"What Part am I to Act in This Great Drama"
Women Soldiers in the American Civil War

During the Civil War, in a search for personal freedom, a great number of women disguised themselves as men to fight as soldiers, challenging the passive, domestic roles that society had created for them. The well-known image of women in the Civil War is of self-sacrificing nurses and occasionally of cunning spies; never does one hear of the hundreds of women who concealed their sex in order to fight in the war. The number of women who fought was small in comparison to the three million men who did, but it remains significant that these women "were there and weren't supposed to be."[1] Although some women joined the military to follow their husbands and brothers, the majority of the women soldiers' reasons to enlist were similar to those of their male counterparts, ranging from fierce patriotism to economic need. The majority of women who enlisted were like Sarah Rosetta Wakeman and from rural communities, like Jennie Hodgers and or from working-class backgrounds --just as were the majority of male soldiers.

Women who served in the military during the Civil War enlisted for the same reasons as their male counterparts: staunch patriotism, a desire to escape from their lives at home and a desire for adventure, or for simple monetary reasons. Although several women joined to follow their loved ones into battle, others, such as Sarah Emma Edmonds, alias Franklin Thompson, joined to escape from oppressive homes. Edmonds, a Canadian, fled to the United States in order to escape an arranged marriage


Edmonds in male guise

[1] Personal interview with DeAnne Blanton, Senior Archivist, National Archives, Washington D.C., August 2000

and an oppressive father. Edmonds adopted male guise and worked as a Bible salesman, quickly becoming fond of the freedom that life as a man afforded her. When the war broke out, she joined the 2nd Michigan Infantry, eventually becoming a spy of much renown, and going on to write an autobiography about her adventures.

Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Lyons Wakeman, joined the military because it provided more money than most professions accessible to both working-class women *and* men. Wakeman, like Edmonds, had fled from her rural town in upstate New York because of domestic trouble--fights with her parents and eight siblings.[2] At the time that the war broke out, Wakeman was already living as a man in order to work on a coal barge, having found that the only profession that enabled women to earn a comparable income was prostitution.[3] Wakeman was soon recruited for and enlisted in the 153rd New York Infantry, attracted by the enlistment bonus and the $13 that she would receive each month.

Wakeman in Uniform

Wakeman, like some of her comrades-in-arms, was barely able to read and write, but nonetheless wrote numerous letters home. She expressed her contentment with the liberty that life as a man provided her, writing, "I am as independent as a hog on ice."[4] Having lived the life of the common Civil War soldier, Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, like many others, died of chronic diarrhea in 1864.[5] Despite all

[2] Burgess, Lauren Cook, ed. *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, Alias Pvt. Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers, 1862-1865.* (Pasadena, MD: Minerva Center, 1994), 9
[3] Ibid, 9
[4] Ibid, 42
[5] Ibid, 81-82

these details, Wakeman's significance remains in the fact that she was female: her mere enlistment in the army to avoid a life of passivity and subjugation challenged women's accepted roles in Civil War era society.

Jennie Hodgers' roots were representative of two other groups that made up the ranks of the armies, particularly that of the Union: factory workers and immigrants. By 1861, Hodgers had already spent a great deal of her life living as a man, beginning when she stowed away from her native Ireland. In the United States, Hodgers' uncle found her a job working in a shoe factory whose employees were all male[6]. It is assumed that she worked there until her enlistment in the 95th Illinois Infantry at the age of eighteen. Hodgers later cited that in addition to the army's attractive wages, a desire for adventure inspired her to enlist. As DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook write, Hodgers felt that, "the country needed men and she wanted excitement."[7] Hodgers, like Edmonds and Wakeman, found that life as a man provided a great deal more personal freedom than she had been born with, and she therefore chose to live as a man for majority of her remaining years.

Jennie Hodgers, 1864

The enlistment of women in the Civil War was not limited to the armies of the North: cousins Mary and Mollie Bell, aliases Bob Martin and Tom Parker, were adolescent farm girls from Virginia whose uncle had "deserted" them to join the Union army. Burning with fierce patriotism and sense of duty, the two girls decided to "replace" their uncle by concealing their sex and enlisting in a cavalry regiment under the

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[6] Leonard, Elizabeth D. *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 185

[7] Blanton, DeAnne & Cook, Lauren M. *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 38-39

command of Confederate General Jubal A. Early. The Bells served for two years, earning the respect of their comrades with their brave fighting; Mary was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, and Mollie to the rank of Corporal. The girls maintained their masquerade for two years with the help of their captain, who helped them avoid risk exposure by exempting them from such things as physical examinations. In 1864, this captain was captured, and the Bells made the mistake of telling their secret to a lieutenant, who, seeking recognition, tattled to General Early. The sisters were falsely accused of being prostitutes, briefly imprisoned, and later sent home, still in uniform.[8]

