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# America's Amazons:

## Women Soldiers of the American Civil War

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As soon as Americans were called to action in their Civil War in 1861, both Northern and Southern men prepared to enlist in their respective armies. These men presented themselves as heroic and full of patriotic ideals. In contrast, the women were prohibited from enlisting due to their perceived softer gender. Despite a growing female reform movement throughout the 1830-40s which included groups such as the Female Anti-Slavery Society (1835) and the Female Moral Reform Society (1836), American women were continuously relegated to the home hearth, denied the exercise of constitutional rights such as the ability to vote or hold property as these freedoms were the sole right of white protestant men.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, while women expressed patriotic sentiments similar to those of their male counterparts, they were disallowed from performing directly in military combat. For many women, their participation was limited to joining activist groups, becoming nurses or, for those women daring enough, delving into the realms of espionage. However, despite the accepted roles allocated to women, some challenged these boundaries and became soldiers. To achieve these ends, such women would cut their hair short, don pants and give themselves male aliases. The actions of soldiers such as Frank Thompson and Lyons Wakemen, while demonstrating outstanding courage and bravery, have been noted primarily by historians because they were in actual fact, women. Somewhere between two hundred to perhaps five hundred women wore the soldier's uniform and enlisted in the Union and Confederate armies under male pseudonyms.<sup>2</sup>

Since the end of the Civil War, many historians such as James M. McPherson have dedicated their research to scrutinizing the multiple motivations of men joining the army ranks.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is a study of these *women* soldiers that should generate a greater curiosity amongst Civil War historians. Unlike men, women had no pressure from family and friends to fight as soldiers in the war and as a result, their incentives were different and numerous. This article will discuss some of the women soldiers' motivations to leave behind the relative safety of home and transform themselves into men. It will also attempt to identify how the gender expectations of Victorian America impacted

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1 Richard H. Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, (USA: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 2.

2 Mary Livermore, *My Story of the War*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2005), 199.

3 James M McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why men fought in the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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how these women were perceived by others. I will be specifically exploring the motivations of patriotism, love, monetary needs, a desire for independence and adventure, or a combination of all these elements.

Despite the recognised statistic that there were as many as five hundred women who may have participated in the war disguised as male soldiers, it is a topic that has been given little attention within American Civil War scholarship. Within the context of women's participation in this war, these fighting women tend to be forgotten as academics prefer to discuss female nurses or the women on the home front. Jane E. Shultz's book is a prime example of this as, despite the deceiving title *Women at the Front* (2004), this study is limited to a discussion about women as hospital workers during the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

However, over the past two decades, Civil War literature has not completely ignored the female soldier's presence. Lauren Cook Burgess' introduction in *An Uncommon Soldier* (1994) and Richard E. Hall's *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (2006) have both presented interesting viewpoints on these soldiers. Hall's intensive research has compiled many of the available sources to provide an accurate account of the battles in which women soldiers participated as well as information about the military units to which many of them had belonged. However, he fails to provide a concise and succinct analysis of the motivations behind the enlistment of these daring women.<sup>5</sup> Burgess' work is a compilation of the writings of one female soldier, Rosetta Wakeman, and while her introduction provides an intriguing insight into Rosetta's motivations, it is naturally restricted to the one soldier and is therefore quite limiting.<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth D. Leonard in *All the Daring of the Soldier* (1999) was perhaps one of the first historians to delve deeply into the topic of women serving as soldiers in disguise. Stated by Leonard, the popular misconception among both contemporary Civil War scholars such as Frank Moore in *Women of the War: Their heroism and self sacrifice* (1866), and held onto by modern historians such as John Laffin in *Women in Battle* (1967), was that '...women who enlisted as soldiers in the Civil War did so for love of a man, for love of adventure, or because ...[of] patriotic fervour.'<sup>7</sup> What Leonard's work achieved was to bring forth the idea, ignored in the past, that these women had much to gain financially and were therefore most likely equally motivated by the desire to be rewarded monetarily.

