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Interview

WARRIOR WOMEN--SOLDIERS OF THE CIVIL WAR: AN INTERVIEW WITH DEANNE BLANTON AND LAUREN COOK BURGESS

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cwbr: You have a book planned with Louisiana State University Press. Do you have a working title?

DeAnne Blanton and Lauren Cook Burgess: Yes. Because we have found instances of women in military service and engaging in battle throughout all four years of the Civil War, our working title is From Bull Run to Bentonville: Women Soldiers of the American Civil War. We hope that it will be available, appropriately, on the eve of the new millennium, sometime in 2001.

cwbr: When did you first learn about the phenomenon of women soldiers in the Civil War?

db: About eight years ago, I went into the stacks of the National Archives looking for something that a researcher requested. While looking through a War Department reference collection, I found an envelope with "women soldiers - Civil War" written on it. It was a file dating from the early 20th century. I was fascinated. I've been independently researching Civil War soldier women ever since.

lcb: My curiosity about women soldiers grew out of my interest in the life of the common soldier of the Civil War. Over a decade ago, I was reading a number of soldier letters and diaries, as well as classics such as The Life of Billy Yank and The Life of Johnny Reb. I came across several references to women found in the ranks, and was immediately intrigued and fascinated. Researching these women has been an obsession for me ever since.
**cwbr:** When did you begin working together? How do you divide the research and writing responsibilities?

**lcb:** I first met DeAnne at the National Archives while working on the Sarah Rosetta Wakeman letters in 1992. As an archivist in 19th Century Military Reference, DeAnne was not only incredibly helpful with the Wakeman research, but she also had amassed quite a bit of information about female soldiers. Our collaboration began right then and there, sharing our lists of sources on soldier women. It wasn't too long after we met that DeAnne proposed that we work together on a history of these extraordinary women and since then we've been working toward that goal.

**db:** Lauren and I divided up the research and went to work. Periodically over the years, we've gotten together to share our findings, and talk about what we were learning about Civil War women soldiers. When the time came to write it all down, we developed an outline for the book and divided up the writing responsibilities. We edit each other's chapters, and endlessly discuss interpretations!

**cwbr:** Is there any particular historian, such as Mary Elizabeth Massey, from whom you draw inspiration?

**db:** I think that Massey deserves much credit for her work, Bonnet Brigades, because it was one of the first "modern" works that paid serious attention to women in the Civil War. However, her interpretation of women soldiers is flawed. Massey stated that they were either crazy or prostitutes. Our research disproves this. One of my goals in writing this book is to set the record straight on that account.

**lcb:** My ambition for years has been to write a history of the "common" woman soldier after the style of Bell Wiley. Wiley's seminal works on the common Civil War soldier have been my inspiration, as have more recent books examining individual's motivations for soldiering, such as James McPherson's For Cause and Comrades. The fact that we have collected a great deal of documentation and information on over 200 women soldiers enables us to pursue a study along these lines.

**cwbr:** What kind of reception did you receive when you began your research? Had the climate changed in the late 90s when you were searching
for a publisher for your book?

**db & lcb:** We've both experienced a range of reactions to our work over the past decade. Many are intensely fascinated by these military women, a good number respond with skepticism and anger, and there is the inevitable sensationalization of the subject. As information about women Civil War soldiers has become more widely disseminated over the years (in middle grades history textbooks, for example), the controversy has diminished somewhat, but rarely do we encounter indifference to the subject.

**cwbr:** What audience do you envision for your work?

**db & lcb:** We believe that our audience will be quite broad, encompassing Civil War scholars and enthusiasts, those interested in women's studies, and members of the general reading public whose imagination is sparked by the idea of historical women in non-traditional roles. Indeed, these were women who participated in infantry, artillery, and cavalry combat, activities that women in the U.S. armed forces are for the most part prohibited from engaging in today.

**cwbr:** Why has it taken us so long to be ready, again, to accept the idea of women fighting as men in the Civil War?

**db & lcb:** It's interesting that you should ask that, as we are working now on the chapter that examines just this issue. The answer lies in the changing culturally defined roles for women in our society over the past two centuries, and ironically, the broadening of women's legal and economic status in the 20th century. In 19th century Victorian society, the idea of separate spheres of influence for men and for women was so indelibly entrenched that a few exceptions to the rule that women should interest themselves only in husband, home, and family carried no threat whatsoever to cultural norms. In addition, for several centuries up through the 19th, the fictional literary and even real concept of the "Female Warrior Bold" was quite widespread in popular culture.

