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Ready, Aim, Feminism: When Women Went Off to War

Anika N. Jensen
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

I like to imagine that if Sarah Emma Edmonds were my contemporary she would often sport a t-shirt saying, "This is what a feminist looks like."

Edmonds was a patriot, a feminist, and, along with an estimated 400 other women, a soldier in the American Civil War. Fed up with her father's abuse and appalled at the prospect of an arranged marriage Edmonds left her New Brunswick home at the age of fifteen and soon adopted a male identity to become a successful worker. When the war erupted, she was compelled by a sense of patriotism and adventure to join the fight and was soon mustered into Company F of the Second Michigan Volunteers. The newly dubbed Frank Thompson, with her cropped hair and ill-fitting uniform, was able to fit in easily with the other youthful soldiers and soon marched to Manassas where her war story commenced. Throughout the war, Edmonds/Thompson served as a postman, a nurse, and a spy until she contracted malaria and was forced to desert for fear of revealing her true sex [*excerpt*].

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, feminism, woman soldier

Disciplines

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

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Ready, Aim, Feminism: When Women Went Off to War

November 6, 2015

By Annika Jensen '18

I like to imagine that if Sarah Emma Edmonds were my contemporary she would often sport a t-shirt saying, “This is what a feminist looks like.”

Edmonds was a patriot, a feminist, and, along with an estimated 400 other women, a soldier in the American Civil War. Fed up with her father’s abuse and appalled at the prospect of an arranged marriage Edmonds left her New Brunswick home at the age of fifteen and soon adopted a male identity to become a successful worker. When the war erupted, she was compelled by a sense of patriotism and adventure to join the fight and was soon mustered into Company F of the Second Michigan Volunteers. The newly dubbed Frank Thompson, with her cropped hair and ill-fitting uniform, was able to fit in easily with the other youthful soldiers and soon marched to Manassas where her war story commenced. Throughout the war, Edmonds/Thompson served as a postman, a nurse, and a spy until she contracted malaria and was forced to desert for fear of revealing her true sex.

Edmonds’ case is not unique, though not much is known about the other fighting women. Likewise, historians have trouble narrowing down their reasoning for joining the war: some, like Satronia Smith Hunt, could not bear to lose their husbands and decided to fight alongside them, while others enlisted out of a sense of patriotism, duty, adventure, or honor. But there was one incentive that tied each of these women together, from Jennie Rodgers to Loreta Velasquez, one motivation that governed their daring, noble actions: feminism and the desire for equality.

Let’s break down our reasoning.

Edmonds enlisted because of a sense of patriotism, a desire for adventure, and general sick-and-tiredness of being oppressed. Victorian social convention dictated that women stay confined, domestically and contentedly, in their own sphere; they were unable to seek the same sense of adventure, but when disguised as men they were given that opportunity. While many women during the Civil War Era were undoubtedly patriotic, they did not have the same outlet to express such, being unable to enlist. Though some made a tremendous impact on the home front and in hospitals around the country, Edmonds knew her purpose lay on the battlefield and, seeking equality, she took the necessary measures to make a difference in the Northern cause, even if it was forbidden. Bam, feminism.



My queen: Sarah Edmonds, alias Frank Thompson, of the Second Michigan Volunteer Infantry. Photo via NPS.

Florina Budwin and Sattrionia Smith Hunt enlisted alongside their husbands, who were both killed throughout the course of the war. While Hunt was never even injured during her undercover service, Budwin and her husband were captured together and sent to Andersonville prison, where Mr. Budwin died. Mrs. Budwin fell sick and her sex was discovered by a Southern doctor, but she was unable to recover from her illness.

Why is it significant, then, that these women enlisted to fight beside their spouses? Obviously it is a huge statement about loyalty, but there is another implication: if these women stayed behind on the home front, they would be at a higher risk of oppression and sexual violence. Single women, even if they had lost their husbands to war, were generally looked down upon and taken advantage of, so escaping to the battlefield was a means of avoiding harmful and sexist social conventions as well as proving defiance in the name of equality. Budwin and Smith would not idle about and wait to be oppressed; they looked misogyny in the eyes and said, “no.” Bam, feminism.

Finally, the desire for independence is another central factor to imply that women went to war for the cause of equality. Some women, like Sarah Edmonds, were escaping patriarchal oppression; others, like Jennie Rodgers (known as Albert DJ Cashier) sought better social treatment, given that Rodgers retained her masculine disguise her entire life. In short, Victorian women were not allowed to be independent: those who tried to do so were looked down upon

and sometimes viewed as lower-class or even as prostitutes. Going to war essentially gave these women an outlet to be on their own and form bonds of camaraderie based on friendship and loyalty, not sexism and domination. They broke the rules for the sake of freedom. Bam, feminism.

About 400 women are speculated to have fought in the Civil War, and though a variety of reasons are given as to their enlistments, they all narrow down to the simple idea of equality between the sexes. Compiled Military Service Record files exist to prove the valor of these women, as do first-hand accounts, such as Sarah Emma Edmonds's *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*; grislier evidence includes female skeletons found at Shiloh and Gettysburg, though little is known about these casualties. History insists that we forget these women (for some, not even a name remains), but their cause is greater than the records we have. They simply insist that we remember their creed.

Bam, feminism.

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