

## Never to be Forgotten: The Tale of Women Spies During the Civil War

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### Abstract

Wall provides an overview of the lives of women, who worked as spies, during the Civil War. The paper specifically covers the stories of four women, Belle Boyd, Elizabeth Van Lew, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, and Sarah Emma Edmonds. Each of these women's experiences during the war were unique to them, but at the same time similar. The paper goes into detail explaining how all of the women were committed to their cause, held a degree of power in the war, and their fates after the war were eerily similar regardless of which side they were on. The evidence used to explain the crucial work these women did and how they were committed, had power, and how their fates were similar is heavily primary documents. The documents include the women's journals and writings after and during the war and newspaper articles during and after the war. By using these sources evidence is found to support the case that even though the women were on different sides during the conflict they had a lot of similar experiences.

Both the United States of America and the Confederate States of America had women working as spies. These women came from different backgrounds and worked for opposite sides of the conflict, but they had more similarities with each other than differences. All of them were committed to their cause, held a degree of power in the war, and their fates after the war were eerily similar regardless of which side they were on.

These women were strong, determined, and committed to their mission, and participated in many aspects of the Civil War. Many worked as both spies and nurses during the war, while a select few put on a uniform and fought in battle. The female spy Loreta Janeta Velazquez explains why women were able to work in so many different realms during the fighting, "A woman labors under some disadvantages in an attempt to fight her own way in the world, and at the same time, from the mere fact that she is a woman, she can often do things that a man cannot."<sup>1</sup> As espionage agents, the women would cross into enemy territory as either themselves or by wearing a disguise. Due to the fact that they were women, many people would not suspect them and the women were able to glean important information for their countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Loreta Janeta Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle: A Narrative of the Exploits...* ed. By C. J. Worthington, (Dustin, Gilman & Co., Richmond.; 1876), 130.

During their times as spies and soldiers many women received the honor of rank in the military. For example Belle Boyd became a Captain in the Confederate Army.<sup>2</sup> For this reason the term soldier can be appointed to these women. Although not all of them were on the front lines, all of them were risking their lives for their country.

Here, four main women will be considered in depth: Belle Boyd, Elizabeth Van Lew, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, and Sarah Emma Edmonds. Each of these women played a crucial role in the war that may never be fully appreciated.

Belle Boyd was born in Martinsburg, Virginia, in 1844.<sup>3</sup> In her narrative Boyd describes her life as a child. When she became of age she was sent to school and later made her *entrée* into society at 16 in Washington D.C.<sup>4</sup> It was not long until Belle Boyd's "rebel ways" would begin. At the beginning of the Civil War Boyd's father quickly enlisted. As Boyd puts it, "my father was one of the first to volunteer."<sup>5</sup> Soon after, the Union Army gained control of Boyd's home town. It was here that Belle Boyd's career began.

Boyd's first of many negative meetings with the Union began on July 4, 1861, after the Union had entered Martinsburg, Virginia.<sup>6</sup> It was on this day that Belle Boyd, at the age of 17, fired her first shot at the Union Army. During the Fourth of July celebration Union soldiers, while intoxicated, heard that there were Confederate flags hanging in Belle Boyd's room. The soldiers went to the Boyd home with the intent of destroying the flags.<sup>7</sup> This plan was spoiled by Belle Boyd's maid, Boyd explains, "Fortunately for us [ . . . ] my negro maid promptly rushed up-stairs, tore down the obnoxious emblem, and [ . . . ] burned it."<sup>8</sup> When the soldiers could not find what they sought, they decided to raise a large Federal flag over the home.<sup>9</sup> Belle Boyd's mother stepped in and "would not consent" to the action by stating, "'Men, every member of my household will die before that flag shall be raised over us.'"<sup>10</sup> At this remark a soldier began to insult Belle's mother as Belle watched from the stairs.<sup>11</sup> During this encounter Belle describes that she "could stand it no longer; my indignation was roused beyond control; my blood was literally boiling in my veins; I drew out my pistol and shot him. He was carried away mortally wounded, and soon after expired."<sup>12</sup> It was from this moment, the moment Boyd took her first shot at a Federal soldier, that her determination against the Union fully ignited. Her efforts in espionage gained momentum and she was very successful at it. Boyd writes, "Whatever I heard I regularly and carefully committed to paper, and whenever an opportunity offered I sent my secret dispatch by a trusty messenger to General J.E.B. Stuart, or some brave officer in command of the Confederate troops."<sup>13</sup> Boyd's determination was great as seen in her account of how she felt after being released a second time after being arrested by Federal officials due to her espionage, "I departed; not in peace, however, for my little 'rebel' heart was

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<sup>2</sup> Belle Boyd, 146

<sup>3</sup> Belle Boyd, 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Scarborough, *Siren of the South: Belle Boyd*, (Mercer University Press, Macon: 1997), 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Belle Boyd, 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Scarborough, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Belle Boyd, 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 83 -84.

on fire, and I indulged in thoughts and plans of vengeance.”<sup>14</sup> Boyd’s determination would be her trademark throughout the war as she worked to gain knowledge for the Confederacy.

