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Our Strengths As Women

With the Civil War raging on, men fought on the bloodied battlefield, but they weren't the only ones that were fighting with their lives on the line. Many women had stood up for themselves and their side with dedication, fighting their own battles as they proved to have a heart as strong as man. By fighting in ways they can support the war-- as soldiers, nurses, spies, and as loved ones-- they change from being the inferior gender to true fighters. The war might have been destructive to our country, but it helped strengthen the pride of women, in their perspective and others. Eagerly volunteering to fight and support, these new experiences outside their homes changed the lives of all women forever.

As men were recruited to fight in the battle, several women had also decided to join the fight, but they had to be skillful and wise. Overall, there was an estimated total of 400 documented cases of women that dressed up as the opposite gender and fought on the battlefield. By changing their appearance which took lots of work, women would transform into men after cutting their hair short and trading in dresses for guns. This had occurred with a woman named Frances L. Clalin, a woman who disguised herself as a man who fought for the war known as "Jack Williams."¹ Every woman, including Clalin, had to do whatever they could to conceal their identities as women, which was impossible at sometimes, especially when they could not show their "masculine" side. Their secret would be blown when they were either wounded or killed, being discovered when the nurses had tended to them.

For the women that went into the fight, many back home had thought they were crazy, thinking it was foolish and unusual for normal housewives to go out into a world where only the

¹ ("Frances L. Clalin 4 Mo. Heavy Artillery Co. I, 13 Mo. Calvary Co. A. 22 Months." *Frances L. Clalin 4 Mo. Heavy Artillery Co. I, 13 Mo. Calvary Co. A. 22 Months*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Jan. 2015.)

fittest live. However, the women didn't care anything about what they thought. Those "maniacs" had their own beliefs they wanted to express, and the only way to do so was to go outside of their homes, onto the lands of fighting.

"...And these were the women who went to the war:

The women of question; what did they go for?

Because in their hearts God had planted the seed

Of pity for woe, and help for its need;

They saw, in high purpose, a duty to do,

And the armor of right broke the barriers through..."²

Determination fueled their souls as their desire for adventure grew stronger everyday. Some had been desperate enough to follow their loved ones to war, refusing to be home by themselves, mourning over the consequences that could occur to their families. With the ingredients of anticipation and fear mixed together, it had created a barrier that had stopped some women from going, but the strong hearted ones to pass through with ease.

As the brave enlisted, many others stayed home, knowing they could not fight alongside with the fears of death, blood, and gore. Although, they didn't just sit and mourn like many would think. Instead, they knew they had to help their boys on the front lines somehow, and that was when organizations were established. Many of these organizations such as the Sanitary Commission, helped aid the soldiers and supply them with necessities like food, water, clothing, and cash.³ Fruits and vegetables that were planted in gardens would be picked and sent to the front lines, along with baked goods and canned foods. Women would work at homes by sewing

² (Barton, Clara. "The Women Who Went to the Field." *Civil War's Trust*. Civil War's Trust, 18 Nov. 1892. Web. 21 Jan. 2015.)

³ ("*Civil War Sanitary Commission*." *Civil War Sanitary Commission*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Jan. 2015.)

and knitting uniforms, socks, gloves, and blankets that are shipped off to the men, providing them with satisfying clothing. To collect money for things like medical supplies and such, they would hold fundraising campaigns or even go door-to-door, gathering donations that could be used to help. It wasn't fighting in a physical manner, but in a supporting manner, where contributions were the key instead of fighting to the death.

While the women worked in organizations, some wanted to have more active roles. They didn't want to be back at home or directly on the battlefield, but instead, they stayed on the sidelines as nurses, tending to the wounded and fallen. The role of nursing soon became the symbol for women in the Civil War, but it was also highly discouraged by military administrators and surgeons, saying it was difficult and grisly work. Back then, being a nurse didn't mean you just put ointment and a bandaid on a scratch. Nurses would treat the most extreme wounds as they did the chores of a housewife, cooking, cleaning, and even writing and reading letters to those who could not. It wasn't a comfortable nor simple task, but they were able to prove their skills by withstanding the horrors of the results of battle as they did their best to keep the men out of pain. Their endurance of the gruesome scenes and chaotic environment of hospitals had created the unexpected which was to have women achieve, even with these conditions.⁴

Amongst these nurses, there was one woman that had received the most honor, and that was Clara Barton. It was when she was a nurse on the sidelines, she achieved distinction among all woman. Her patience had run out, and she had gone out into battlefield to tend to soldiers right where they had fallen. She had refused to wait for soldiers to be brought back to safer grounds, where they could die or become more wounded during the process. Barton's spirit to fight had grown immensely, until she could not wait any longer and endure the pain the soldiers were feeling.

