

Civil War: It's Wasn't Just A Man's Fight!

By Ava Cox

“Pew pew!...pew pew!...” That was a gun, shot by a woman. And it just made a huge impact on the feminist movement (American Battle Field Trust). The issue was that everyone thought women weren't as capable as men and that they didn't deserve to fight in the war. But, they didn't all fight. Some helped the injured and sick. Women fought through so many stereotypes and issues about their strength or capability, that it was extremely hard for some of them to disguise themselves and join the war. Even though women had to fight through so many stereotypes, they still found a way to fight in the Civil War and contributed as spies, by helping people in need, and risking their lives for their country.

First, it is amazing that women fought in the Civil War because they were brave enough to be spies. This was a huge step. It is believed that there were hundreds of women that served as spies, and were viewed as non-threatening by soldiers which made it easier to do the job of spying (Civil War Saga). One well known Union Spymaster was Harriet Tubman. She established a network of spies in South Carolina, that was made up of former slaves. Tubman was the first woman in the country's history to run a military expedition helping Col. James Montgomery. The result of the expedition freed more than 750 slaves (Smithsonian Institution). Another well known Union Spy was Pauline Cushman. After joining the Union Army, Cushman was sent to Nashville, where she began working with the Army of the Cumberland. Some of the things she did as a spy was gather information about enemy operations, identify Confederate spies, and serve as a federal courier; which she was under suspicion and arrested for (Smithsonian Institution). Another well known Union Spy, was Mary Elizabeth Bowser, also

known as Mary Jane Richards. She sent messages between the prisoners and the Union officials, and helped prisoners escape. To accomplish this, she relied on an informal network of people drawn from Richmond's clandestine Unionist community to help her. They claim that Bowser's willingness to risk her life as part of the Richmond underground is certain (Smithsonian Institution). Usually women spies always fit a certain description, and most volunteered, unless they were recruited by spymasters. Countless people thank all of these risk taking women for their impact on America.

Additionally, women helped people in need. Many of the women who were involved in the Civil War were nurses. They provided aid to injured or sick soldiers, and usually lacked professional training, but they were very resourceful and made a huge impact on the Civil War (HistoryNet). It is known that many women from different religious orders were recognized as caretakers for the sick and experienced epidemics, natural disasters and prior wars. There were also southern women that served as nurses primarily to help with their states' needs (Public Broadcasting Service). The most known Civil War nurse was Clara Barton (See picture 1). She founded the American Red Cross, brought supplies, and served help to wounded soldiers on the battlefield before relief organizations could make it. After this, religious orders started sending trained nurses to staff hospitals near the battlefields. After a few months, there ended up being around 600 nurses serving in 12 hospitals (HistoryNet). Another known nurse during the Civil War was Caroline Asenath Grant Burghardt. Burghardt was one of the youngest applicants accepted by Dorothea Dix. She was one of five nurses sent to Wilmington, North Carolina, where she had to care for Union soldiers that were released from Andersonville Prison. She was found to be much more lucky than the other women who were sent there, of which three died,

and the other got a life threatening disease from the men. Burghardt then made history by being the second longest serving nurse under Dix's authority. Another well known nurse that served during the Civil War was Hannah Chandler Ropes. She volunteered to work in Washington, D.C. at a military hospital, and was assigned to work as a matron at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, which was one of the poorest hospitals in the area of Washington. Ropes was well known by her involvement in improving the conditions and management of the hospital for the soldiers that were enlisted there (U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center).

Finally, the most important reason that it's amazing that women fought in the Civil War is because they risked their lives for their country by fighting. Some women joined the war because of their loved ones, while others had that thirst for adventure, or from being a passionate patriot. There was estimated to be somewhere between 400 and 750 women soldiers that fought during the Civil War (American Battlefields Trust). To enlist in the army, they would cut their hair short, and spoke as little as possible to avoid being discovered. A well known women who enlisted in the army was Sarah Rosetta Wakeman. In order for her to be able to enlist, she disguised herself with the name Private Lyons Wakeman. She served as a private in the 153rd New York Infantry Regiment and fought in a battle in Pleasant Hill, Louisiana, in 1864. Another woman who enlisted in the army was Sarah Edmonds. In order for her to enlist as well, she changed her name to Franklin Thompson. She served with the 2nd Michigan Volunteers and fought in many battles, which included the Siege of Yorktown, the Battle of Williamsburg, and the Second Battle at Manassas. These are just a few women who did so much to risk their lives for their country (Infoplease). There were also women known as vivandieres, who followed the army to provide support for the troops. Even though vivandieres didn't fight in the war, they still

risked their lives by helping soldiers, and sometimes were captured by the enemy. They were also armed, and earned honors. But their biggest accomplishment was the fact that they were on the battlefield during the war to help the wounded soldiers at that moment (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History).

Indeed, while they could get injured or killed, it was fantastic that women fought in the Civil War. They risked their lives in so many ways and volunteered to do amazing things. Whether it was being spies to being nurses, they made a huge impact on the war and in America in general. Even though they were doing the same thing that the men were doing, they still brought an entirely new perspective over everything that has to do with feminism and women fighting in wars. Women in the Civil War have made a change by stepping up from stereotypes that were always portrayed hurtfully and spreading positivity throughout others by their risk taking adventures.

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Appendix

Picture 1



Profile vignette of Clara Barton, looking to her right of the camera.

