

WOMEN IN WAR

ACTIVITY 2: Women in the Infantry Four Corners Debate

She Went Into Battle: Female Soldiers in the U.S. Military

Erin Lindsay McCabe, author of *I Shall Be Near to You*

In November 2013, three women graduated from the Marine Corps enlisted infantry training course -- for the first time in its history. Ten more women completed the program in December. However, to date, none of the 13 graduates have been offered infantry assignments. That's because their participation in the training is part of the Marine Corp's ongoing research into how best (or even whether) to integrate women into combat positions and "certain military specialties," all of which "will remain closed to them until at least 2015," according to the Military Times. Yet, what few realize is that women have served on the front lines before. Over 150 years ago, the Union and Confederate armies' rosters included over 200 documented female soldiers. Disguised as men, these women fought alongside their male counterparts, endured the worst war had to offer and proved to history that women have the physical and mental fortitude required of a soldier.

Who were these women who broke with social convention and strict Victorian gender roles to don pants and do battle? The records of women's service are maddeningly vague -- sometimes just a mention from another soldier writing home about how a woman was discovered among the dead, or heard screaming all night on a battlefield, or captured as a prisoner of war. As such, many of the "documented" women are still nameless or known only by their male aliases. A few are known only by their first names. Since education for women was even less imperative than for men, they left behind few letters, only a handful of memoirs, and no diaries, and I'd never heard of any of them (or any other female soldier, save Joan of Arc) before stumbling upon the collected letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman of the 153rd New York State Volunteers in my college library.

In writing my novel, *I Shall Be Near To You*, I have spent years imagining what these female soldiers might recount of their lives if they could, and I used Rosetta Wakeman's letters as my inspiration. One of the things that fascinates me most about the stories of female Civil War soldiers is that here is no discussion in any of the scant accounts written by the women themselves of how they managed the uncivilized life of a soldier and kept their secret. Rosetta wrote home:

The weather is cold and the ground is froze hard, but I sleep as warm in the tents as I would in a good bed. I don't know the difference when I get asleep. We have boards laid down for a floor and our dishes is tin. We all have a tin plate and a tin cup, and a knife and Fork, one spoon. We have to use the floor for a table. I like to be a soldier very well.

In addition to the standard privations, they apparently found ways of dealing with feminine hygiene, bodily functions, cleanliness, and poor rations, all the while maintaining an even higher standard of modesty that prevented their discovery. It makes the modern discussion of how women could possibly manage these same issues seem even more ridiculous.

The women who enlisted were daughters, sisters, wives, mothers. At least one woman's sex was discovered after she reported shooting her male assailant in the face when he tried to rape her. One female corporal was promoted to sergeant after fighting in the battle of Fredericksburg -- while in her third trimester. Other women moved right up the ranks too -- maybe not to the rank of the United States' first and second female four-star Generals Ann Dunwoody (Army, retired) and Janet Wolfenbarger (Air Force) -- but to positions as commissioned officers, such as lieutenant and captain. Some of the women whose service was discovered were profiled in positive and sentimental newspaper stories. Many of the women whose identities were revealed were lauded by their fellow soldiers (once the men got over being disgruntled at having had a woman in their midst) as being "good fighting men" who were capable and gallant, who pulled their weight and fulfilled their duties. In fact, there is not a single record of a woman soldier being court-martialed for dodging work, committing crimes, or engaging in otherwise disgraceful behavior. Women, in the words of Rosetta Wakeman, could fight and "drill just as well as any man."

These ladies chose a military life voluntarily and were willing to tough it out -- just as I suspect the women who want to openly serve in the military and on the front lines today are willing to do. Rosetta spoke to her family of her time in battle:

I was not in the first day's fight but the next day I had to face the enemy bullets with my regiment. I was under fire about four hours and laid on the field of battle all night. There was three wounded in my Co. and one killed.

She and her fellow soldiers, both men and women, faced danger bravely.

Then, as now, many women made the choice to join the military for the money. The Army was the best paying job around, offering \$13 a month, plus a signing bonus of \$152. The most a woman could hope to make as a laundress was \$10 a month, and typically they earned far less (\$4-\$7 as a maid in New York City, for instance). The military was the only place where women could get paid equal wages for equal work (because everyone thought they were men). Some joined to escape bad home lives and to see something of the world. Many of them joined because they didn't want to be separated from their loved ones -- fiancés, husbands, brothers, fathers -- one woman saying, "I have only my husband in all the world."

Inspired by Rosetta Wakeman and the women like her who fought -- and died -- for their country, I wanted to give voice to the thoughts and feelings and choices they might have had but that were never recorded. That's why I am particularly looking forward to integration in 2016, even though I have personally never felt I could fight in a war. What I am interested in is women being full-fledged members of society, of having access to the positions that will make it possible for more women to fill the top leadership roles in our country. What I really want is for women to be part of the story from the outset, and for the world to know that they've been there all along. It's been a long time coming, for women to openly serve, but it's also part of a deep-seated tradition in this country. After all, women first fought for the United States on the front lines of the Revolutionary War.

Additional Source: They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War by DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook