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A Woman in Soldier's Dress: Taking the Field

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Abstract

The year was 1989. The place, a Civil War reenactment at Antietam National Battlefield. Lauren Cook (then Burgess) had been participating in reenactments for two years. Her portrayal of a fifer required her to wear a soldier's uniform rather than in a civilian woman's dress. She did her best to portray a soldier, disguising her sex so she could pass the "fifteen yard" rule, which meant that at fifteen yards she could not be identified as a woman. The call of nature proved to be her undoing, however, when an NPS official "caught" her coming out of the women's restroom. Asked to wear a dress and portray a civilian, Cook refused and was told to leave the event. Cook perceived this as sex discrimination and filed a lawsuit against the federal government. Four years later, in 1993, she would win her court case.

Though dramatic in nature, Cook's experience is echoed through the many stories of women who attempt to portray soldiers in Civil War reenactments. Times have changed since 1989, and women are now allowed to portray soldiers, but the stigma remains. Women who wish to portray soldiers are expected to not only have an accurate uniform, but to pass the "fifteen yard rule." For some, this is what they strive to do and many go above and beyond in accomplishing this. Others, however, do not even attempt to disguise their sex. This is where the controversy begins and people start to question whether or not women should be allowed to portray soldiers at all [*excerpt*].

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Civil War Reenactments, Antietam National Battlefield, sexism

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | History | United States History | Women's History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Woman in Soldier's Dress: Taking the Field

November 2, 2015

By Elizabeth Smith '17

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As a reenactor for seven years, I have had to deal with this questioning and controversy. Though lucky in many regards, I have seen firsthand how some people would prefer those taking the field—meaning the soldiers who participate in the battle reenactment—to be solely male. At the same time, however, I have seen just as many people who will defend a woman's right to don soldier's dress and fight right alongside the men.

In this three-part series, I will be investigating the history of women soldiers in the Civil War along with the current issue of women portraying soldiers in reenacting. I will also discuss my personal experiences as a woman soldier reenactor, as well as dealing with the difficult questions that arise from the controversy surrounding women portraying soldiers in Civil War reenacting today.



The author in uniform. Photograph by the author.

Check back Tuesday and Wednesday of this week to read more of Elizabeth's take on women in the Civil War and reenacting.

Sources

Meyer, Edgar L. "The soldier left a portrait and her eyewitness account." *Smithsonian* 24 (1994): 96.

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