Another incident that describes Belle Boyd’s determination for the cause she believed in occurred when she assisted General Jackson on May 23, 1862.<sup>15</sup> Boyd had moved to the city of Front Royal so that she may be safer and away from Federal control. That, however, was not the case, because soon after her arrival Front Royal was taken by the Union army.<sup>16</sup> Boyd continued her work, though, and learned that the Union commander “General Banks was at Strasbourg with four thousand men, that the small force at Winchester could be readily re-enforced by General White, who was at Harper’s Ferry, and that Generals Shields and Geary were a short distance below Front Royal, while Fremont was beyond the Valley.”<sup>17</sup> Belle Boyd had this information when General Jackson was attempting to take Front Royal back into Confederate control. This information translated meant that Front Royal could easily be taken if the Confederates did not stop until they had fully taken the city. Boyd’s determination gave her the courage to run across the battle field of the Union and Confederacy to convey the news to General Jackson.<sup>18</sup> She was successful and the Confederacy won the battle.<sup>19</sup>

One may be skeptical that Boyd was one of the main causes for the Confederate victory, but both the Union and Confederacy pointed to her as the one. Colonel Lillibrowne, of the Union army, was asked how he had fallen into such a predicament. His response was pointing to a bouquet of flowers that Boyd had sent him a couple of days before and stated, “That bouquet did all the mischief: the donor of that gift is responsible *for all* this misfortune.”<sup>20</sup> General Jackson of the Confederacy wrote Boyd a personal thank you note for what she did on May 23, 1862, “Miss Belle Boyd, I thank you, for myself and for the army, for the immense service that you have rendered your country today.”<sup>21</sup> Another example is from the *New York Times*, “yet she has not failed of accomplishing her full share of treason, having undoubtedly betrayed our forces at Front Royal, whereby the First Maryland Regiment was so badly cut up.”<sup>22</sup> It was through encounters like these that Belle Boyd showed her determination and skill to assist her homeland in any way possible. Her life, however, though heroic was hard and it would not be long till Boyd would be an outcast, unable to return to the land she loved for many years.

Another courageous woman that worked for the Confederacy was Loreta Janeta Velazquez. Little is known of Velazquez, except for the knowledge that can be gleaned from her autobiography about the war and after, legend, and brief newspaper articles. One may question Velazquez’s account, due to its writing style and fantastical accounts, but as a newspaper author wrote 20 years after the book’s first publishing, it needs to be appreciated as fact, “The narrative of Mme. Loreta Janeta Velazquez, [. . .], has to be treated with more respect. There is reason to believe that there is some foundation of truth in it. She was a spy,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>15</sup> Belle Boyd, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 106-108.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>20</sup> Belle Boyd, 110.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “From Harper’s Ferry: Capture and Defeat of Bushwackers by the Fourth Maryland Cavalry-A Union Company of Virginians-Aneedotes Concerning Parson Brownlow and Others-Rumors of a Large Force near here-Guerilla Warfare-Women Drummed out of Camp-Soldiers’ Graves-Personal Gossip-Ashby, Belle Boyd, Dr. Paler and others-Negro Soldiers-Maryland Refugees, &c., &c.,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1862, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2005), 3.

and at the beginning of the troubles may have been present at some of the engagements.”<sup>23</sup> With this knowledge the account of Loreta Janeta Velazquez can be sifted and truth can be assembled from the more exaggerated portions of her story.

