

# Women who wanted to be men

by ROSANNE SMITH

**A**N ATTRACTIVE YOUNG LADY from New Jersey recently addressed a letter to her congressman asking for an appointment as "midshipwoman" to the United States Naval Academy. It would seem that she was preparing to attack one of the last masculine fortresses not already taken by modern-day woman. Actually, that fortress was breached long ago.

In the last century, more than a score of women refused to recognize the conventional limits of their sex and, posing as men, sailed the seven seas as full-fledged tars, and even fought as soldiers, under conditions that would make many a modern male yearn for home and mother. Several went completely undetected until it suited them to take up the life of a woman again.

One of the most colorful of these extraordinary ladies was Emma Barnes from the State of Maine, who signed on the *James Rae* whaler, when she was 15. She served as an able-bodied seaman for 18 months, going aloft in the rigging and performing the strenuous duties that were then the lot of the deck sailor.

Her sex was discovered when, at the height of a storm, she inadvertently answered a command from the mate in her natural voice instead of the rough, gruff tone she had assumed. After the discovery of her femininity the captain refused her wages, and she took her case to the Alderman's office. She appeared at

*Women Soldiery*

the hearing dressed as a woman—and a tall, fine-looking woman she was.

Some of the questions and answers from that hearing, as reported in the *Philadelphia Ledger* in the year 1856, are interesting.

“Under what name and at what wages did you ship?”

“George Stewart, and at \$18 a month.”

“What is your height and weight?”

“My height, sir, in my bare feet is full five feet nine and a quarter inches, and my weight is 180 pounds on shore. At sea it is rather more.”

“Do you like the sea?”

“That I do; rough as it is, there is something pleasing about it—a landsman’s life is but the same thing over and over again. A sailor at sea is kept too busy to be troubled with the blues.”

“Didn’t you lick a Yankee captain once?”

“That I did. It was round the Horn—I mind it well. He was a big fellow—as big as I am, but over six feet. He picked a quarrel with me and struck me with his fist. I knocked him down with a left-hand blow. He fell on the quarterdeck and halloed like a calf. I gave the saucy fellow just what he deserved.”

“Were you not afraid to trust yourself with sailors?”

“God knows I was not. They are easily managed and generally speaking they are the warmest-hearted beings in the world. I drank and smoked with the men at all times. George Stewart hasn’t an enemy among men.”

The redoubtable Emma was awarded the pay due to her and it is a safe assumption that she chose a new name and went to sea again. For with her stocky build, her knowledge of the sea and ships, and the strength to knock down a six-

## Women Soldiery

foot man with a left-hand blow she would have no difficulty again passing as a man in the cumbersome clothing of a sailor.

It is easy to see how a woman could pull off such a masquerade provided she had the strength to perform her duties. In those days there were no stringent physical examinations. A captain or shipowner took the measure of a man with his eye, and accepted any reasonably hearty-looking specimen.

Many boys barely into their teens ran off to follow the sea. So a high voice and the absence of a beard would not be considered out of the way, and the bulky sailor's garb would easily disguise the undeveloped femininity of these young girls.

Sailors slept in their clothing, and the long hours and hard duty produced a weariness that left them unobservant of their companion's personal habits—particularly when the last thing they would suspect was that a woman was in their midst.

In 1802, a Mrs. Cola served on board a British man-of-war as a common sailor. When she told her story she became famous and opened a coffee house which became a rendezvous for seamen.

A 14-year-old Cornwall girl, Elizabeth Bowden, on being left an orphan went up to London to search for a way of making a living. Unable to find work, she disguised herself as a young boy and walked to Falmouth where she enlisted as a "ship's boy" on board His Majesty's ship-of-war *Hazard*. She did "good service aloft and below."

She had never learned to swim, however, and one day while she was serving as oarsman in one of the ship's boats she was thrown into the water when the boat capsized in heavy seas. She nearly drowned, and in the process of reviving her it was discovered that she was a girl.

## *Women Soldiery*

Dismissed from the service, according to an old account of the case, "by the kindness of the officers, the poor girl was placed in a proper position."

In 1815, a Negro woman admitted that she had served 11 years on the British war vessel *Queen Charlotte*. Listed under the name William Brown, she had become so expert a sailor that she was promoted to captain of the foretop.

She was described as "quiet, almost surly," certainly not qualities associated with the loquaciousness of the lighthearted female. In the entire 11 years her secret was never once suspected.

It is understandable how these women, even in the intimacy of the foc'sle, carried off their masquerade with so many factors in their favor. But the task of those who disguised themselves as soldiers was infinitely more difficult. For not only did they have to undergo the arduous life of a soldier but they had to face the test of combat and of living under battle conditions.

One, a Mary Smith, served for five years in the 24th Iowa Infantry and carefully saved her wages. When she was mustered out she bought land in northern Iowa and used the remainder of her savings to go to school.