In their recent book *They Fought like Demons* (2002), DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook took Leonard's work into consideration and incorporated this factor into their own analysis of female soldiers' motivations. Amongst this, my work delves deeper into the topic by exploring the effect of gender expectations upon these women, and how these may have effected how they explained themselves to the public. Unsurprisingly, women were seen as fragile and delicate. Gender determined a person's role in society as well as what economic options were inevitably available to them. For women, this was unavoidably quite limited and most lower class women found themselves in domestic service.<sup>8</sup> The nineteenth century also saw an intensification of

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4 Jane E. Shultz, *Women at the Front*, (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2004).

5 Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*.

6 Lauren Cook Burgess, ed., *An Uncommon Soldier*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

7 Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of a Soldier*, (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1999), 239.

8 George Beard and Lydia Pinkham, 'Gender, class, and nerves in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America,' *Health Care for Women International*, Vol. 10, No. 2-3, (1989), 93-114.

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gender segregation which is reflected in the expansion of house sizes amongst the upper-middle and middle class. These houses moved past the basic hall and parlour structure to one of many rooms in which different men and women were frequently segregated. The men's space included the library and billiard rooms, while the women found a home in the parlour and drawing rooms. Women would demonstrate their domesticity and womanliness by entertaining in their own parlours which they decorated and furnished themselves. This spatial separation of genders in the home reflects the increasing distances between men and women's lives, where women now held responsibility for separate areas of the house. This separation enhanced the ideology of feminine domesticity and the underscored the belief that a woman's place remained at home and hearth.<sup>9</sup>

While prominent American Civil War historian James McPherson stated that there were many motivations for men to enlist, there were also equally as many reasons for American women to participate in combat. It can be assumed as somewhat natural that men's motivations were just as applicable to women who wanted to serve as soldiers. It is apparent in the writings of countless soldiers, both male and female, that patriotism was an inherent motivation. In fact, as historians DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook have argued, the Civil War 'whipped up martial passions in women as well as men.'<sup>10</sup> Sarah Emma Edmonds was a woman who became particularly notable for her heroic actions when she wrote a memoir that covered her experience in the army. Patriotism was a common theme where she 'thank[ed] God that I am permitted in this hour of my adopted country's need to...express gratitude which I feel towards the people of the Northern States.'<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many women expressed the desire to fight, even if they did not quite go to the extreme of cross-dressing. Judith White Brockenborough wrote in her diary about an encounter with a woman in the local bakery. She said that '[t]hem Yankees must not come a-nigh to Richmond; if they does, I will fight them myself.' Judith herself was impressed by the woman's patriotism and dubbed her a 'heroine in homespun.'<sup>12</sup> Kate Cummings expressed similar sentiments in her diary, suggesting that 'if the men didn't fight, the women would.'<sup>13</sup> Of course the majority of women never acted upon these feelings, which would be considered by many Americans as extremely unladylike, and therefore restricted their contribution to the war effort by either staying on the home front or assisting as nurses. Both of these duties were considered by Americans to be infinitely more respectful for a woman in American society.<sup>14</sup> Indeed Mary Livermore, an American journalist and a contemporary of the Civil War, wrote of her disapproval of such women, saying that '[s]uch service was not the noblest.'<sup>15</sup>

The women soldiers, however, were not always viewed with distaste. Some journalists latched onto the idea of the patriotic woman soldier, espousing these virtues to their readers. In the article 'Two women discovered in the union uniform' published in the *New York Times*, two women were identified as serving in the 21<sup>st</sup> Missouri infantry. Charley Davis and Bill Morris were discharged from the

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9 Jessica Kross, 'Mansions, Men, Women, and the Creation of Multiple Publics in Eighteenth-Century British North America,' *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 33, No. 2, (1999), 385-408.

10 DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women soldiers in the American Civil War*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 25.

11 Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, (Hartford: W.S. Williams & Co., 1865), 19.

12 Judith White Brockenbrough McGuire, *Diary of a Southern Refugee During the War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, (Richmond: J.W. Randolph & English, 1989), 99-100.