Velazquez was an ambitious and courageous woman who went against the status quo of the time to join her husband in battle. Her story begins when her husband, a Confederate officer, was leaving for war and her wishing to accompany him.<sup>24</sup> He, generally, refused her requests and departed without her.<sup>25</sup> She, however, resolved to accompany him in some way or form and continued with her endeavor to become a soldier in the Confederate Army. Velazquez explains, “He [her husband] ought to have known me better, and to have been assured that a woman of my obstinate temper was not to be prevented by mere argument from carrying out a pet scheme which promised such glorious results as the one we had been discussing.”<sup>26</sup> With that determination Loreta Velazquez gathered up her needed materials: uniform, disguise, pseudonym, and a company; and joined her husband under the name of Lieutenant H. T. Buford, C.S.A.<sup>27</sup> Not long after; however, her husband died during a training exercise and Velazquez decided to continue on her quest to fight in battle.<sup>28</sup> She participated in several battles, but decided that she wanted a steadier drama than the occasional battle, and started to participate in espionage for the Confederacy.<sup>29</sup> Velazquez explains her mental process of changing occupations when she writes, “The experiences of actual warfare, however, soon had the effect of convincing me that a woman like myself, who had a talent for assuming disguises, and who, like me, was possessed of courage, resolution, and energy, backed up by a ready wit, a plausible address, and attractive manners, had it in her power to perform many services of the most vital importance, which it would be impossible for a man to even attempt.”<sup>30</sup> It was not long until Loreta Janeta Velazquez began her new career.

Loreta Velazquez started her vocation as a spy by returning to the clothes of a woman, and crossing over to Washington D.C. She then began to obtain some contacts in the Federal capital city that she may return at a later date to retrieve more information. During her first visit Velazquez used her natural name and was very open that she was there, even making herself known to an old military acquaintance of her late husband.<sup>31</sup> Due to this acquaintance she was able to visit the War Department, the Secretary of War, General Wessells, and President Lincoln.<sup>32</sup> These places gave her an understanding of the inner workings, but as Velazquez describes the real place to gain information was the Post Office. “Here I succeeded in finding out a number of things I wanted to know [ . . . ] simply by listening to the conversation I heard going around me, [ . . . ] [I] wondered how the Federal authorities ever expected to prevent the Confederates from finding out their plans if this kind of thing [government officials conversations] was going on all the time.”<sup>33</sup> Velazquez then returned to the South and her disguise as a military officer in the Confederacy.

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<sup>23</sup> Mente Muriel Dowie ed., “Tall Yarns About Women: The Women Adventurers. The lives of Mme. Velazques, Hannah Snell, Mary Anne Talbot, and Mrs. Christian Davies,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1893, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2005), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Loreta Janeta Velazquez, 51.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 61, 84, 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 140, 141.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

Loreta Velazquez was not done with her espionage work and soon joined the secret service. Not long after her return to the Confederacy Velazquez was summoned to Virginia by Captain Shankey and asked to enter the secret service.<sup>34</sup> She took part in several more battles and small expeditions of espionage, but it was not until the fall of New Orleans that Velazquez's work fully began. Foreseeing the coming defeat Loreta Velazquez decided to put away her uniform. "I at first thought of leaving as quickly as I could; but a little reflection induced me to change my mind, for I saw clearly that if the Federals took possession of the city, I would as a woman, have a grand field of operation."<sup>35</sup>

Velazquez was able to receive a foreign identity from an English woman who was leaving and bought her papers from her.<sup>36</sup> With these papers Velazquez went to the provost marshal to obtain an acquaintance with him and in future glean information for the Confederacy.<sup>37</sup> She was able to become acquainted with Colonel Butler, General Butler's brother, and obtain a pass that permitted her to go to Mandeville and Mobile without being searched.<sup>38</sup> This pass allowed Velazquez to become a smuggler, carrying medical drugs and Confederate money into Confederate lines, without the Federals searching her.<sup>39</sup> She continued her work as a Confederate agent and carried dispatch through Federal lines to Confederate officials in places like Havana and Franklin.<sup>40</sup> Velazquez continued her career of Line Runner, which took her to Canada and out West.

One of Loreta Janeta Velazquez's most interesting, and possibly most unbelievable, ventures was her assault on the Federal Treasury, by participating in an underground network to steal several currency printing plates from the Treasury. Giving the conspirators the ability to print counterfeit money to assist the Confederacy and at the same time increase their own income.<sup>41</sup> Loreta Velazquez writes about the operation in her book,

As for myself and other Confederates, we took all the advantage we could of the general demoralization, and not only replenished our treasury, so as to be able to carry on many operations that otherwise would have been impossible, but worked in many ways to turn the criminal selfishness and unpatriotic greed of people, with whom we were brought in contact, to account, for the benefit of our cause.<sup>42</sup>

This whole occupation, however, people did not wish to give credit to Velazquez. In December of 1879, a reporter asked Loreta Velazquez about the whole affair, saying, "Nobody will believe what you say,' I said, frankly. 'Your story is quite incredible.'"<sup>43</sup> Velazquez's response was that if the reporter put the whole affair in writing she would "sign it and swear to it before a Notary Public."<sup>44</sup> The proceeding was a written confession giving detail about the whole issue, what Velazquez received, who she did the counterfeiting with, how much money they printed, and that she had documentation to prove her story.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 242, 243.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 244, 255.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 487.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "Madame Velasquez: The Ridiculous Story Which Investigator Glover Swallowed," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 23, 1879, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1986), p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

At the end of the interview the reporter asked the question that many wondered what Loreta Janeta Velazquez did with her portion of the money. Velazquez's answer displays the determination within her, "I spent it all in buying war vessels for the Confederacy. I organized the only navy that Mallory ever had."<sup>46</sup> Velazquez was a strong woman who fiercely fought the status quo to be able to fight for the cause she believed in, but like other women in similar circumstances she would never have a place that she settled in to call home.

