

Sarah Emma Edmonds

(1842-1898)



Emma Edmonds was one of approximately 400 women who succeeded in enlisting in the army (either Union or Confederate) during the Civil War. Her uniqueness is that she not only succeeded in remaining in the army for several years, but was also eminently successful as a Union spy-all while impersonating a man.

Born in Nova Scotia, Emma had a very difficult early life. Her father greatly resented the fact that she was not born a boy and subsequently he treated her badly in her early life. To counter his temper Emma did all she could to prove that she was in fact a boy underneath her femininity. Finally the father's treatment got so abusive that Emma fled from her home to the United States where she quickly adapted to a new life. The United States became her country and it was a natural thing for her to want to defend "her country" when the war began.

Emma was living in Flint, Michigan, when the first call for Union enlistments went out. She wanted to answer the call. So she cropped her hair, got a man's suit of clothing, took the name of Frank Thompson and tried to enlist. It took her four tries

but finally she did in fact get sworn into the Union Army (at that time the physical consisted merely of asking the enlistee questions-no medical examination). On April 25, 1861, Emma Edmonds alias Frank Thompson became a male nurse in the Second Volunteers of the United States Army.

After training in Washington, D.C., Emma's unit was sent south to be part of McClellan's campaign in Virginia. Private Thompson (Emma) was assigned as a male nurse to the hospital unit of the 2nd Michigan Volunteers and had no trouble in maintaining her masculine masquerade. Even before the hostilities erupted on a full scale two events occurred that changed Private Thompson's life forever. The events were:

1. A Union agent working in Richmond for McClellan was caught and faced a firing squad. This left a void in the intelligence gathering for McClellan.
2. A young officer, named James Vesey, who Emma had known back in Canada, was killed on a patrol. Emma, not knowing this, went to see him and arrived at his unit just as his funeral was about to begin.

As a result of these events, when the word went out that McClellan's staff was looking for a person to act as a spy prior to the campaign-Private Frank Thompson volunteered. She studied all she could find on weapons, tactics, local geography and military personalities and when interviewed for the position, Private

Thompson so impressed the staff that the position was his (hers).

Prior to her first mission, Private Thompson had to devise a disguise that would not alert the Confederates to her real mission and she decided to enter the Confederacy as a black man. Assisted by the wife of the local chaplain, the only person knowing her true identity, she used silver nitrate to darken her skin to the point that the doctor she worked for in the hospital did not recognize her. She donned men's clothing along with a black minstrel wig--chose the assumed name of "Cuff"--and departed on her first mission.



Once on the Confederate front she was soon assigned to work on the ramparts being built by the local Negroes to counter McClellan. Her hands were so blistered after the first day that she convinced a fellow slave to swap jobs with her and the second day she worked in the kitchen and all the time she kept her eyes and ears open. She learned a great deal about the morale of the troops, the size of the army, weapons available, and even discovered the "Quaker guns" (Logs painted black to look like cannons from afar) that were to be used at Yorktown.

After the second day, she was luckily assigned as a Confederate picket, which allowed her to escape and return to the Union side. The information she delivered was well received and she even had a personal interview with McClellan--after which she returned to duty as a male nurse in the hospital unit--but not for long.

About two months later, she once again was ordered to infiltrate the Confederate lines. She did not want to return as "Cuff," so she went as a fat Irish peddler woman with the name of Bridget O'Shea. Once again she successfully gained admittance to the Confederate camps--sold some of her wares and garnered as much information as she could. She returned to the Union camp not only with the information but with a beautiful horse from the Confederate camp, that she named Rebel. In the process of returning on this trip, Private Frank Thompson was wounded in the arm, but managed to stay in the saddle and elude the Confederates in the chase.

With the battle in Virginia slowing down, the Second Michigan was transferred to the Shenandoah Valley, in Virginia, to support the efforts of General Philip Sheridan. Private Thompson's reputation as a nurse and also as a spy preceded the transfer and Private Thompson soon found new territory for spying. On several occasions Emma went behind the Confederate lines as "Cuff," a fellow of whom Emma herself said, "I truly admire the little fellow--he's a plucky one; got his share of grit."