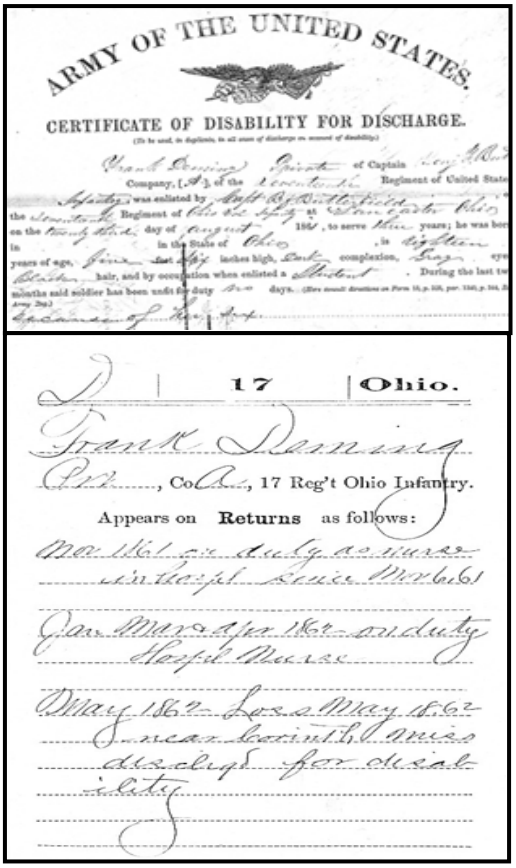
If a woman soldier's sex was discovered, her superior officers, fellow soldiers, and civilians who knew the secret tended to act in one of two ways. One was to honorably discharge the woman, stating that like Joan of Arc, she had admirably served her nation in battle. Another was like the case of the Bell cousins: the woman would have her morals and sanity put in question, be summarily dismissed, and sometimes imprisoned.

Although their comrades in arms, those who knew them the best, attested that the Bells had "done good service as a soldier without at all exciting the suspicians [sic]…as to their sex.", their commanding officer, despite lack of evidence, insisted that the Bells were "common camp followers, and that they have been the means of demoralizing several hundred men in [his] command. The adopted the disguise of soldiers to better to…hide their iniquity."[9] This declaration overlooked the fact that no reasonable woman would risk her life to serve several years as a soldier for the sole purpose of selling her wares. The commanding officer, whose testimony was given to the public through the

[8] Blanton & Cook, 154
[9] Ibid, 124

Richmond Daily Examiner, simply could not understand that one—let alone two—of the "fairer" and therefore weaker sex could indeed "don the breeches and slay"[10] the enemy as skillfully--or perhaps more so than their masculine counterparts. An unapologetic *Daily Examiner* later reported that the Bells were subsequently incarcerated at Castle Thunder for three months, where they successfully fought to salvage their reputations. They were sent home three months later, still in uniform.

Like the case of Mary and Mollie Bell, military heroism could not prevent a woman's motives from being called into question: the psychological capacity of several women was questioned upon the discovery of their sex. Mollie Bean of the 47th North Carolina Infantry was found to be a woman in 1865, shortly before the conclusion of the war. Despite the fact that she had been wounded twice in her two years' service for the Confederate Army, she was accused of not only being "manifestly crazy"[11], but also of being a spy, and was therefore incarcerated at Castle Thunder. "Emily", a middle-class girl from Brooklyn, joined the army with a longing to be


ARMY OF THE UNITED STATES.

CERTIFICATE OF DISABILITY FOR DISCHARGE.

17 | Ohio.

Frank Deming

Co A, 17 Reg't Ohio Infantry.

Appears on Returns as follows:

The military records of "Frank Deming" designate that her sex is "disability" enough to discharge

[10] Leonard, 199
[11] Blanton & Cook, 154

the next Joan of Arc. She died at Lookout Mountain in Tennessee after dictating a note to her father, which appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* with an editorial comment that Emily had suffered from "a sad case of monomania, which had a terrible termination." [12]

Despite her local newspaper's assumption about Emily's condition, her story was widely published throughout the country, with thousands of readers enchanted by its romanticism, her story perfectly fitting the motif explained by Blanton and Cook:

> "…cross-dressing female heroines, both fictional and real, were a standard commodity in popular culture. In fact, military and sailor women were celebrated in popular novels, ballads and poetry from the seventeenth century through the Victorian age. Inspired by and created for an audience of literate but lower- and working-class people, the woman warrior was a virtuous and heroic ideal."[13]

Many other women found themselves in similar situations: upon these women's exposure, their commanding officers, comrades, and the general news-reading public lauded these women for their bold, patriotic behavior, glorifying them as contemporary Joan of Arcs or like the Amazons of the ancient world. Frances Clailin (alt. Clayton) of Minnesota initially enlisted with her husband. When he was killed, she confessed her secret, and was honorably discharged; a few weeks later, she decided to re-enlist in the army, but her train was attacked by Confederate guerillas. Her story was reported nationwide, all noting that she had done "full duty as a soldier," approving of her faithfulness to her husband and country.[14] In 1861, Sarah Jane Ann Perkins defected from Massachusetts to join the Old Dominion artillery in Virginia, and served until her capture by Union troops in 1864. By that time, she had

Frances Clailin, dressed as an officer.