Just like the Confederacy, the United States of America also had women working as spies. One of these Union women was Elizabeth Van Lew, who worked as a spy in Richmond, Virginia, during the Civil War. Elizabeth Van Lew was the daughter of Johan and Eliza Van Lew and was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>47</sup> Even though Van Lew was raised in the South, she held many more Northern convictions. This could be because both of her parents were from the North and the fact that Elizabeth Van Lew was sent to school in Philadelphia.<sup>48</sup> Being educated in the North during the 1830s probably brought Van Lew into contact with Abolitionists, and historical evidence shows that her mother did not agree with the slaveholding practice, even though the Van Lew family held slaves, and Eliza Van Lew attempted to reduce the number of slaves held by the family after the death of her husband.<sup>49</sup> This would explain why a Southern woman would go against the social norm of her time to labor for the opposition of her homeland.

Elizabeth Van Lew worked for the Union as a spy and as part of an underground network helping escaped Union soldiers return north. Van Lew informed both General Ulysses S. Grant and General Benjamin F. Butler of critical intelligence needed by the Union.<sup>50</sup> The *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote of Van Lew after the war and gave her credit for obtaining maps for the Union intended for an attack on Fort Darling, "When the Union commanders proposed to attack Fort Darling and wanted a plan of the Rebel stronghold on the James they got complete drawings of it through Miss Van Lew."<sup>51</sup>

Although Elizabeth Van Lew was a crucial informant for the Union, her primary action was to assist the Union prisoners in Libby prison in Richmond, Virginia. Van Lew began her work by asking to be a hospital nurse for the Union prisoners, originally she was refused, but upon placing her request a second time with another officer, she was granted her request.<sup>52</sup> This opportunity was extremely uplifting for Van Lew. She writes, "How joyful was I to be put in communications with what to me was most sacred – Federal soldiers in prison and in distress!"<sup>53</sup> She was extremely active and often interceded for the soldiers. In one incident she stepped in to save a soldier's life that was being left for dead outside in the dirt, "She protested that it was a shame that so young and handsome a man should be left to die as a dog in the broiling sun in the prison yard; and her persuasions finally prevailed. The commanding officer ungraciously gave his consent to the removal of the dying soldier. He was removed to the lady's house,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2003), 9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 10, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 18, 24.

<sup>50</sup> "USS Elizabeth Van Lew: The Full Story of Her Work as Union Spy," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1887, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1986), p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> David D. Ryan, Ed., *A Yankee Spy in Richmond: The Civil War Diary of "Crazy Bet" Van Lew*, (Mechanicsburg, Stackpole: 1996), 34.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 35.

was kindly cared for, and recovered.”<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Van Lew’s work was publicly known and would forever alienate her from her peers.

Elizabeth Van Lew was one of the leaders of an underground network that assisted prisoners of war escape north from the prisons. One occurrence was when soldiers were able to dig a tunnel out of the prison and escape to freedom.<sup>55</sup> Van Lew assisted by arranging a hiding place for some of the men at the home of Mrs. Rice.<sup>56</sup> It was because of her work for the Union that Elizabeth Van Lew received a nomination, by General Grant, for the office of “Post-Offices.”<sup>57</sup> Even with this success of a political office, Van Lew still did not escape estrangement from the rest of her community.

An additional woman who fought for the Union was Sarah Emma Edmonds. The unique trait of Sarah Edmonds was that she was not an American citizen. Instead Edmonds was from Canada, and chose to stay in the United States and contribute to the cause.<sup>58</sup> Sarah Edmonds enlisted in the Union military under the name of Franklin Thompson.<sup>59</sup> As the title of her book explains, Edmonds worked as a Field Nurse, Soldier, and Spy under the pseudonym and disguise.

