

1864

*The forgotten war  
that shaped  
modern Europe*

TOM BUK-SWIENCY

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PROFILE BOOKS

Profile Books gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of the  
Danish Arts Foundation

**DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION**

Published in Great Britain in 2015 by  
PROFILE BOOKS LTD  
3 Holford Yard  
Bevin Way  
London  
WC1X 9HD  
[www.profilebooks.com](http://www.profilebooks.com)

Originally published in Denmark in 2008 by Gyldendal,  
entitled *1864: Slagtebænk Dybbøl*  
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

Typeset by MacGuru Ltd in Granjon  
[info@macguru.org.uk](mailto:info@macguru.org.uk)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 276 5  
eISBN 978 1 78283 077 1



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## *Introduction: The veteran*

As the steamship rounded Kegnæs – a tail-shaped point off the island of Als – the famous Danish poet and author Holger Drachmann gazed towards the horizon in the direction of Dybbøl Hill, which looked to him ‘like a giant beached whale in its death throes’.

It was late afternoon on 18 April 1877. Drachmann was on his way to Sønderborg and Dybbøl to see the battlefield where, thirteen years earlier, Danish soldiers had fought hopelessly against a superior enemy. For Drachmann and his contemporaries, ‘18 April’ and ‘Dybbøl’ were synonymous with destruction and humiliation.

Shortly after his arrival in Sønderborg, Drachmann went on a guided tour of the old defence works. A local veteran who had survived the heavy bombardments and the Prussian storming of the Danish position served as his guide. The veteran and his regiment had moved into position on the battered left flank of the Danish defensive line on 17 April 1864, and were thus fated to participate in the final, crushing battle of the war.

‘So, what was it like? How did you feel in the hours before and during the offensive?’ Drachmann asked. Clearly unaccustomed to being interviewed, let alone questioned about his feelings, the veteran replied, ‘What a queer thing to ask!’ Still, the question seemed to evoke a series of mental images from

that day, during which he had in fact shut down all feelings. Hesitatingly at first, then in a torrent of words, the veteran began describing the incessant bombardments preceding the storm:

We were almost at death's door and looked like we had been sleeping in a pigsty, which in a sense we had. Throughout the night we could hear the sound of the Prussians throwing up trenches only a few yards from our own defensive works. The day before, they had taken the sap trenches we had dug in front of the entrenchment, and we had not been able to beat them back. So they were really close, and we knew something was bound to happen soon, and we hoped it would. We could not stand the wait. We were just sitting there in the trenches, basically doing nothing, and were as dirty as filthy rags. No one would have confused us for Danish soldiers. My face was covered with the brain matter of a fellow soldier whose head had been shot off during a shoot-out. In the night, we fired our last shells targeting those Prussian trenches where we could make out the faint forms of crouching soldiers ... We thought for sure they would attack, but they did not. They just pounded us. It was the worst bombardment yet. You cannot imagine the shower of shells that rained down on us. I cannot explain it, because you would not understand.

The veteran paused, as though searching for words: 'It was as if a grindstone kept churning inside my head, and, now that I think about it, I can still feel this grinding in my head.'

Drachmann and the veteran fell silent – the veteran's last sentence left hanging in the air. Quietly, the two men took in

the landscape around them and the setting sun, casting long shadows on the now grassy Dybbøl Hill.

Drachmann was the first to break the silence. 'So, what was it like when the Prussians finally attacked?' A look of bewilderment settled on the veteran's face. 'I do not know.' Yet it was clear to Drachmann that his question had evoked another host of mental pictures. After a long, contemplative pause, the veteran began talking with great urgency:

They just burst out of the ground in long lines. Immediately bending forward, then running fast towards us; the first line with fixed bayonets, the next with their guns held crosswise against their chests ... We levelled our rifles, aiming for their faces, but soon they were among us.

We tried to drive them back, but they came at us again, and again. They kept pushing onwards, and there were a terrible lot of them. I know, I looked them straight in the face, and yet I do not remember a single one. Some were howling like animals, others growling through clenched teeth, as I am sure we did too. But unlike them, we were not drunk. I swear to it. Though perhaps everyone behaves like drunkards in such a situation. I cannot really tell you more. It is all a muddle now. But we fought on the parapets and in the trenches. And as long as we had guns, we used them like real soldiers. I kept mine, but I saw others engaging in raw fist-fights and biting each other's throats. A big, handsome Prussian lad with wellington boots suddenly leapt at the chest of one of our men and crushed his face. I stabbed him with my bayonet; he fell on top of me, and I had to kick him hard to free myself. In fact, there was a lot of kicking, but I do not much care to think about it

... then suddenly it was as if someone hit me with a really big stick on the left arm ... blood began trickling down my arm and hand ... around me there was shooting, howling and hooting, but it was as if I was not really there. I was in a sort of trance.



*Sunday, 17 April 1864*

Only a few hundred metres – in some places a mere 150 – was all that separated the opposing armies on 17 April. For several weeks the Prussians had advanced on their enemy with pick and shovel, digging a gigantic system of zigzagging communications trenches and parallel trenches, which spread like a giant web across no-man's-land towards the Danish defence works. More than a hundred Prussian siege cannon had been mobilised to wear down the enemy before a decisive assault. Powerless to defend themselves, the Danish troops had no choice but to seek cover from the relentless shelling and pray for a miracle, the men crouching in or behind anything that could provide shelter: parapet walls, powder magazines, trenches, shell-holes and rifle-pits.

