

Women spies of the civil war assignment



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Women Spies of the Civil War " it was not deemed possible that any danger could result from the utterances of non-combatant females... That this policy was a mistaken one was soon fully proved..." - Allan Pinkerton, The Spy of the Rebellions, 1883 (Leonard 1). In antebellum America there was little tolerance for autonomous women. Usually females, spanning all classes, were attached to households, dependent on males for status and wealth. Society demanded that domesticity be the woman's domain, any deviations from this constricting edict was met with disdain.

The cultural myth of the model genteel women permeated the fabric of 19th century life. However, with the advent of the Civil War women were required to assume new duties. The temporary shortage of manpower created new opportunities for women, transforming their existence. The vast majority of women met this challenge and mobilized on behalf of the war effort. A critical task women excelled at was espionage, the collecting of information on enemy activity; it utilized all the skills they had acquired maneuvering through a male dominated world.

Ironically, the emphatic notions that women were innocent, passive, and vulnerable enabled them to more easily obtain and pass on military secrets during the Civil War. Intelligence was a necessary, vital component to the strategic planning of the war. Its' contribution shaped decisions and actions of commanders in both armies. Gathering intel consisted of scouting, cavalry reconnaissance, interrogations, visual observation, interception of enemy flag messages, and espionage.

Jomini, a military writer favored by American officers stated, " How can any man decide what he should do himself if he is ignorant of what his enemy is about? " (Fishel 9). Who better to discover confidential orders from officers of the opposing side than women? Who would deduce that the flirtatious daughter of the plantation owner was actually a cunning spy, or that the spinster administrating to the prisoners in a grimy Richmond jail was assembling classified information for the hated Yankee army?

The youngest and most notorious Southern spy was Belle Boyd of Martinsburg, Virginia. She was only seventeen when she took up the cause. Taking advantage of Union soldiers' gallantry toward a beautiful teenage girl, she served as a courier for the Confederate intelligence service and delivered information on troop size and placement she had picked up from admirers. Belle had excellent horsemanship skills and wide knowledge of the Shenandoah Valley. She was able to get through the Union lines and to deliver messages to the Confederate generals.

Her acts of daring were often sensationalized by embellished reports in the newspapers. Belle was arrested twice by the Union for suspicion of spying and was sent to Old Capitol Prison in Washington. Eventually they released her and dispatched her back down South with strict instructions not to return for the rest of the war. Rose O'Neal Greenhow, the " Wild Rose", was the daughter of a wealthy landowner and the wife of Dr. Robert Greenhow, a distinguished Virginia lawyer. After her husband's death she took up residence in Washington, D. C. as a reigning socialite.

Rose's talent for scintillating conversation and her definitive political views attracted people of all kinds to her home. Politicians and society's leaders all coveted invitations to her soirees. The charming hostess asked clever, leading questions and listened intently to obtain valuable information. When the war broke out, she joined the Confederacy's spy efforts led by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Jordan of Virginia. On July 10, 1861 before the Battle of Manassas, Rose passed critical intelligence to General Pierre Beauregard at Fairfax Court House near Bull Run.

She encrypted the coded message on a tiny sheet of paper: " McDowell [General Irwin] has certainly been ordered to advance on the sixteenth. ROG" (Caravantes 64). Next, Rose contacted Betty Duvall, one of her agents, to carry the sensitive communication that had been painstakingly sewed into a small pouch, by stashing it away in her tightly wound hair. Beauregard received the missive in time and was able to strategically rearrange his troops. Rose is credited as a crucial component to the Confederate victory at the first Battle of Bull Run.

Isabelle Buchanan Edmondson, nicknamed Belle, was an uncontrollable, wild young woman living with her family in Elm Ridge, Tennessee. Searching for an outlet for her restless energy she began smuggling and spying for her beloved South. In 1863, Belle began working for Captain Thomas Henderson's Independent Scouts based out of Memphis. She transported contraband: basic necessities, medicine, weapons, and hundreds of letters between rebel soldiers and their families across the Yankee picket lines. To hide all of these illegal goods, Belle utilized the traditional Southern style dress of hoop skirts and elaborate hairdos, which concealed much.