In August of 1862, Private Thompson again went behind enemy lines and this time Emma went as a black mammy complete with the black face and the bandanna. On this trip she became a laundress in the camp and while cleaning an officer's coat a packet of official papers fell out of his pocket. Emma quickly picked them up and decided it was time to return to the Union side with the packet. She did and the officers were delighted with the information she had garnered.

At the end of 1862, her unit was transferred and this time they were sent to the Ninth Corps, commanded by General Ambrose Burnside, near Louisville, Kentucky. As before, the reputation of Private Thompson preceded the transfer and his secret missions continued in the new area. Here he was asked to

assume the role of a young man with Southern sympathies by the name of Charles Mayberry, and go to Louisville to assist in identifying the Southern spy network in the town. Once again, Private Thompson succeeded in his mission-this time just prior to the unit's transfer to the army of General Grant in preparation for the battle of Vicksburg.

Under General Grant, Private Thompson worked long hours in the military hospital until a real dilemma arose. She became ill with malaria and could not admit herself to the hospital where her true identity would be discovered. After much soul-searching Emma decided that she had to leave camp for awhile and recover in a private hospital. Arriving in Cairo, Illinois, she once again became a woman and checked herself into a hospital for treatment of malaria. Once recovered Emma planned to don her uniform and rejoin her unit-that is until she read the army bulletins posted in the window of the Cairo newspaper office. There on the list of deserters from the Union army was the name of Private Frank Thompson.

With the last of her funds, Emma Edmonds bought a train ticket to Washington where she worked as a nurse until the end of the war. There would be no more secret missions for Private Frank Thompson to add to the eleven successful missions in his career.

After the war Emma wrote her memoirs titled *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, which became a very popular book selling thousands of copies. Emma gave all of her profits from the book to the U.S. war relief fund. Once the book was completed Emma became homesick for her native Canada; when she returned there she found love. In 1867 Emma married Linus Seely and went back to the United States, initially to Cleveland, Ohio. The marriage was happy, and Emma raised three sons, one of whom enlisted in the army "just like Mama did."

While happy in her family life Emma continued to brood over being branded a deserter in the Civil War. With the encouragement of her friends she petitioned the War Department for a full review of her case. The case was debated and on March 28, 1884, the House of Representatives passed House Bill Number 5335 validating Mrs. Seely's case. The House Bill includes the following statements:

"Truth is oftentimes stranger than fiction, and now comes the sequel, Sarah E. Edmonds, now Sarah E. Seelye, alias Franklin Thompson, is now asking this Congress to grant her relief by way of a pension on account of fading health, which she avers had its incurrence and is the sequence of the days and nights she spent in the swamps of the Chickahominy in the days she spent soldiering.

That Franklin Thompson and Mrs. Sarah E.E. Seelye are one and the same person is established by abundance of proof and beyond a doubt. She submits a statement . . . and also the testimony of ten credible witnesses, men of intelligence, holding places of high honor and trust, who positively swear she is the identical Franklin Thompson. . . ."

On 5 July 1884, a special act of Congress granted Emma Edmonds alias Frank Thompson an honorable discharge from the army, plus a bonus and a veteran's pension of twelve dollars a month. The resulting Special Act of Congress read:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of Interior is hereby, authorized and directed to place on the pension roll, the name of Sarah E. E. Seelye, alias Frank Thompson, who was late a private in Company E, Second Regiment of Michigan Infantry Volunteers, at the rate of twelve dollars per month.

Approved, July 5, 1884

Now satisfied Emma lived out the rest of her life in La Porte, Texas, where she died on September 5, 1889. She is buried in the military section of Washington Cemetery in Houston, Texas. In honor of her duty and devotion to her country she is the only female member of the organization formed after the Civil War by Union veterans-The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). In her own words Emma Edmonds said of her adventures:

"I am naturally fond of adventure, a little ambitious, and a good deal romantic-but patriotism was the true secret of my success."



Sources:

Reit, Seymour; Behind Enemy Lines – Harcourt publishers

Seguin, Marilyn; Where Duty Calls; The Story of Emma Edmonds Soldier and Spy in the Union Army – Branden Publishers

Edmonds, Sarah Emma; Memoirs of a Soldier Nurse and Spy – A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army – Northern Illinois University Press

For more information you can begin with:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Emma_Edmonds