

They Fight Like Demons

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According to Deanne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, “the story of the rank-and-file Civil War soldier has been told in distinctly masculine terms.” (p. 1). This is truly the case in Historical Education. In fact, contemporary textbooks mention very little, if anything at all, about the role of women during the Civil War. More specifically, said textbooks mention nothing about the hundreds of women who actually served as soldiers during the Civil War. In the book *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War*, Blanton and Cook achieve an in-depth account of the stories of these forgotten women. As a teacher, I do address the role of women in the military when I cover the world wars and the Vietnam Conflict, but I have never mentioned the role of women in the military during the Civil War. Certainly, I have covered the role of nurses such as Clara Barton and doctors such as Elizabeth Blackwell, but I had very little knowledge of the women who served in military commends. Thankfully, Blanton and Cook provide specific examples of women who served, some well known, and some who have remained anonymous. They claim that their research “produced evidence of about 250 women soldiers in the ranks of the union and confederate armies. There were, undoubtedly, many more.” The authors base their research on tangeable proof: the Library of Congress, journals, newspaper articles and literature from the era. Of the 277 page book, almost 60 pages alone are references upon which they based their research. The authors also set out to prove that the women soldiers deserve credit for they served “in deadly earnest. They were effective in combat and performed their full share of military duties, both routine and special. “ (p. 205). I plan to share this point of view with my students.

Blanton and Cook spent more than ten years doing research for their book. They travelled the country from the museums of Antietam and Gettysburg to local jails in Tennessee and Missouri. In fact, they tried to cover every possible angle from which they could draw information. They referred to “military records, government documents, regimental histories, diaries and letters of soldiers, memoirs, contemporary newspapers, photographs and the works of fellow historians.” (p.4). The focus of the book is specifically on the regiments of the army, no research was done on navies. Blanton and Cook set out to debunk the attitudes of the scholars of the 1960’s who asserted that women who served during the Civil War were sexually confused transsexuals and lesbians. The authors assert that they can only find proof that was the case for one woman, and that the rest most likely set out to “seek economic privileges and social opportunities otherwise closed to them. Their transvestism was a private rebellion against public conventions...and was an opportunity to escape the Victoria Era confines of their sex.” (p. 15). The authors later continue to assert that “Any focus on the sexuality of women soldiers is nothing more than a smokescreen that obscures consideration of their military record.” (p. 201).

Blanton and Cook assert that although most women who served in the military during the Civil War were asserting their independence against the strict Victorian Era code of conduct some women served for other reasons, such as to be with their brothers, lovers or husbands. In fact, “Frances Jamieson from Kentucky entered the field at the First Bull Run serving as a first lieutenant under the command of her husband, a captain.” (p. 9). Not only does her story show

the various reasons that women enlisted, but also that some men also knew of their identity, and helped them keep it a secret. All women soldiers went to extreme measures to conceal their identities for fear of courtmartial, jail, or the worst punishment for some, simply being sent home. The most common way for a women to be discovered and reported was not by their male bretheren in arms, but by getting wounded. Of course most soldiers in the Civil War died from disease, and that was a great fear for women soldiers as well. In fact, some owmen soldiers refused medical help altogether. For example, Sarah Edmonds was injured three times during her service in the Union Army. Each time she dressed her own wounds out of fear of discovery. It wasn;t until she contracted a terrible case of Malaria that she left the Army out of fear of discovery. She was described as "Pvt. Franklin Thompson as having deserted April 19, 1863, from their camp near Lebanon." (p. 99). In her book Nurse and Spy, Edmonds recollects providing medical service to two women during the Battle of Antietam, and vowed to keep their identity a secret. Most interstingly, is a surgeon's account of Charlie H. She died of measles in the Spring of 1865 in a hospital in Tullahoma, Tennessee. According to the authors no one at the hospital supposed that Charlie was female, as stated in the surgeon's memoirs "there was nothing about him different from other boy-patients except his extreme fairness." (p. 101). Before her death Charlie confessed that she was an orphan and joined the army to be with the man she loved, who abandoned her. She stated that she "had nothing to live for but her country" (p.101), and begged the young doctor to keep her identity a secret. The doctor lived up to his promise and not only prepared her body for the coffin post-mortem, he also nailed the coffin shut before it was sent to the dead house. "The surgeon then waited seventeen years before telling Charlie's story." (p. 102).

The authors also set out to see if the women who served had similarities besides gender, such as social class, educational background, marital status and regional background. Blanton and Cook found no specific correlations. Many of the women were single, yet just as many were married. Some were widows seeking revenge. Some of the women had read the *Declaration of Sentiments* and perhaps more of these women could not read or write. Some were poor southern farm women, and some were factory girls from the North. The diversity of these brave women is far stretching. Of the less educated women, no diaries or memoirs exist, thus the number of those who served is unknown. Although more records and documents show that many of the women were from the South, the authors find that not to be proof enough to assume that most female soldiers were from the South due to the fact that Victorian rules were more strict in the North and that perhaps many Northern female soldiers would never even mention it in their diaries.

Blanton and Cook devote a majority of their book to the consequences for the women who were discovered. They surprisingly found that many of the women's identities were kept a secret by their fellow soldiers. They could only find three instances in which women were turned in by fellow soldiers "who claimed fear of court-martial for knowledge of their identity." (p 78). Most women who were brought before the provost marshal were sent home upon discovery, several received a full court-martial, and some were sent to local prisons. Conditions in local prisons often were horrible and at least ten of said women died of disease. Many women would just re-enlist after being sent home. For example "Lizzie Compton, who sometimes went by the name of Jack or Johnny...served for at least a year and a half and was

detected seven times.” (p. 115). Some female soldiers were identified in POW camps and were promptly returned to the enemy to deal with.

