

Was Sarah Edmonds truthful?

Examine the documents below. Then consider the question above.

Sarah Edmonds, born Sarah Edmonson, was a Canadian woman whose father had always wanted a son. At a young age she fled her hostile home and changed her name to Edmonds. Fearful her father would find her she donned men's clothes as Frank Thompson. She took a job as a Bible salesman and ended up in Flint, Michigan. When the Civil War broke out, she enlisted. She served in numerous capacities during the war. She eventually contracted malaria and deserted in order to avoid discovery. After recovery she wrote a book about her time serving for the Union and petitioned Congress to have her desertion charges dropped and receive a pension.

Edmonds was one of many people who donned different clothes to serve in the Civil War. Her story is one of the few published and it became a nation-wide sensation. Some people wonder if she exaggerated it. Was it possible she was everywhere she says she was? Decide for yourself.

Publisher's Notice

No apology is necessary for adding one more to the numerous "War Books" which already fill a large space in American Literature; for, to the general reader, nothing connected with the Rebellion can be more interesting than the personal experiences of those who have been intimately associated with the different phases of military life, in Camp, Field, and Hospital.

The "Nurse and Spy" is simply a record of events which have transpired in the experience and under the observation of one who has been on the field and participated in numerous battles – among which are the first and second Bull Run, Williamsburg, Fair Oaks, the Seven days in front of Richmond, Antietam, and Fredericksburg – serving in the capacity of "Spy" and as "Field Nurse" for over two years.

While in the "Secret Service" as a "Spy," which is one of the most hazardous positions in the army – she penetrated the enemy's lines, in various disguises, no less than eleven times; always with complete success and without detection.

Her efficient labors in the different Hospitals as well as her arduous duties as "Field Nurse," embrace many thrilling and touching incidents, which are here most graphically described.

Should any of her readers object to some of her disguises, it may be sufficient to remind them it was from the purest motives and most praiseworthy patriotism, that she laid aside, for a time, her own costume, and assumed that of the opposite sex, enduring hardships, suffering untold privations, and hazarding her life for her adopted country, in its trying hour of need.

In the opinion of many, it is the privilege of woman to minister to the sick and soothe the sorrowing – and in the present crisis of our country's history, to aid our brothers to the extent of her capacity – and whether duty leads her to the couch of luxury, the abode of poverty, the crowded hospital, or the terrible battle field – it makes but little difference what costume she assumes while in the discharge of her duties. – Perhaps she should have the privilege of choosing for herself whatever may be the surest protection from insult and inconvenience in her blessed, self-sacrificing work.

The moral character of the work, – being true to virtue, patriotism, and philanthropy – together with the fine embellishments and neat mechanical execution – will, we trust, render it an interesting and welcome visitor at every fireside.



Book Excerpt

I was becoming dissatisfied with my situation as nurse, and was determined to leave the hospital; but before doing so I thought it best to call a council of three, Mr. and Mrs. B. and I, to decide what was the best course to pursue. After an hour's conference together the matter was decided in my mind. Chaplain B. told me that he knew of a situation he could get for me if I had sufficient moral courage to undertake its duties; and, said he, "it is a situation of great danger and of vast responsibility."

That morning a detachment of the Thirty-seventh New York had been sent out as scouts, and had returned bringing in several prisoners, who stated that one of the Federal spies had been captured at Richmond and was to be executed. This information proved to be correct, and we lost a valuable soldier from the secret service of the United States. Now it was necessary for that vacancy to be supplied, and, as the Chaplain had said with reference to it, it was a situation of great danger and vast responsibility, and this was the one which Mr. B. could procure for me. But was I capable of filling it with honor to myself and advantage to the Federal Government? This was an important question for me to consider ere I proceeded further. I did consider it thoroughly, and made up my mind to accept it with all its fearful responsibilities. The subject of life and death was not weighed in the balance; I left that in the hands of my Creator, feeling assured that I was just as safe in passing the picket lines of the enemy, if it was God's will that I should go there, as I would be in the Federal camp. And if not, then His will be done: Then welcome death, the end of fears.

