Was he a traitor? Would he live to see his family again?

Andreas Bekker, right with telephone, March 17, 1917.

Written in Danish on the back of the photo:

Dear Anna,

Here is a picture from a position(?) in the French snow fields with the forest in the background where we have our housing. Greetings from your Andreas

I had generous input for this article from several sources leading up to our trip. Andreas' granddaughter, Jytte Brikner forwarded copies of several wonderful photos and field posts with Andreas' handwritten notes on the back. Jytte also sent an oral history via Jorgen Kongerslev, a grand nephew of Andreas. Jorgen sent me additional photographs and stories about Andreas. Marie Rogers, a Bekker cousin, has compiled a detailed genealogy on Ancestry.com, which has been very helpful. I was able to weave these family artifacts into the documented history of WWI, to produce a hazy image of Andreas and the circumstances that led to his desertion from the German military.

To determine whether our ancestor was a traitor or a hero, some facts and circumstances must be considered:

- Andreas Bekker was not a German. He was a Dane who happened to be on the wrong side of an arbitrary political boundary when it changed to German control.
- When Andreas was a child, German soldiers entered the Bekker home and smashed his mother's dishes which had Danish emblems on them. The soldiers threatened the family and insisted that the Bekkers renounce their Danish heritage. They informed the family that all the male children would be required to serve in the German army when they came of age.
- Three of Andreas' older brothers emigrated to America to escape conscription but, for unknown reasons, Andreas remained in his home country.
- Denmark was officially neutral during WWI. The Danes were friendly with Germany, but they held no animosity toward France or its allies.



- In 1914, when Andreas was 37 years old, he was conscripted by the German army.

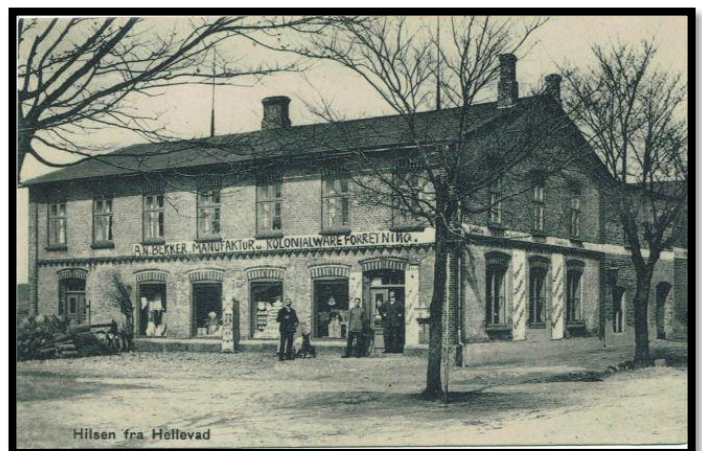
- Andreas had been married to Anna for more than five years, he had a two-year-old daughter Edith, and a newborn son Aage, when he was forced into military service.

Anna, Karen (mother), and Andreas - Flensborg, Denmark c1905

- Andreas spoke both Danish and German, but his first language, and his allegiance, was to Denmark.
- Andreas was a merchant, not a soldier. He owned a retail store in Hellevad, Denmark, selling furniture, clothing, and groceries.

Postcard entitled; "Greetings from Hellevad"

Andreas, far left with Sjaper the dog, in front of "A.N. Bekker Manufacturer and Kolonialware Business", in about 1914.



None of these personal circumstances mattered to the German army. At the outbreak of World War I, Andreas was pressed into military service.

I wrote a previous piece about the horrors of Verdun. The objective of the battle, as described by a German general, was “*to bleed the enemy white*”. The Germans wanted to demoralize the French Allies, no matter the cost to human life. They conscripted 3 million expendable soldiers from outside the core of their realm and sent them into suicidal battle. Andreas and the other civilians-turned-soldiers were used as cannon fodder to accomplish the German army’s diabolical objectives at Verdun.



Andreas yderst til venstre med briller 1916

Andreas was initially a dutiful soldier. He sent numerous field posts home to his wife Anna over a two-year period, explaining his military experience, lodgings, and duties.

Andreas is seen here (on the far right with binoculars), in front of a machine gun bunker. The year was 1916, near Verdun, France.

We don’t know much about Andreas Bekker’s personal combat experience, but the Battle of Verdun was “*Hell on Earth*”, as described by a French lieutenant.

At some point, Andreas had had enough of killing, or being shot at. He abandoned his post and made his way home to Denmark, to Anna and his family. Had he been found out, Andreas Bekker would have been court-martialed, and likely executed.

German Air Force, above French positions:

September 18, 1917

Dear Anna/mom! Thanks for your card I received on September 14. I am glad to hear that you are well at home. I am fine and might come in October or November, hopefully I remain healthy and then we’ll see each other. Love from your own Andreas. Take care, see you soon. Say hello to the little ones and Nora (the maid?)



Ein von einem deutschen Flugzeug aus aufgenommener deutscher Flieger über französische Stellungen.

World War I ended on November 11, 1918. Andreas reached his home in Hellevad about that time. We don't know how he escaped German authorities, or how he survived in the forest during his year-long journey, but he reached home and safety as the war ended.

Andreas Bekker returned to civilian life and his career as a merchant. After the war he opened a retail enterprise in Flensburg, Denmark.



“Andreas and Anna with Edith and Aagi in living room in Flensburg”, c1920.

But Andreas could not escape the Germans entirely. In 1920 a plebiscite was held in Flensburg to determine if the town should be considered Danish, or German.

The ethnic German majority in the town voted to join Germany. The town's name was changed from *Flensburg, Denmark* to *Flensburg, Germany*. Andreas found himself in Germany against his will again.

Andreas Bekker escaped from Germany a second time. He moved his family further north to the town of Vejle, Denmark and opened another hardware store. Andreas and Anna lived in Vejle the rest of their lives. Andreas died a hero, on June 11, 1962, at the age of 85.

I say that Andreas died a “hero”. Having studied his circumstances and walked in his footsteps the past few days, I have come to believe that Andreas was not only justified in his decision to desert the German army, but incredibly brave and patriotic to do so. Andreas risked his life as a soldier but after witnessing the death and destruction at Verdun, his convictions would not allow him to continue to participate in Germany's killing machine.

Andreas was 40 when he made the decision to renounce the German army. Unlike most soldiers, Andreas had a mature mind, a wife and family, and he was not a German national. Germany, Andreas decided, was not justified in forcing him into battle, to be used as a pawn for a demoralization campaign.

Andreas risked his life by abandoning his post. He did so not because he feared death on the battlefield, but because he knew the war was unjustified. Even if Germany had valid reasons for the killing, Andreas was a loyal Dane and Verdun was...

... not his battle to fight.