When she finally fell in love she felt she must tell her sweetheart about her past life. He refused to believe her at first. But when he checked the records, from the information she gave him, he found her story completely true. He married her and she bore him a large family.

When the Civil War broke out, a Brooklyn girl, obsessed with the story of Joan of Arc, became convinced that voices of destiny were calling her to duplicate the adventures of Joan. Her family tried to

*Women Soldiery*

dissuade her but she ran away and joined the drum corps of a Michigan regiment. She was wounded at the Battle of Chickamauga.

In attending her wounds, it was discovered that she was a young girl. Learning that her wounds were fatal, she dictated this note to her father:

“Forgive your dying daughter. I have but a few moments to live. My native soil drinks my blood. I expected to deliver my country but the fates would not have it so. I am content to die. Pray, pa, forgive me. Tell ma to kiss my daguerreotype. “Emily.  
“P.S. Give my watch to little Eph.”

**P**ROBABLY the most fabulous of all these modern Amazons was Madame Loreta Janeta Velazquez. Daughter of a Spanish father and a French-American mother, she was born in Cuba and moved with her family to Mexico when she was still a child. Later, she was sent to the United States and educated in a convent in the South. She, too, was fascinated by Joan of Arc, by military strategy and heroic exploits in battle.

She rebelled against the match her parents had arranged for her and eloped with a young army officer. When the Civil War broke out, her husband reluctantly resigned from the U.S. Army and joined the Confederate forces.

Madame Velazquez had borne three children, all of whom died and, driven partly by grief and partly by the urge to emulate Joan of Arc, she determined to follow her husband into battle. When he positively refused to allow her to accompany him, she decided to accomplish her purpose alone, and set out for New Orleans.

In her memoirs, Madame Velazquez writes: “As soon as I got to

## *Women Soldiery*

New Orleans, I went to an old French army tailor in Barrack Street . . . who understood how to mind his own business by not bothering himself too much about other people's affairs, and had him make for me half a dozen fine wire net shields.

"These I wore next to my skin, and they proved very satisfactory in concealing my true form, and in giving me something of the shape of a man, while they were by no means uncomfortable . . . A woman's waist, as a general thing, is tapering, and her hips are very large in comparison with those of a man, so that if I had undertaken to wear pantaloons without some such contrivance, they would have drawn in at the waist and revealed my true form . . .

"So many men have weak and feminine voices that, provided the clothing is properly constructed and put on right, and the disguise in other respects is well arranged, a woman with even a very high-pitched voice need have very little to fear on that score."

Madame Velazquez wore a mustache and an Imperial goatee, and after she assumed her disguise went in company of a new acquaintance to visit a family. She had a bad moment when the mustache became freighted with buttermilk and was about, she thought, to come off. Her fears proved unjustified as she discovered that the beard and mustache were difficult to remove even with the aid of alcohol.

So effective was her disguise that when she presented herself to her husband he failed to recognize her. Relenting, he undertook to train the troops she had recruited and was killed a short time later when a carbine exploded in his hand.

In company with her manservant Bob (who never once suspected her

## *Women Soldiery*

sex) and a battalion of 236 men, Madame Velazquez fought in the battles of Bull Run and Ball's Bluff. Chafing under the boredom of a lull between battles, she disguised herself as a *woman* and went to Washington where she met the Secretary of War and Mr. Lincoln. ("I could not dislike him," she reported.) She learned much about the movement of Federal troops in the East and 13 days later she was back in uniform.

She soon found that in her guise as a dashing Confederate officer she was very attractive to women. To avoid embarrassment she told each admirer, "I don't want to deceive you. The fact is, I am as good as married already." Producing a young lady's photograph from her pocket, she added, "I expect to be married to this lady after the war."

Her sex was discovered as the result of a wound she received at the Battle of Shiloh. "One of the principal causes of my detection . . . was that my apparatus got out of order, so that I was forced to dispense with it," she wrote. "I was to blame, too, for permitting myself to grow careless, and not always being on my guard."

What impelled these women to lead such bizarre lives? If pressed for a reason they might have said they wanted adventure, or life in the open air. Some would have cited religious convictions; or that they, like Joan of Arc, were driven by voices of destiny. Madame Velazquez wrote of her childhood: "I wished that I was a man, such a man as Columbus or Captain Cook, and could discover new worlds, or explore unknown regions of the earth."

But most of them, after experiencing the world as men, were content to live out their lives as women.

Today, with stringent physical examinations, the clean-shaven face,

## *Women Soldiery*

the higher age level required for military service, it would be virtually impossible for a modern woman to duplicate the exploits of these adventuresses.

Many of them lost their lives trying to fulfill their mistaken destiny. It was an unselfish sacrifice no matter how misguided.