My name was sent in to headquarters, and I was soon summoned to appear there myself. Mr. and Mrs. B. accompanied me. We were ushered into the presence of Generals Mc., M. and H., where I was questioned and cross-questioned with regard to my views of the rebellion and my motive in wishing to engage in so perilous an undertaking. My views were freely given, my object briefly stated, and I had passed trial number one. Next I was examined with regard to my knowledge of the use of firearms, and in that department I sustained my character in a manner worthy of a veteran. Then I was again cross-questioned, but this time by a new committee of military stars.

Next came a phrenological examination, and finding that my organs of secretiveness, combativeness, etc., were largely developed, the oath of allegiance was administered, and I was dismissed with a few complimentary remarks which made the good Mr. B. feel quite proud of his protege. This was the third time that I had taken the oath of allegiance to the United States, and I began to think, as many of our soldiers do, that profanity had become a military necessity. I had three days in which to prepare for my debut into rebeldom, and I commenced at once to remodel, transform and metamorphose for the occasion. Early next morning I started for Fortress Monroe, where I procured a number of articles indispensably necessary to a complete disguise. In the first place I purchased a suit of contraband clothing, real plantation style, and then I went to a barber and had my hair sheared close to my head. Next came the coloring process—head, face, neck, hands and arms were colored black as any African, and then, to complete my contraband costume, I required a wig of real negro wool. But how or where was it to be found? There was no such thing at the Fortress, and none short of Washington. Happily I found the mail-boat was about to start, and hastened on board, and finding a Postmaster with whom I was acquainted, I stepped forward to speak to him, forgetting my contraband appearance, and was saluted with—"Well, Massa Cuff—what will you have?" Said I: "Massa send me to you wid dis yere money for you to fotch



him a darkie wig from Washington." "What the — — does he want of a darkie wig?" asked the Postmaster. "No matter, dat's my orders; guess it's for some 'noiterin' business." "Oh, for reconnoitering you mean; all right old fellow, I will bring it, tell him." I remained at Fortress Monroe until the Postmaster returned with the article which was to complete my disguise, and then returned to camp near Yorktown.

On my return, I found myself without friends — a striking illustration of the frailty of human friendship — I had been forgotten in those three short days. I went to Mrs. B.'s tent and inquired if she wanted to hire a boy to take care of her horse. She was very civil to me, asked if I came from Fortress Monroe, and whether I could cook. She did not want to hire me, but she thought she could find some one who did require a boy. Off she went to Dr. E. and told him that there was a smart little contraband there who was in search of work. Dr. E. came along, looking as important as two year old doctors generally do. "Well, my boy, how much work can you do in a day?" "Oh, I reckon I kin work right smart; kin do heaps o' work. Will you hire me, Massa?" "Don't know but I may; can you cook?" "Yes, Massa, kin cook anything I ebber seen." "How much do you think you can earn a month?" "Guess I kin earn ten dollars easy nuff." Turning to Mrs. B. he said in an undertone: "That darkie understands his business." "Yes indeed, I would hire him by all means, Doctor," said Mrs. B. "Well, if you wish, you can stay with me a month, and by that time I will be a better judge how much you can earn."

