A Woman in Soldier’s Dress: Taking the Field

Elizabeth A. Smith
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, United States History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/113

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/113

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.
A Woman in Soldier’s Dress: Taking the Field

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

Comments
This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.
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 law suit 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.

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

Sources