13 Kate Cumming, *Kate: the Journal of a Confederate Nurse*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 38.

14 Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 26.

15 Livermore, *My Story of the War*, 120.

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army when it became apparent that their names were in actual fact Jane Short and Lou Morris. Both of them having served in multiple regiments, they claimed patriotism as their sole motive, stating that they wanted to 'do their share of licking the rebs.'<sup>16</sup> The *New York Times* again extolled a female fighter's virtue in an article about Frances E. Hoox who was wounded after she joined the 19<sup>th</sup> Illinois volunteers at the age of seventeen. She was deemed by the newspaper to be 'marvellous' as she possessed a 'warm patriotism' and 'belong[ed] clearly to the class of heroines thought worthy to wear wreaths.'<sup>17</sup>

Not all women claimed patriotism as their sole incentive and indeed those that said as much are viewed critically by contemporary historians. A number of women openly stated in newspaper articles and military records that they joined in order to follow a loved one, also a common motivation amongst the men who frequently joined alongside a brother or cousin.<sup>18</sup> Ivory Brown, Martha Parks Lindley and Lucy Thompson Gauss all joined the army along with their husbands in an attempt to avoid separation.<sup>19</sup> An account in a New York newspaper, the *Saturday Globe*, described how Kady Brownell was 'determined not to be left behind' by her young husband and enlisted in a company known as the Carbineers.<sup>20</sup> Another woman, Sarah Bradbury, also volunteered to a Union cavalry unit under the alias of Frank Morton to be with her sweetheart. In an article in the *Nashville Dispatch*, Tennessee, she claimed that she had joined the army so as to follow her friend, referred to as Mr H. She stated that '[He], by his frequent visits and manifestations of love, won my heart.' She was, by all accounts, not too enamoured with him, because she apparently found herself companioned with a different soldier after the original love interest had been captured.<sup>21</sup> Loreta Janeta Velazquez's *The Woman in Battle* details the struggles of a woman under the guise of Harry T. Buford. She fell in love and eloped with a man called William.<sup>22</sup> When the war broke out, Loreta disguised herself as a man in order to convince her husband that she was able to perform a soldier's duties.<sup>23</sup> Many of these newspaper articles paid homage to these women's bravery but it is fair to say that this response was dependent on how well each woman's reasons for enlisting aligned itself with the feminine ideal of the nineteenth century. Women who expressed strong patriotic desires or desires of feminine love and devotion were accepted as their motivation remained inside the boundaries of womanly behaviour.

Acceptance of romantic motivation may be contrasted against an aspiration for financial gain, which was much less *honourable* in a patriotic sense and less *noble* in a romantic sense for a woman to enlist. This phenomenon is reflected in the complete absence of such explanations amongst the news articles. As stated previously, gender determined the available economic options, and there can be no doubt that earning a wage by fighting would be seen as a very inappropriate way for a woman to earn an income. The best source that demonstrates that financial reasons were indeed a possible motivation comes from the family letters sent home from Rosetta Wakeman. Wakeman

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16 'Female soldiers: Two Women Discovered in the Union Uniform,' *New York Times*, 18 August 1864.

17 'Story of a Female Fighter,' *New York Times*, 21 April 1864.

18 McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 25.

19 Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 30.

20 Kady Brownell, 'Honor is her due,' 21 December 1895, reproduced in Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 276.

21 Sarah Bradbury, 'The Romantic Story of the Female Soldiers,' 11 March 1863, reproduced in Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 275.