The 20th century has seen big changes for American women. After 72 years of protest and agitation, women finally won the vote in 1920 and had begun to make inroads in the workplace. The cultural backlash to women's expanding legal and economic power came in the 1920s with the popularization of Freudian theories about independent women being neurotic, confused, or crazy, and most likely lesbians. These ideas about independent women who pursue
non-traditional careers informed most historians' views of 19th century women soldiers until recently. While society continues to make progress in this regard, cultural taboos about women in combat remain very much intact.

**cwbr:** How many cases of women disguising themselves as men and fighting have you documented? To put this in proper context, can you give an estimate of women who dressed as men before or after the War, such as Albert DJ Cashier?

**db & lcb:** We have information and documentation about 250 women. We only know of about seven women who dressed and lived as men either prior to the War or afterward. These were women from frontier, immigrant, or agrarian backgrounds, and they did so in order to make an honest living, which was difficult for any unmarried, independent woman to do during that period.

**cwbr:** How have you gone about researching a subject that has been hidden for so long? What resources proved most helpful? How available are these sources to the general public?

**db & lcb:** The answer to how we have gone about researching this subject is: very patiently and for a very long time. These women enlisted in secrecy, and for the most part, they were very successful in keeping their identities cloaked. When discovered, they would tell military authorities or the press very little about themselves. Researching them is difficult, at best. We are deeply grateful to literally several hundred people from around the world who have, over the years, heard about our research and sent us items of interest (from as far away as Antarctica and Australia). The most helpful resource in documenting women soldiers and their experiences has been the National Archives, closely followed by the U.S. Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks. Plus, women soldiers are mentioned frequently in the diaries and letters that their fellow soldiers wrote during the War. Some of these are published, and others are in archival or private collections around the country.

**cwbr:** Sarah Morgan of Louisiana often laments in her Civil War-era diary that she was not a man and therefore could not join the fight. Rosetta Wakeman of New York donned men's clothes seemingly without hesitation. When you compare women of the time, both North and South, what do you think made one more likely than another to dress as a man? What kinds of women were MOST likely to do so?
**db & lcb:** Women from poor, rural, and immigrant backgrounds were most likely to feel no compunction about shifting gender identity to suit their purposes, whether to serve as a soldier or to make a living wage. Many frontier women - and men - seemed to have little or no hesitation about females serving openly in the ranks. As one western soldier remarked in a letter home, "- some of our best soldiers are of the fair sex. I am told that there are many in Missouri cavalry regiments and they lend a good hand in time of hardship."

**cwbr:** Generally speaking, women soldiers did not affect the outcome of the War. So why is it important for us to acknowledge their role?

**db & lcb:** Because they were there. We believe that the women veterans of the Civil War deserve the same honor accorded to their male comrades. Women soldiers not only faced the guns of the adversary, but they also faced the prejudices of their society. Their country did not expect them to fight, yet they did it anyway. Every single woman soldier was a willing volunteer, who went to extraordinary measures to enlist and stay in the army. We feel that such devotion to cause and country is a worthwhile story in itself.

**cwbr:** No doubt many women soldiers' stories are yet to be discovered, hidden beneath their male person in photographs and letters on public display in collections and museums around the country. Can we hope that corrective measures will take place as more information on the topic is disseminated? Would these women want to be revealed?

**db & lcb:** Quite a few women were successful in maintaining their male masquerade throughout their terms of military service, and we only know about them because of postwar admissions and discoveries. We'll never know how many more women served and failed to make their stories known. We are sure that when this book is published many people who learn about these women for the first time will come forth with new information. In light of growing public appreciation for the role that women played in America's greatest and most bloody conflict, we are quite sure that these warrior women would take pride in having their stories told at this point in time.

**cwbr:** What do you hope to accomplish with your research?
db & lcb: I hope we bring about a new appreciation for and understanding of these heretofore controversial and mysterious figures. They sacrificed and gave their "last full measure of devotion" alongside their male comrades, never asking for or receiving any special favor because of their sex.

DeAnne Blanton is a military archivist at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., specializing in 19th century army records, particularly those of the Civil War.

Lauren Cook Burgess is an independent historian and editor of An Uncommon Soldier (Oxford University Press, ISBN 0195102436, $10.95), the only collection of letters by a Civil War woman soldier known to exist.