[12] "Romantic History," Brooklyn *Daily Times*, 19 Feb. 1864
[13] Blanton and Cook, 5
[14] Blanton and Cook, 150

been promoted to the commissioned rank of lieutenant, and had abandoned the guise of a man; the Confederate Army being so short of manpower that they would never consider dismissing such a seasoned veteran. Both her confederates and captors admired her fierce, Amazon-like dedication to the Southern Cause. [15]

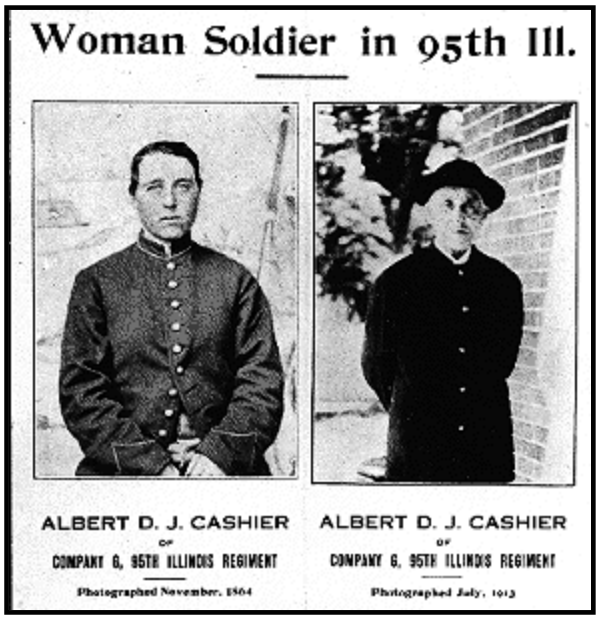
Loreta Janeta Valezquaz, alias Lt. Harry T. Buford, was so dedicated to the Southern Cause that she raised own regiment and led it into battle at such conflicts as the first Bull Run. After the war, she went on to detail her adventures in her memoir *The Woman in Battle*, in which it became apparent that her motivation for military service was not as much patriotic fervor, but a sheer spirit of adventure. Newspapers of the day, and subsequently scores of historians for the following decades denounced her story as a complete fabrication. Only recently has it surfaced that her story is in fact true. In an interview, military Archivist DeAnne Blanton hypothesized that the reason that the verity of Valezquaz's story was questioned was because, "fighting only for adventure was not an accepted thing for women to do. Women soldiers were praised when they claimed 'Oh, I did it to follow my husband, brother, etc.'; 'Oh, I did it for my country.' [Valezquaz] was brave enough to tell the truth and turn around to say 'Boy, that was *fun*!"[16]

Valezquaz in female and military attire.

[15] "Pvt. Jane Perkins, CSA, " DeAnne Blanton, Conklin, Eileen (ed.). *The Journal of Women's Civil War History: From the Home Front to the Front Lines. Accounts of the Sacrifice, Achievement and Service of American Women, 1861-1865*. (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 2001), 106-7

[16] Personal interview with DeAnne Blanton, Senior Archivist, National Archives, Washington D.C., August 2000

Although these warrior women may have all initially enlisted in the army for the same reason of personal freedom, their post-war experiences were vastly different. Contradictory to her original reason for flight to the United States, Sarah Emma Edmonds went on to marry and have five children, retreating to the gender role that she had once spurned. She died in 1898 of health problems that found their roots in the war; many of her former comrades-in-arms were present at her funeral. Contrary to Edmonds' decision to return to a traditional female life, several women lived the duration of their lives disguised as men. Jennie Hodgers lived as a man until a car accident in 1913, and a subsequent hospital visit revealed her sex. Like Mollie Bean and "Emily," Hodgers was immediately declared insane, institutionalized, and forced to wear the female attire that she hadn't worn since her girlhood. She died three months later, and was buried with full military honors.



Hodgers in Nov. 1864 and July 1913, after her exposure.

To this day, women seek personal freedom by joining the military, and a debate continues to rage over women's places there. Many argue that women have no place in combat for "scientific" reasons: women are physically weaker than men, are too emotional, etc, they should not serve in the military. This argument is unfounded. As is proven by the hundreds of documented cases of women who served in the armies of the

American Civil War, women have always been just as capable as men of fighting and dying for their nation.

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