22 Leonard, *All the Daring of a Soldier*, 252.

23 Loreta Velazques, *The Woman in Battle*, (Hartford: Belknap, 1876), 61.

also dressed as a man and enlisted into the army upon the commencement of the war. The numerous letters that 'Lyons' Wakeman sent home to her family provide us with a clear description of her motivations and emotions during the war, granting insights that would never have been revealed to the public eye. These letters reveal that, unlike many of the other women soldiers, Wakeman had worked as a male before to enlisting as a soldier. At nineteen years of age, in August 1862, she left home dressed as a man and began working as a Chenango Canal Boatman in New York State. Her letters reveal that Rosetta/Lyons' need for monetary funds was a strong incentive for her to don her guise. She wrote that 'I knew that I could help you more to leave home than to stay there with you.'<sup>24</sup> She was told to join the army by a group of soldiers she encountered while working. She did so and with some enthusiasm told her family of the \$152 that she was granted on enlistment. In Wakeman's case, her desire for financial remuneration was in no way selfish as she frequently sent home substantial sums to her debt-ridden family. On this point Wakeman said that '[a]ll the money I send you I want you should spend it for the family, in clothing or something to eat.'<sup>25</sup>

Another example of women passing themselves off as men to become soldiers due to financial difficulties was V.A. White who had left home after giving birth to a child out of wedlock and had soon become a prostitute in one of the classier brothels of Nashville, Tennessee. While the earnings obtained from prostitution were the most a woman could ever hope to earn, it would have come at quite a personal cost. White came to this realisation, who was later recorded as saying to a friend that the guilt and depression became too much. White sought an escape route from the moral degradation of being a prostitute. This opportunity presented itself by her joining the war effort as a soldier in the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Regiment.<sup>26</sup>

Sarah Emma Edmonds was certainly not motivated by either monetary requirements or romantic notions. Indeed, she scorned those women who followed lovers, sweethearts and husbands and was highly critical of the entire institution of marriage. Although later in life money did become an issue for Edmonds, it certainly played an insignificant role during her service in the war, as well as for some years after. In fact, the substantial royalties that she was entitled to after the huge success of her memoirs, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, held no interest for her and she asked for the proceeds to be used solely in the assistance of wounded soldiers and veterans. While, as stated above, Edmonds herself concluded that patriotism was primarily her reason for enlistment, historian and author Laura Leedy Gansler was doubtful that this was her only incentive for becoming a soldier.<sup>27</sup> For a woman, the male soldier masquerade would offer great opportunities to break free of the restrictions established by the defined gender roles. Like Wakeman, Edmonds had already been living and working as a man prior to enlisting in the army and had used her alias in order to avoid a marriage to a New Brunswick farmer that was being forced upon her by a crude and overbearing father.<sup>28</sup> She, like many other women, saw becoming a soldier as adventurous and exciting. There were not many occupations open to women that did not involve being tied to

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24 Rosetta Wakeman, 'Letter to Family, Alexandria, Virginia,' 5 June 1863, reproduced in Burgess, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 31.

25 Rosetta Wakeman, 'Letter to Family, Alexandria, Virginia,' 24 November 1862, reproduced in Burgess, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 18.

26 Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 36.

27 Laura Leedy Gansler, *The Mysterious Private Thompson*, (New York: Free Press, 2005), 169, 172 and 185.

28 Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: women who dressed as men in the pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness*, (Boston: Pandora Press, 1989) 14.

domestic service.<sup>29</sup> Gansler believes that the desire to escape from this monotonous life and to look for adventure would have been a huge motivation for a woman like Edmonds.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Edmonds herself made no secret of her childhood fascination with the fictional heroine Fanny Campbell, who paraded as a male sailor in order to rescue her sweetheart.<sup>31</sup> Many women would have been influenced by such a tale and saw joining the war in this romantic light.

Being a man also meant that these women could share some of the pleasures that were hereto denied them due to their gender. Rosetta Wakeman wrote enthusiastically of her life as a soldier and enjoyed her ability to take care of herself. She wrote 'I am enjoying myself better this summer than I ever did before in this world.'<sup>32</sup> Phillip Sheridan, a Major General of the 11<sup>th</sup> Division, third Corps of the Army of the Ohio, wrote of his brief encounter with two female soldiers caught in his division in his memoirs. They were detected because they had both obtained some 'apple-jack by some means, got very drunk and on the return had fallen into Stone River and been nearly drowned.' It was during the resuscitation process that their genders had been uncovered. It was not merely drinking that these women had more freedom to partake in. The next morning, one of the women was 'smoking a cod-pipe' as she calmly waited to be collected by her superiors.<sup>33</sup>

