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A Woman in Soldier's Dress: Then and Now

Elizabeth A. Smith
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

This post is the second in a three-part series on women soldiers in the Civil War and during modern reenactments. Also check out the [introduction of this series](#).

I was thirteen years old when I joined the 5th Kentucky Orphan Brigade, a Confederate reenactment group based out of south-central Kentucky. At fourteen, I “saw the elephant”—a Civil War term for seeing battle—for the first time as a soldier. It was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done, but seven years later I credit that decision to go through with it as bringing me to where I am now, writing for the *Compiler* here at Gettysburg College. In those seven years, however, I have faced my fair share of scrutiny for portraying a soldier rather than a civilian. I didn’t become aware of the scrutiny until more recently, however, as I became more conscious both of historical and modern views about women portraying soldiers at Civil War reenactments [*excerpt*].

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Woman in Soldier's Dress: Then and Now

November 3, 2015

By Elizabeth Smith '17

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I was thirteen years old when I joined the 5th Kentucky Orphan Brigade, a Confederate reenactment group based out of south-central Kentucky. At fourteen, I “saw the elephant”—a Civil War term for seeing battle—for the first time as a soldier. It was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done, but seven years later I credit that decision to go through with it as bringing me to where I am now, writing for the *Compiler* here at Gettysburg College. In those seven years, however, I have faced my fair share of scrutiny for portraying a soldier rather than a civilian. I didn’t become aware of the scrutiny until more recently, however, as I became more conscious both of historical and modern views about women portraying soldiers at Civil War reenactments.

I’ve been lucky. Only once have I ever been in a situation where I thought I would not be able to participate in the event because I am a woman, but that one time when I was sixteen was quickly fixed by my first sergeant convincing the board of that particular reenactment to amend the rules that had said no women were allowed to portray soldiers. In seven years, never once has anyone directly questioned whether or not I should be allowed to take the field. I’ve been complimented on my authenticity, encouraged to continue to be as accurate as possible, and never had a negative comment directed at my portrayal of a woman soldier.

Although I haven’t had anything said to my face, I have received nasty glances that clearly say “She doesn’t belong.” Though the reenacting community has become far more open to women soldiers since 1989, there are some who do not believe it is a woman’s place to be on the battlefield. I’ll discuss this more in depth in the next post, but for now it is safe to say that there are some who believe no women should portray soldiers.

For me, whenever I encounter these people who do not believe that my persona has a place on the battlefield, I just throw my head back, ignore their glares, and strive to be the best soldier I can possibly be. Truthfully, for most women who choose to shoulder a musket at a reenactment, that is all they can do. Though the nay-sayers may not like it, history is on the side of the woman soldier.

Though a small dip compared to the millions of men who served in both the North and the South, approximately 500-1,000 women disguised themselves as men and served in the armies. At the time, it was considered improper for a woman to wear pants, and any woman who would choose

to join the man's world of war was considered to be either insane or a prostitute. Whenever a woman was discovered, she was unceremoniously removed from the camp and from the army.



Sarah Emma Edmonds, alias Frank Thompson. Photograph by elycefeliz, via Flickr.

For some women, like teenager Lizzie Compton—alias “Jack” or “Johnny”—being drummed out of the army wasn’t a deterrent and she quickly rejoined in another unit in order to continue to fight. (Compton would reenlist seven times throughout the war.) Others, like Sarah Emma Edmonds—alias Private Franklin Thompson of the 2nd Michigan Infantry—would escape detection. In Edmonds’s case, she would serve for two years in multiple capacities including as a soldier, spy, courier, and nurse, and would remain undetected until a bout of malaria forced her to desert. Unique among the nearly 250 known women soldiers, Edmonds would write a memoir in 1864 titled *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, in which she never explicitly stated, but heavily implied that she served in those capacities in both male and female attire. Edmonds would also be the only woman to receive a pension for her service—as well as getting the charge of “desertion” removed from her wartime record.

The most famous woman soldier to come out of the Civil War, however, is Jennie Hodgers, alias Private Albert Cashier of the 95th Illinois Infantry. Cashier served through the entirety of the war without being discovered, despite being wounded and captured several times. Once the war was over, she continued to live as a man, going by the name of Albert Cashier until she was hit by a car in 1911. Her sex was then finally discovered, but it wasn’t until 1914 that the story was leaked and her secret revealed to the country. She would die in 1915 in an insane asylum, forced to wear dresses for the first time in her adult life.

These are only some of the stories of women soldiers who served in the American Civil War. Although they were a minority compared to the men who served, it cannot be denied that women soldiers did in fact serve in both the Union and Confederate armies. The question today, however, is not a debate on the historicity of women soldiers, but on portraying them in reenactments, which I will discuss in my next post.

Check back tomorrow for the final post in this series.

Sources

Blanton, Deanne and Lauren M. Cook. *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.

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