For her work as a spy, Sarah Emma Edmonds, took on some of the most radical disguises. Her first disguise being that of a male African American.<sup>60</sup> This disguise took some time to fabricate due to Edmonds being a woman and Caucasian. She started by obtaining the clothing of a slave, and cutting her hair extremely close to her head then covering it with a wig.<sup>61</sup> To blacken her skin she used nitrate of silver.<sup>62</sup> This masquerade made it possible for her to slip into Confederate lines and she began work as a slave for the Confederate army, this allowed her to gain intelligence about a peddler who was working as a spy for the Confederacy.<sup>63</sup> For Edmond’s second excursion she disguised herself as an Irish woman, and with this disguise she was able to obtain intelligence about the Confederate defenses, force size, and battle plans.<sup>64</sup> This information was of great help to the Union military.

As a soldier Edmonds participated in the Battle of Bull Run, like Janeta Loreta Velazquez; however, the two women were on opposite sides of the battle.<sup>65</sup> It is said that during the battle she began to assist wounded soldiers in a stone church, and did not know of the Federal soldier’s retreat.<sup>66</sup> She then made her way back to Washington D.C. and sent messages to the relatives of the men Edmonds had cared for in their final hour.<sup>67</sup> She also worked as a “postmaster and mail carrier” for General McClellan’s brigade, and during battle was said to, “[remain] with her comrades and did her duty like the man she was

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<sup>54</sup> “USS Elizabeth Van Lew.”

<sup>55</sup> David D. Ryan, 62.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “Article 2-No title,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, March 25, 1869, 47, 12, American Periodicals Series Online, p. 94.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy: A Woman’s Adventures in the Union Army*, (DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press: 1999), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., XIX.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 83, 95-96.

<sup>65</sup> John L. Steele, “She Wore the Blue: Girl who Served Four Years in the Army,” *Woman and Home*, *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1895, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881-1986), p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Emma Edmonds, 20, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 24.

supposed to be.”<sup>68</sup> However, even though, Sarah Emma Edmonds worked so hard for the Union, she later had to fight for recognition.

The reason that these women chose to work in the manner that they did is hard to interpret. One can interpret that they stood up against the political view of the time, just because they wanted adventure, or because they wanted something much more than that. For Belle Boyd it can be interpreted that she was standing up for freedom. She writes, “The first champion of freedom-I speak advisedly, and in of a seeming paradox-was South Carolina. [. . .] but she flung down the gauntlet in the name and for the cause of liberty.”<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Van Lew’s mission was to strive to do everything in her power to keep the Union together.<sup>70</sup> Velazquez and Edmonds can be interpreted that they each had an adventurous spirit to drive them into action. Whatever their reason, however, one thing can be seen. Their actions during the war and after, by publishing their stories, assisted in demonstrating to their society that women could do more than society told them to do.

Van Lew is a definite example of how they could use their clout to fight for rights in society. In the years leading up to her death, Van Lew sent, every year, a note with her taxes protesting the government for collecting taxes from people who could not vote.<sup>71</sup> Though their reasons may have been different for entering the war one thing is certain, their work did show how women could take on a bigger role in society than the one society allowed.

While they did have their differences for entering the conflict, they did have their similarities. During their work as spies each of them were committed to their cause; each of them held a degree of power in what happened; and each of them endured a similar fate. These three things are crucial similarities between women who fought on different sides of the line.

The first of their commonalities is the evidence that all of them were highly devoted to the cause they believed in. These women did not stand idly by and watch their countries wage war. Instead they rose up and were dedicated to their beliefs. Each of these women tells of their devotion in their own remembrances of the war.

In Belle Boyd’s memoir one can see her determination in that even when faced with arrest and under suspicion she continued her espionage career.<sup>72</sup> One can also see her determination while she is in jail, on multiple occasions this audacious teenager, while in jail, would flaunt Confederate flags and sing Confederate songs to the disgust of her guards. During her second prison sentence Boyd got a hold of several Confederate flags and would hang one out her window, “though I must acknowledge that there was rashness in displaying the tiny Southern banners, and danger of subjecting myself to insult from the brutes who guarded me. But I could not resist the temptation!”<sup>73</sup> A newspaper reported one of Belle Boyd’s antics in prison, “a certain Belle Boyd is mentioned as singing, to the great disgust of her guard, ‘My Maryland, my Maryland.’ The latter would tell her to ‘hush up.’ But Belle would reply, ‘I shan’t do it.’”<sup>74</sup> Incidents like this in prison show Boyd’s commitment to the cause, that even when she was incarcerated Boyd tried everything she could to show where her allegiance truly lay and still exasperate Union officials. This loyalty was recognized by a *New York Times* newspaper reporter when he wrote,

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<sup>68</sup> John L. Steele.

<sup>69</sup> Belle Boyd, 74.

