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They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War

DeAnne Blanton
Lauren M. Cook
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In the early winter of 1863, a young Union soldier in a letter home mentioned a comrade who had taken ill: “The other night the Corporal had a baby, for the Corporal turned out to be a woman!” The now-unidentified woman from New Jersey had been in the Army almost year before being discovered.

Though exact numbers are difficult to pinpoint, the authors’ own research found nearly 240 cases where females joined the ranks during the War Between the States. With careful documentation and attention to detail, Blanton and Cook deliver a story that has been told before but mostly forgotten over the past century.

Cook works in communications at North Carolina’s Fayetteville State University and has edited a previous book about a woman soldier in the Civil War; Blanton is a senior military archivist at the National Archives, specializing in nineteenth-century U.S. Army records. The authors look at the phenomenon of female soldiers who served on both sides; better records available from the Union Army enabled more information regarding women from the North. The title of their book comes from a line in a soldier’s letter about a battle in Georgia: “They fought like demons… . I saw three or four rebel women soldiers in the heap of bodies.”

The women’s motives for joining were the same across the lines: to not be separated from a loved one, belief in the war cause itself, or desire to live as a free, independent person—an option not readily available to nineteenth-century women.

The authors examine how women were able to slip in as recruits (“All that we showed was our hands and feet”) and stay in despite physical barriers. Several women are traced throughout chapters dealing with life in the military, the prisoner of war experience, women as casualties, and how female soldiers were perceived by the public.

One of the most fascinating chapters, titled “When Jennie Came Marching Home,” details what happened to some of these women after 1865. Most, like Elizabeth Niles who served with her husband Martin in the 14th Vermont Infantry, returned home and raised a family. A few others, like the Irish immigrant Jennie Hodgers who lived the rest of her life as Albert Cashier in Illinois, kept their male identity and the freedom it afforded.

Following the war there was support and interest when it became public knowledge that women had served; that historical perspective had changed dramatically by the 1920s, when Freud advanced his theories about independent women generally being insane and most likely lesbians. Blanton and Cook swing that pendulum back to reality with this book.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (December 16, 2002)

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