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Sometimes she could not walk because of the heavy weight of hidden items under her clothes and would have to hire a ride. Yankee spy Pauline Cushman was born Harriet Wood in New Orleans, Louisiana. However her father lost all of his money when Harriet was young and moved the family to Grand Rapids, Michigan. From this rugged, outdoor life, she developed a passion for adventure that would last a lifetime. At age eighteen, Harriet decided to leave home to discover the rest of the world.

Her wanderings led her to New York City where she began a career as an actress under the pseudonym Pauline Cushman. When the war broke out, Pauline was in Union-held Louisville, Kentucky playing a part in *The Seven Sisters*, a road show at Woods Theater. One night two Confederate officers who offered to compensate her if she would toast Southern President Jefferson Davis during her performance approached her. Stalling them, Pauline contacted Colonel Moore, the Federal provost marshal. They Colonel realized this was a golden opportunity to secure a mole within the Confederate camps and encouraged her to play along.

Pauline whole heartedly agreed with the scheme and patriotically immersed herself in the role of spy. She began following the Confederate army searching for her "lost" brother", a rebel soldier, while she covertly observed their activities and shared her findings with the Northern forces. Pauline's activities caught the attention of Federal Colonel William Truesdale, head of the Army police. He managed a large network of spies and had a dangerous assignment that he believed she could easily accomplish with her reputation as a Southern supporter.

The Colonel wanted her to visit the five camps of Confederate General Braxton Bragg. While on her mission, Pauline discovered as a Yankee agent was captured by her rebel enemies. After a thorough interrogation, she was submitted to a trial and sentenced to death by hanging. Fortunately, a few days later the Union forces overtook Shelbyville and rescued a weakened and overwrought Pauline. An estimated four hundred women disguised themselves as men to fight in the Civil War (Collins 193).

Emma Edmonds, a young Canadian woman in hiding from her tyrannical father, had traveled to the United States at the age of nineteen masquerading as Franklin Thompson. She had enhanced her strong, lean body, large features, and deep voice with a short haircut and men's garb. This completed her new identity. When the War Between the States erupted in 1861, Emma wanted to demonstrate her appreciation to her adopted country and enlisted. The army seemed to be taking anyone who " could carry a musket a few yards without falling down. " (Caravantes 16).

As Frank, she was accepted as a three-year recruit with the Union and was a nurse in various camp hospitals. In 1862, a Federal spy was executed, which left an opening, someone needed to assume his duties. Emma accepted this perilous position. She had to create her own disguises. Her first venture was as a boy slave; she darkened her skin with silver nitrate, trying to penetrate the lines at Yorktown. She developed detailed characters and costumes to aid in the Union cause. By the end of the war, Emma had played many roles from an Irish Peddler to a grieving widow.

The women whose names are most notably linked with espionage and opposition on behalf of their respective nations during the Civil War performed services, which authorities that benefited from their work applauded, and which those on the opposing side deemed worthy of retribution. These women were from diverse backgrounds, each of their adventures was unique yet, they all shared courage in the face of adversity, the will to prevail, and a fierce devotion to their cause. The rules of sexual decorum that restricted women before the Civil War were suspended due to emergency.

The chaos of the battlefield turned out to be the ideal ground for female initiative (Collins XV). The new frontiers these women forged and conquered in a man's world quickly progressed the women's movement for equality of the sexes. The Civil War heroines gave birth to a new attitude of self-reliance and ambition, women discovered that they could provide for themselves and even prosper without men. The ending of the war was more than just the rebirth of a nation; it was the continuation of a strong legacy of women fighting for their rightful place in society.

Work Cited Caravantes, Peggy. *Petticoat Spies: Six Women Spies of the Civil War*. Greensboro: Morgan Reynolds, 2002. Collins, Gail. *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. Fishel, Edwin C. *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996. Leonard, Elizabeth. *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.