So saying Dr. E. proceeded to give a synopsis of a contraband's duty toward a master of whom he expected ten dollars per month, especially emphasizing the last clause. Then I was introduced to the culinary department, which comprised flour, pork, beans, a small portable stove, a spider, and a medicine chest. It was now supper time, and I was supposed to understand my business sufficiently to prepare supper without asking any questions whatever, and also to display some of my boasted talents by making warm biscuit for supper. But how was I to make biscuit with my colored hands? and how dare I wash them for fear the color would wash off? All this trouble was soon put to an end, however, by Jack's making his appearance while I was stirring up the biscuit with a stick, and in his bustling, officious, negro style, he said: "See here nig — you don't know nuffin bout makin bisket. Jis let me show you once, and dat ar will save you heaps o' trouble wid Massa doct'r for time to come." I very willingly accepted of this proffered assistance, for I had all the necessary ingredients in the dish, with pork fat for shortening, and soda and cream-tartar, which I found in the medicine chest, ready for kneading and rolling out. After washing his hands and rolling up his sleeves, Jack went to work with a flourish and a grin of satisfaction at being "boss" over the new cook. Tea made, biscuit baked, and the medicine chest set off with tin cups, plates, etc., supper was announced. Dr. E. was much pleased with the general appearance of things, and was evidently beginning to think that he had found rather an intelligent contraband for a cook. [...]

I took the cars the next day and went to Lebanon — dressed in one of the rebel prisoner's clothes — and thus disguised, made another trip to rebeldom. My business purported to be buying up butter and eggs, at the farmhouses, for the rebel army. I passed through the lines somewhere, without knowing it; for on coming to a little village toward evening, I found it occupied by a strong force of rebel cavalry. The first house I went to was filled with officers and citizens. I had stumbled upon a wedding party, unawares. Captain Logan, a recruiting officer, had been married that afternoon to a brilliant young widow whose husband had been killed in the rebel army a few months



before. She had discovered that widow's weeds were not becoming to her style of beauty, so had decided to appear once more in bridal costume, for a change.

I was questioned pretty sharply by the handsome captain in regard to the nature of my business in that locality, but finding me an innocent, straightforward Kentuckian, he came to the conclusion that I was all right. But he also arrived at the conclusion that I was old enough to be in the army, and bantered me considerably upon my want of patriotism.

The rebel soldier's clothes which I wore did not indicate any thing more than that I was a Kentuckian – for their cavalry do not dress in any particular uniform, for scarcely two of them dress alike – the only uniformity being that they most generally dress in butternut color.

I tried to make my escape from that village as soon as possible, but just as I was beginning to congratulate myself upon my good fortune, who should confront me but Captain Logan. Said he: "See here, my lad; I think the best thing you can do is to enlist, and join a company which is just forming here in the village, and will leave in the morning. We are giving a bounty to all who freely enlist, and are conscripting those who refuse. Which do you propose to do, enlist and get the bounty, or refuse, and be obliged to go without anything?" I replied, "I think I shall wait a few days before I decide." "But we can't wait for you to decide," said the captain; "the Yankees may be upon us any moment, for we are not far from their lines, and we will leave here either to-night or in the morning early. I will give you two hours to decide this question, and in the mean time you must be put under guard." So saying, he marched me back with him, and gave me in charge of the guards. In two or three hours he came for my decision, and I told him that I had concluded to wait until I was conscripted. "Well," said he, "you will not have long to wait for that, so you may consider yourself a soldier of the Confederacy from this hour, and subject to military discipline."

This seemed to me like pretty serious business, especially as I would be required to take the oath of allegiance to the Confederate Government. However, I did not despair, but trusted in Providence and my own ingenuity to escape from this dilemma also; and as I was not required to take the oath until the company was filled up, I was determined to be among the missing ere it became necessary for me to make any professions of loyalty to the rebel cause. I knew that if I should refuse to be sworn into the service after I was conscripted, that in all probability my true character would be suspected, and I would have to suffer the penalty of death – and that, too, in the most barbarous manner.

I was glad to find that it was a company of cavalry that was being organized, for if I could once get on a good horse there would be some hope of my escape. There was no time to be lost, as the captain remarked, for the Yankees might make a dash upon us at any moment; consequently a horse and saddle was furnished me, and everything was made ready for a start immediately. Ten o'clock came, and we had not yet started. The captain finally concluded that, as everything seemed quiet, we would not start until daylight.