Blanton and Cook assert that as the war became more desperate for the South, some women became open about their identities with the public and in the military. In fact, many of these women were allowed to stay in the army after discovery. They claim that “Because the Confederacy grew ever more desperate for soldiers, women in some rebel ranks gradually quit the pretense that they were men.” (p. 127). They also assert that both Union and Confederate General such as Lee, Sherman, Wheeler, Forrest and Burnside all were aware of women in the ranks. Some of these generals sent the women home, however, General Lee “made accommodations for a woman in his command.” (p. 127). A soldier under Lee recorded in his diary “A man and his wife went together, she putting on a uniform; Gen’l Lee when it came to his knowledge had them detailed so they could still be together with her serving.” (p. 127). In another case, General D.H. Hill of the Confederate Army pointed out to a group of troops that a female captain, known as Captain Billy “is a (brave) example for some of these men staying at home.” (p. 127). The most surprising account comes from New Jersey Union Army, in which an unidentified corporal actually gave birth. According to the letter home of Col. Adrien Root of the 94th New York Infantry he came across a sick corporal on the picket-line, whom he then helped to a local farmhouse converted to a hospital. Upon arriving at the farmhouse “There the worthy corporal safely delivered a fine, fat little recruit for the...regiment!” (p. 105). Unfortunately, accounts of the event only discuss the birth, not what happened to the corporal before and after the event. Another soldier reported that the birth “caused a great deal of merriment in the regiment.” (p. 106).

During the war the public had become aware of some of the female soldiers. Blanton and Cook state that attitudes towards the women varied. Some newspapers portrayed them as “rebel martyrs”, while others wrote of the women being “undercover prostitutes.” (p. 202). Also, the authors claim that many newspaper accounts are not valid because at the time, “when stories of women soldiers were not available, the public and the press invented them.” (p. 188). Many stories portrayed the women as legends, others as escapees from the insane asylums. The authors do claim that the accounts of the women soldiers were no longer discussed or thought truthful by the 1930’s. Despite the advance in women’s rights during the 1920’s, the authors claim that from the 1930’s until recently, the role of women during the civil war became “unimportant, and a matter of speculation on sexual preference rather than military service.” (p. 210).

Blanton and Cook also give many examples of the heroic actions of female soldiers. During the Civil War, most nurses were male. Although many females disguised themselves as males to serve as nurses and use their excellent medical skills, most chose to fight on the battlefield. The authors claim that out of the numbers of women they have tried to compute, most were discovered when they became casualties of war. For example, Mary Ann Pitman posed as a spy for the notorious general Nathan Bedford Forrest. In fact, she was also a spy for an unknown general in the union. Sarah Edmonds not only fought during the battles of Manassas, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, she served as an orderly to General Poe. She also carried mail during the Peninsula campaign, and later became a spy for the Union “penetrating enemy lines and obtaining useful information.” (p. 68). Cook and Blanton also found death records of “eight women who served during Antietam. Seven were Union; one Confederate.” (p. 14). Of popular

knowledge is the memoirs of Loretta Velasquez, a self proclaimed Confederate soldier who served under six different alias'. Until recently, Velasquez' work has been referred to as a huge fraud by historians. Blanton and Cook assert that although there are definite chronological inconsistencies in her memoir, they have found proof that actually puts Velasquez at the Battle of Shiloh, along with "at least five others" (p. 10). According to the Missouri Camp and Prison Journal, "During the battle of the Stones River, a captured sergeant had fought while in her fifth month of pregnancy." (p. 13). Two women were killed during Pickett's Charge, and upon discovery of their gender their fellow soldiers were known to claim that they "fought like demons." (p. 2).

Upon the end of the Civil War, most women soldiers returned to their traditional lifestyle. Only Loretta Velasquez and Sarah Edmonds will share their stories. However, most chose to return to traditional life and resume their traditional roles. Only three known female soldiers went during the Indian Wars. Albert Cashier, a former female soldier who chose to live life as a man was eventually forced into an insane asylum for it. Otto Schaeffer dies as a result of a fire fifty years after the close of the war, when it was discovered that he was actually female. However most chose to quietly return to their former lives. In fact, "Most of these women never applied for a military pension." (p. 198). Loretta Velasquez did apply for a pension and was not granted one until her book *The Woman in Battle* was published in 1876. The authors state that "although there are glaring inconsistencies in her book, she embroidered on the truth in order to tell a more exciting story" (p. 178). The authors also claim that because Velasquez married several times, lived on her own throughout most of her life and moved west without a family, she "failed to comply with the established motif and thus offended Victorian romantic

sensibilities.” (p. 178). In her book *Nurse and Spy*, Sarah Edmunds will later be accused of doing the same.

What fascinating stories to share in the classroom! I am looking forward to incorporating this information into my unit titled ‘Herstory’, in which I cover the social and political development of women from Abigail Adams’and “remember the ladies” through the present. I am quite excited to create a sub-lesson titled “women in the military” and not jump from Robert Shurtleff from the American Revolution to the WAC’s of World War II. Is it fantastic that I can fill in the gaps with specific stories from the Civil War. In fact, I would like to create an assignment that asks the students to compare perception of women in the military during the Civil War to perceptions of women in the military today. I think that would generate an exciting discussion of gender roles throughout history, and another discussion as to how much those roles have changed, if at all.