

CHAPTER I

From 1776 to World War II

On the hot and sticky morning of Monday, 20 July 1942, the green parade ground at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, was lush with grass, daisies, gnats, and members of the press. The photographers required the most supervision because of their tendencies toward photographing female underwear or latrine scenes. There were representatives of four press associations, nineteen newspapers, four foreign news organizations, six motion picture companies, and two photographic services, plus many well-known writers. The occasion was the opening of the United States Army's first training center for women.

Centuries of evolution in warfare and in society had been required to make possible this unprecedented event. From the days of the American Revolution to the early twentieth century, there could be found little serious consideration of a women's corps in the United States Army. For the pioneer woman, home defense was a readily acceptable activity, but it had no connection in the public mind with an organized military corps of women.

However, from the earliest days there were innumerable popular stories of females who had disguised themselves well enough to enlist in the Army as individuals. None of these stories could be verified from Army files, and they apparently occurred more often in legend than in fact, but there was evidence that not all were fictional. The American Congress

went so far as to recognize the claims of one Revolutionary soldier, Deborah Sampson Gannett, by granting her husband a widow's pension.

Every succeeding war had its Molly Pitchers, most of whom made good copy for the young American press. Nineteenth century newspapers reveled in such headlines as SERVED BY HER LOVER'S SIDE, or THE DEAD SOLDIER WAS A WOMAN. According to these accounts, the Union Army inadvertently awarded some women the Kearny Cross and the Confederacy placed others on a Roll of Honor. One Confederate wife, declaring that she was "perfectly wild about war," was said to have donned a false mustache and successfully raised and commanded a regiment of recruits. Such stories were legion, but scarcely of help to later Army planners.¹

Of more significance for the future were scattered cases in which, because of an actual need for women's skills, the Army employed groups of civilian women as nurses, laundresses, clerks, and emergency aides of many types, sometimes in uniforms of their own devising. It was not unusual, for example, that each regiment of the Braddock expedition was allowed some forty women employees, one ration

¹ (1) *Magazine of History*, Vol. XXV, pp. 33-34 (July 1917). (2) Ltr, TAG to Editor, *Rural New Yorker*, May 12, 1915. WD Rec AGO, Enl Br 7275-C, with 3132-C-1884, 2285035 National Archives. (See Bibliographical Note.) (3) Francis Henry Gribble, *Women in War* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1916).