Music and dancing was kept up all night, and it was some time after daylight when the captain made his appearance. A few moments more and we were trotting briskly over the country, the captain complimenting me upon my horsemanship, and telling me how grateful I would be to him when the war was over and the South had gained her independence, and that I would be proud that I had been one of the soldiers



of the Southern confederacy, who had steeped my saber in Yankee blood, and driven the vandals from our soil. "Then," said he, "you will thank me for the interest which I have taken in you, and for the gentle persuasives which I made use of to stir up your patriotism and remind you of your duty to your country."

In this manner we had traveled about half an hour, when we suddenly encountered a reconnoitering party of the Federals, cavalry in advance, and infantry in the rear. A contest soon commenced; we were ordered to advance in line, which we did, until we came within a few yards of the Yankees.

The company advanced, but my horse suddenly became unmanageable, and it required a second or two to bring him right again; and before I could overtake the company and get in line the contending parties had met in a hand to hand fight.

All were engaged, so that when I, by accident, got on the Federal side of the line, none observed me for several minutes, except the Federal officer, who had recognized me and signed to me to fall in next to him. That brought me face to face with my rebel captain, to whom I owed such a debt of gratitude. Thinking this would be a good time to cancel all obligations in that direction, I discharged the contents of my pistol in his face.

This act made me the center of attraction. Every rebel seemed determined to have the pleasure of killing me first, and a simultaneous dash was made toward me and numerous saber strokes aimed at my head. Our men with one accord rushed between me and the enemy, and warded off the blows with their sabers, and attacked them with such fury that they were driven back several rods.

The infantry now came up and deployed as skirmishers, and succeeded in getting a position where they had a complete cross-fire on the rebels, and poured in volley after volley until nearly half their number lay upon the ground. Finding it useless to fight longer at such a disadvantage they turned and fled, leaving behind them eleven killed, twenty-nine wounded, and seventeen prisoners.

The confederate captain was wounded badly but not mortally; his handsome face was very much disfigured, a part of his nose and nearly half of his upper lip being shot away. I was sorry, for the graceful curve of his mustache was sadly spoiled, and the happy bride of the previous morning would no longer rejoice in the beauty of that manly face and exquisite mustache of which she seemed so proud, and which had captivated her heart ere she had been three months a widow.

Our men suffered considerable loss before the infantry came up, but afterward scarcely lost a man. I escaped without receiving a scratch, but my horse was badly cut across the neck with a saber, but which did not injure him materially, only for a short time.

After burying the dead, Federal and rebel, we returned to camp with our prisoners and wounded, and I rejoiced at having once more escaped from the confederate lines.

I was highly commended by the commanding general for my coolness throughout the whole affair, and was told kindly and candidly that I would not be permitted to go out again in that vicinity, in the capacity of spy, as I would most assuredly meet with some of those who had seen me desert their ranks, and I would consequently be hung up to the nearest tree.

Not having any particular fancy for such an exalted position, and not at all ambitious of having my name handed down to posterity among the list of those who



“expiated their crimes upon the gallows,” I turned my attention to more quiet and less dangerous duties.

Edmonds, Sarah Emma. Nurse and Spy in the Union Army: The Adventures and Experiences of a Woman in Hospitals, Camps, and Battle-Fields. Hartford: W. S. Williams & Co., 1865.

Inquiry

1. As you watch, record sentences or ideas that show Edmonds was credible or perhaps exaggerating in the middle columns.
2. After you finish the two middle columns, look back at the evidence. Which information is most persuasive to you? Mark that #8. Which evidence is least persuasive to you? Mark that #1.

Rank	Evidence she is Credible	Evidence she Exaggerated	Rank



Questions for Analysis

1. Add up the rank on each side. Which side weighed more? Why do you think it worked out that way?

2. In conclusion, was Sarah Edmonds truthful?



Questions for Analysis

3. What dangers did she face that were different from her fellow soldiers?

4. Do you think Edmonds was a hero?