<sup>70</sup> David D Ryan, 7.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Belle Boyd, 84.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 160, 161.

<sup>74</sup> “Article 4 – No title,” *The Knickerbocker Monthly: A National Magazine*, May 1863, 61, 5, American Periodicals Series Online, p. 47.



“During the past campaigns in the Valley, this woman [Belle Boyd] has been of immense service to the enemy. She will be now, if she can. She, therefore, should at once be passed beyond our lines, [. . .], and allowed to remain with those with whom she deeply sympathizes.”<sup>75</sup> Actions show Belle Boyd’s dedication and determination to further the Confederate cause.

Confederate soldier and spy Loreta Janeta Velazquez, was no different, and portrayed her devotion to the Southern cause fervently. Velazquez’s fidelity to the South went deeper than even her commitment toward her husband. Velazquez writes, “As for me, I was perfectly wild on the subject of war; and although I did not tell my husband so, I was resolved to forsake him if he raised his sword against the South.”<sup>76</sup> She also writes of her conviction toward that South, that it could not be swayed, even when she met President Lincoln, “[. . .] did not influence me in the least with regard to my own opinions concerning the rights and wrongs of the contest between the North and South, nor did I allow it to interfere in any way with the carrying out of my plans.”<sup>77</sup> Velazquez’s allegiance to the cause she believed in was fortified and unmovable, similar to that of her fellow women in uniform.

Though the Confederate women were stonewalled in their beliefs the Northern women were, likewise, strongly devoted to their cause; and Elizabeth Van Lew was no exception. Van Lew’s dedication can be seen in the evidence that she sided with the North, even though she had grown up in the South. She still felt comradeship to the South, which is evident at times when she writes in her journal. An example would be when she writes of Virginia’s secession from the Union, “Finally the State was surrendered, and we cried out for the blood of Sumter and Carlisle and the Union members of the convention who fled for their lives.”<sup>78</sup> Van Lew does this multiple times, showing that she still saw herself as a Southern woman, but her convictions allied her with an allegiance to the North. She was steadfast in her commitment, and it held up against slander and threats from her fellow Virginians and she continued her work for the Union.

The malice printed towards Van Lew was noticed by northern newspapers, “They [Elizabeth and Eliza Van Lew] were the subjects of constant espionage, and the most slanderous abuse in the public papers. They were constantly receiving the most threatening anonymous letters; their friends of long years standing deserted them as they would lepers; and ‘men’ have been even known to shake the forefinger upbraidingly in their faces on the public.”<sup>79</sup> With all this criticism Van Lew never faltered from her mission, displaying her allegiance to the Union.

The final Northern woman discussed was Sarah Emma Edmonds, and she too was greatly committed to the cause she stood behind. Her devotion is seen by the fact that though she was from Canada, she still fought for the Union and did not flee to her northern homeland.<sup>80</sup> Her dedication is also seen during her first espionage mission. During the mission Edmonds writes that she would have worked longer to have gleaned the same knowledge she received, “I would willingly have wrought with those Negroes on that parapet for two months, and have worn the skin off my hands half a dozen times, to have gained that single item.”<sup>81</sup> Edmonds even writes of her loyalty, “a little ambitious and a good deal romantic, and this

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<sup>75</sup> “Belle Boyd,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1862, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2005), p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> Loreta Janeta Velazquez, 51.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>78</sup> David D. Ryan, 30.

<sup>79</sup> “Residence of Mrs. Van Lew,” *Harpers Weekly*, July 14, 1866, Harp Week-Electronic Access to Harper’s Weekly, p. 0444ad-0445a.

<sup>80</sup> Sarah Emma Edmonds, 3.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

together with my devotion to the Federal cause and determination to assist to the utmost of my ability in crushing the rebellion, made me forget the unpleasant items, [. . .] – but *patriotism* was the grand secret of my success.”<sup>82</sup> Sarah Emma Edmonds’s commitment was not uncommon.

On both sides of the war women were courageous and stood up for what they understood and saw to be right. The dedication that women entertained during the war brought both beneficial and detrimental consequences. The beneficial consequence was that during the war the women were able to achieve power they normally would not have. Belle Boyd is the greatest example of the power these women could achieve. Within the war she was credited with many decisive wins for the Confederacy due to her information.<sup>83</sup> Newspapers even credited her with being the leader of a group of female spies, the *New York Times* wrote, “She [Boyd] has, however, a trained band of coadjutors who report to her daily – girls aged from 16 upward.”<sup>84</sup> This shows a degree of power, in that a woman was being credited with orchestrating a personal secret service group for the Confederacy.