⁴ (United States. National Park Service. "The Battle of Bentonville--Visual 1." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior, July 1863. Web. 25 Jan. 2015.)

*"...If I were able to sit quietly down in the midst of all the suffering and desolation around me without even attempting to relieve any portion of it, then I would not ask. This my nature forbids and hence I must trouble others with my requests."*⁵

Her selfless nature had showed how she cared about the soldiers, even if they were complete strangers to her, she had done what she could to keep everything under her wing. It was during the Battles of Antietam and Fort Wagner, she became the "Angel of the Battlefield," after dodging bullets as she tended to the fallen. Many others were influenced by her actions, following her in suit to the battlefields. As the Civil War ended, Barton had gone in search of rest which lead her to Europe where she was inspired and influenced by the global Red Cross. When she had returned, she had become the founder of the American Red Cross in 1881, continuing to help the wounded as she did in the war. Before, she was labeled as one of those mentally unbalanced women, but she had become a hero to others, during and after the war.

As the women of the war fought and nursed, there were the ones that went undercover as well. By taking on one of the riskiest roles, women served as spies for both sides, trying to glean useful information from the enemy. The people of both sides had thought women wouldn't be accused of being so involved with the political crisis, much less be a spy for the enemy.

In reality, women easily able to succeed in their tasks, hiding messages within their hoop skirts, corsets, and parasols. Very few women would take up this offer, knowing they had to be sneaky, but not suspicious.

"...lying down the floor of the closet, applied my ear to the hole, and found, to my great joy, I could distinctly hear the conversation that was passing below...The council prolonged their discussion for some hours; but I remained motionless and silent until the proceedings were brought to a conclusion, at one o'clock in the morning. As soon as the coast was clear I crossed

⁵ "Senate Historical Office." *Clara Barton Letter to Henry Wilson 1-18-1863*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Jan. 2015.

the courtyard, and made the best of my way to my own room, and took down in cypher everything, I had heard which seemed to me of any importance..."⁶

It was difficult, and that wasn't a lie. Women *knew* that they were risking their lives and the lives of others during every minute, every second. Even one small mistake could get them caught, with the spies becoming the prey. And because of that one mistake, it could cost them their lives and the chances of survival for their supporting side. However, the success could bring in achievement for the women, proving they could risk their lives for what they wish.

The women who risked their lives out on the battlefield and at home had the one same goal in mind. To prove they had the power to participate in a battle between men. They didn't want to be the "stereotypical" women who cower in fear and mourn over their lost ones. These women wanted to help their side of the country and taste the feeling of adventure and excitement. Many others, such as Dr. Mary Walker had showed the world how they could be involved with in the war, having many contributions that led to achievement as well.

"Dear Sir—

I am sure you will not refuse the favor I am about to ask—ie, that you take this in person to the President, without delay and get the confirmation of my rank of Major.

*I told the President of the risks I encountered in being taken prisoner on purpose and preventing their attacking our army when we were hardly able to act "on the defensive"..."*⁷

Even though she was just an ordinary nurse, Walker was committed to fight until death, and eventually, was recognized as a superior. It was during times like these, that people knew that women changed and how their way of understanding changed. They finally saw the true

⁶ (Boyd, Belle. "Belle Boyd, In Camp and Prison, Vol. 1." *Belle Boyd, In Camp and Prison, Vol 1*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hil, n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2015.)

⁷ (Walker, Mary E. "The Service of Medal of Honor Recipient Dr. Mary Walker, 1864." *The Service of Medal of Honor Recipient Dr. Mary Walker, 1864*. N.p., 23 Sept. 1864. Web. 24 Jan. 2015.)

courage that each and every woman held as they took their opportunities that were considered foolish by the same people in the beginning. All these soldiers, spies, and nurses, they were all connected because they were women who felt like they had been looked down upon and given a limited amount of rights. It was all because of the Civil War, that women were able to rise and show who they really were, giving them a more powerful view of their strength as women.

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