The problem that many historians encounter is how to determine the level of emphasis which can be placed on the primary documents they analyse. This is particularly true for the current situation. Although many women were keen to express patriotic and romantic motives to the newspapers and in their memoirs, these explanations must not be taken at face value. The fact remains that in mid-nineteenth century America, a woman's reputation was sacred and keeping it intact was vital. Women were more likely to garner favourable press if their sole reason for becoming soldiers was to follow their husband, or because they were burning patriots. That a woman might have joined primarily with the interest of earning money, or to escape the restraints of the woman's role in domestic life, would never have been published in a public newspaper as most women would refrain from exposing themselves to the disgust of the public because of their personal disregard of the feminine ideal. It is therefore left to historians to draw conclusions from more than what comes *directly from the horse's mouth* so to speak. An important fact to note is that the majority of women who did participate in the fighting came from very similar circumstances, mostly from low socio-economic agrarian backgrounds. This would be influenced by the reality that these women would have been most used to performing hard labour as well as living and surviving in harsher conditions. Lauren Cook Burgess wrote that 'women such as these, who were confident in their survival skills, would have few qualms about their ability to measure up with the men in the military.'<sup>34</sup>

But while these women were capable of fighting as soldiers, they were also largely from poorer backgrounds which in turn made their enlistment far more beneficial than middle class women. This can only reinforce Elizabeth Leonard's claim, previously ignored by historians, that financial

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29 Mabel Collins Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman: the myth and the reality*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), 89.

30 Gansler, *The Mysterious Private Thompson*, 27.

31 Leonard, *All the Daring of a Soldier*, 191.

32 Burgess, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 31.

33 Phillip Henry Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs or P.H. Sheridan, General United States Army, vol 1*, (New York: C.L Webster, 1888), 254-255.

34 Burgess, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 7.

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rewards would have been quite a strong inducement for a woman to take up arms. Our look into Wakeman's motivations is a rare opportunity, as personal letters written by these women soldiers are not common. The majority of records about these women are found in newspaper articles and military records and these can hardly be reliable sources when searching for true motivations. When interviewed by a journalist, a woman would be very unlikely to declare that it was her desire for money which motivated her to become a soldier. Likewise, the two personal memoirs from Sarah Emma Edmonds and Loreta Janeta Valazquez were written with the intention of appealing to a popular audience. Valazquez's memoir in particular, was much criticized for being entirely a work of fiction.

Primary sources do give us a broad and insightful look into the possible motivations behind women soldiers. While the American Civil War was a conflict supposedly between American men, this article has highlighted that the very same things which motivated male soldiers also inspired women to don the army uniform and fight for their chosen cause. Many women expressed their desire to fight and even though most refrained from the extremities of wearing a disguise, hundreds of women did not. Patriotism was extolled by many a woman as their sole reason for enlistment, a desire to right the wrongs of their enemies. Prime examples of such women included Emma Edmonds, Jane Short and Lou Morris. Many others, like the men, enlisted to remain close to loved ones. The more scandalous and much less vocalized motivation for some women to enlist was for financial reasons. Rosetta Wakeman suggested quite clearly that her desire to clear her father's debt was a strong incentive for her to enlist, even if this was not the reason for her remaining in the army. Rarely, if ever, was it mentioned that a woman enlisted in order to escape the oppression of gender roles in the nineteenth century. This does not necessarily mean it was not a primary motivation. As soldiers, the women could escape the drudgery of domestic employment and partake in simple pleasures such as drinking and smoking. Many, such as Emma Edmonds, sought adventures similar to those explored by fictional characters such as Fanny Campbell. It is imperative to critically analyse the writings of these women and to look beyond what is clearly stated. A number of non-verbalised incentives could have influenced these women to take risks that no one expected them to take. Importantly, what makes these women so fascinating and deserving of recognition is that they were motivated to be in a place that they were not supposed to be. Just like the mythical Amazons of classical antiquity, American women soldiers were also warriors.

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