Sarah Emma Edmonds displayed the power that women could have after the war when she petitioned Congress for a military pension, even after “Franklin Thompson” had deserted, and she was successful.<sup>85</sup> The power that Elizabeth Van Lew was able to acquire is shown in her ability to enter politics as a woman, as an appointed postmaster of Richmond, Virginia, by President Grant.<sup>86</sup> This was the highest political position a woman could officially hold for the time, and Van Lew was nominated directly to it.<sup>87</sup> Each of the above occurrences shows the power that these women could accumulate, but one instance displays this power the most.

The ultimate example of the power these women could achieve is when Belle Boyd threatened President Lincoln, and succeeded in her request. During the war Belle Boyd married a former Union Naval officer, Lieutenant Hardinge, her captor of her last arrest, in England in 1864.<sup>88</sup> Her husband then had to return to America and was captured by Union officials and placed in jail; Boyd’s response was to write a letter to President Abraham Lincoln demanding her husband’s release.<sup>89</sup> Boyd threatened that if President Lincoln did not release her husband by March 25, 1865, she would publish her book hurting the United States Government, “My Book was not originally intended to be more than a personal narrative, but since my husband’s unjust arrest I had intended making it political, & had introduced many atrocious circumstances respecting your Government with which I am so well acquainted & which would open the eyes of Europe to many things of which the world on this side of the water little dreams – If you will release my husband & set him free [. . .] I pledge you my word that my Book shall be suppressed.”<sup>90</sup> Evidently her threat was successful because her husband was released.<sup>91</sup> The devotion these women had brought power that they would not have normally acquired.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>83</sup> “From Harper’s Ferry,” 3.

<sup>84</sup> “Belle Boyd,” 8.

<sup>85</sup> “XLIII Congress – 1<sup>st</sup> Session,” *Hartford Daily Courant*, March 29, 1884, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Hartford Courant (1764-1984), 3.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, 216.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> “Two Days Later From Europe: Arrival of the Scotia at this Ports, How the Seizure of the Georgia is Viewed, English Comments on Federal Successes and the Prospects of Peace; Marriage of the Notorious Belle Boyd,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1864, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2005), 1.

<sup>89</sup> Belle Boyd Hardinge to Abraham Lincoln, Tuesday, January 24, 1865, The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1833-1916.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Ruth Scarborough, 175.

The same enthusiasm for their cause that brought the surge of power also brought the humiliation of being outcasts within their society. Though these women fought hard for the cause they believed in, their actions would cost them their standing within their everyday life with their peers. Belle Boyd was arrested several times during her career as a spy for the Confederacy.<sup>92</sup> Her arrests made newspapers around the United States. Stories explaining who she was and that she was now being held in the “old capitol prison” circulated.<sup>93</sup> Her final arrest occurred on the ship the *Greyhound* as she was trying to run the blockade and go to Europe.<sup>94</sup> After this arrest Boyd was banished and sent to Canada and from there she went to England.<sup>95</sup> During these times Boyd lost contact with her family and was mocked by northern society, “My letter to and from my mother in Martinsburg were intercepted; and from December, the 16<sup>th</sup>, until I arrived in London, and then not until the following October, did I receive one line from her, though she had written repeatedly.”<sup>96</sup> In Northern newspapers she was declared to be insane, “This declaration is positive evidence of insanity.”<sup>97</sup>

Belle Boyd was not able to return to America for several years, and the way she made money was through acting with the stage name of Nina Benjamin.<sup>98</sup> Due to her banishment, Boyd lost many years she could have had with her first husband Lieutenant Hardinge, and with her mother after her father’s death. Sadly, however, Boyd was not the only woman who suffered this fate due to her career during the war. Elizabeth Van Lew suffered a similar fate among her peers in Richmond, Virginia. Van Lew may have had success in getting a job, due to her activities as a Union informant, but it did not help her standing in the eyes of her neighbors. After Elizabeth Van Lew received her new job she soon came under attack. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* published an article titled, “Her Offense is Loyalty: Malice of Ex-Confederates Drives Miss Van Lew from Office,” explaining the reasons behind the brewing evil sentiment towards her. “The reason is that she [Elizabeth Van Lew] was a loyal Virginia woman and her history exposed her to the malice of a ring of unreconstructed Rebels who hold office by the grace of Postmaster-General Vilas.”<sup>99</sup> This sentiment then led to Van Lew being demoted to a lower position within the post office. The article continued saying, “The sin of sins was that she had been a Union spy during the rebellion, [. . .] But for the Southern men and women who were true to the Stars and Stripes they have the single epithet, ‘Traitors.’ It thus came about that is Van Lew was persecuted, not for her own sake, but for the cause she represented.”<sup>100</sup>

Elizabeth Van Lew had carried the torch so valiantly for the Union during the war and after faced growing hostility because of her devotion. This was nothing new for Van Lew, for during the war Southern newspapers had made the feelings of society very clear. One paper, the *Richmond Examiner*, attacked Van Lew and her mother for their actions of helping the Yankee soldiers, saying their actions, “cannot but be regarded as an evidence of sympathy amounting to an endorsement of the cause and the

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<sup>92</sup> Belle Boyd, 83, 117, 154, 183.