The position was untenable. Yet on 17 April neither side knew what the other was planning. The Danes expected an attack, but were unsure when it would take place. The Prussians, in turn, were readying a large mass of troops to storm the Danish position the following day. They did not, however, know whether the Danes were preparing a sortie or perhaps even an evacuation of the position.

An international peace conference had been scheduled for 20 April in London, and both parties were eager to enter into

these negotiations from a position of strength. In Berlin it was believed that a major victory would speak in their favour. Conversely, Danish politicians in Copenhagen believed sustaining a hostile attack would garner support for Denmark's interests – even if, as they phrased it to their generals, 'such a defence would result in massive casualties'.

*The chosen one*

‘Am I going to die?’ 26-year-old Wilhelm Gather of the Prussian army wondered while attending an outdoor service with his company on a cold but sunny April morning in 1864. He could hear the muted thunder of cannon in the distance as he received Holy Communion. With his head bent like his comrades, he thought about the prospect of dying in battle. ‘Who among us here will soon depart this earth?’ he silently asked no one in particular.

Wilhelm Gather belonged to the 4th Company of the 4th Regiment, quartered in the small village of Nybøl a few kilometres from the front line. Gather and his regiment had come in from Varnæs, near Åbenrå, twenty kilometres west of Dybbøl Hill, where they had been encamped for a few days. On 16 April they had been given their marching orders for Nybøl. And like everyone else in his company, Gather knew that this meant an attack was under way.

A week earlier the Prussian general staff had begun the process of selecting the regiments that would serve as assault troops. Gather’s regiment was among the chosen ones, and he would be in the first line of attack. Essentially, assault troops were responsible for overpowering the enemy and thwarting any counter-attacks until reserves could be deployed. And everyone was aware that this assignment was extremely



A Prussian lieutenant from the 4th Company of the 4th Regiment who were given the order to march to the frontlines on 16 April and became part of the first wave of attack on 18 April.

dangerous. Assault troops always suffered huge losses.

Gather became overwhelmed with fear when on 13 April he was told his company had been selected to spearhead the attack. In a letter to his parents, he wrote, ‘Truthfully, it is such a strange feeling to know I’ll be in the first line of attack. The mood in my regiment is grim, and none of us can stop thinking about dying.’

At first, Gather had fervently hoped that ‘the Danes would withdraw from their position before they could attack, or that an international peace conference would be set up, and the attack called off’.

He realised, of course, that these were merely wishful thoughts. So, rather than long for the impossible, he set his hopes on being deployed as a rifleman. A rifleman would fire at the Danish defence line from a distance, and, as he later explained to his parents, therefore had the advantage of being able to seek cover from the dreaded case-shot that was sure to kill swathes of the men storming the Danish position.

He also tried to assuage his fears by noting to his parents that while many men would fall, there were always some who made it. There were always survivors, and why shouldn't he be one of them?

Gather was a well-trained soldier. Like most Prussian men, he had gone through three years of mandatory military service, completed in 1862. He had been called up for active duty when war threatened, and, much to his chagrin, had been forced to put on his uniform again. Despite all his military training, Gather did not feel like a soldier. In fact, from day one he absolutely hated the war, simply could not stomach the hardships and dangers on the front. He was a farmer at heart and longed for the peaceful life on the family farmstead in the village of Hohenburg in the Prussian Rhine Province. The family farm was situated on the slopes of the Rhine and had a grand view of the river. In letters to his parents, Gather lovingly and fittingly referred to his home region as 'Vater Rhein' (Father Rhine).

So far in the campaign, Gather had been lucky. He had been spared serious action and felt he had much to be thankful for when he attended the outdoor service in Nybøl on 17 April. Though the war had been going on since 1 February, the 3rd Army Corps to which his regiment belonged had not been involved in any major battles, unlike the allied forces'

two other corps. Still, the months-long campaign against Denmark had been trying for Gather.

It had been freezing cold when they were based at the Dannevirke fortification forty kilometres south of Dybbøl, where the Danes had initially taken position. And no one doubted that the capture of the Dannevirke would inflict heavy casualties on the Prussian and Austrian troops. Gather therefore found himself in a state of extreme agitation when an order was given on 5 February to row across the Schlei Bay and conduct a flank attack on the Danish line. For days the sound of booming cannon had rung out along the thirty-kilometre front line. Both sides had suffered great losses and a palpable fear had gripped the men. To his great relief the attack was called off. In the dead of night and unbeknownst to the Austro-Prussian forces, the Danes had managed to evacuate their position.

In the weeks that followed, Gather's regiment was deployed to the east coast of mid-Jutland: first to the town of Kolding, just south of the Kongeåen River, and then to Fort Fredericia. The allied troops had besieged the fort and subjected it to several heavy artillery attacks during the month of March.

Gather got his first taste of battle in a minor skirmish near Kolding, where he witnessed a fellow soldier being shot through the chest. Gather was not so much as scratched, but his luck was about to change. By the end of March his regiment was deployed to Dybbøl, now under siege by Prussian troops. The trenches here were cold and wet and the men were miserable. Provisions were miserly, and Gather complained about the meagre rations in letters to his parents. Sometimes, he wrote with much scorn, they did not even get their ration of tobacco. Making matters even worse were the ludicrously