<sup>93</sup> “From Baltimore—Capture of Belle Boyd, the Female Spy,” *Hartford Daily Courant*, August 4, 1862, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Hartford Courant (1764-1984), 3.

<sup>94</sup> “Additional from the Battle-Field,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1864, ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2005), 1.

<sup>95</sup> Belle Boyd, 203, 205.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>97</sup> “‘Belle Boyd’ a Prisoner,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 2, 1864, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1986), 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ruth Scarborough, 180.

<sup>99</sup> “Her Offense is Loyalty: Malice of Ex-Confederates Drives Miss Van Lew from Office,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 6, 1887, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1986), 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

conduct of the Northern Vandals.”<sup>101</sup> This hardship, however, was the sacrifice Elizabeth Van Lew endured for her zeal for what she believed in.

The Confederate spy and soldier Loreta Janeta Velazquez was not left out. Velazquez published her book and told of her tales moving west. During this time two articles surfaced that appear to be about her. The first attacks a woman addressed as Mrs. Bonner, saying she is scam artist and her “morals are of the loosest kind, and no one in this country would believe her under oath, [. . .] an old blister.”<sup>102</sup> In the following October another article appeared, claiming that Mrs. Bonner is also known as Lieutenant Harry Buford, which was Velazquez’s disguise in the Civil War.<sup>103</sup> The article goes on to state, “Mrs. Bonner is here to superintend a book, giving her war history, and shortly to be published by the Southern Publishing company.”<sup>104</sup> The article continues to rectify the false claims in the January article and to defend Mrs. Bonner.<sup>105</sup> Could this be Velazquez? It is hard to tell, but the second report is very similar to her story. This does show, sadly her fate, she vanished into history. Her story was hard to find, and accounts varied. This strong, courageous woman is all but forgotten, and suffered the fate of passionately fighting for the losing side.

The spy and soldier Sarah Emma Edmonds fared better, but was still stricken by the consequences of her actions. While in the army Edmonds became sick and was ordered to a hospital for treatment.<sup>106</sup> She feared her true identity would be discovered so Edmonds deserted and later returned as her true self to work as a nurse till the end of the war.<sup>107</sup> Because of her desertion the name Franklin Thompson, really Sarah Edmonds, was blackened and Edmonds could not receive a pension from the government for the work she had done. Eventually, Edmonds appealed to Congress to remove the desertion off Franklin Thompson’s record and to allow her to receive a pension.<sup>108</sup> Edmonds was successful in her request to Congress and received the pension she desired.<sup>109</sup> Even though Edmonds was able to be recognized by Congress for her actions she did still suffer. She had changed her identity to fight for the cause she believed in, and had to desert so that she would not be found out. Due to her desertion she had to fight Congress for what was rightfully hers, but just like Velazquez, Edmonds slips away into history. Belle Boyd, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, Elizabeth Van Lew, and Sarah Emma Edmonds are a small sampling of the women who courageously stood up for what they believed in. While working as spies for the Union and Confederacy, some even picked up a musket and a uniform and served as soldiers. These women were all committed to their side and held a degree of power in the sway of the war like their male counterparts. These women also suffered the consequence of their devotion, many being arrested and many losing standing within their communities, but all have silently slipped into history and have slowly been forgotten. These women, however, deserve to be remembered, for they are the unsung heroines of the Civil War.

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<sup>101</sup> *Richmond Examiner*, July 29, 1861, [www.mdgornman.com/Written\\_Accounts/Examiner](http://www.mdgornman.com/Written_Accounts/Examiner), 3.

<sup>102</sup> Adam A. Wilson, “From Mormondom: The Exploits of a Mrs. Bonner,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 15, 1875, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1861-1942), 3.

<sup>103</sup> “Lieut. Harry Buford,” *The Constitution*, October 6, 1875, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1861-1942), 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> “A Woman Deserter Asks a Pension,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1884, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2005), 2.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> “XLIII Congress – 1<sup>st</sup> Session,” 3.

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