

## DEBORAH: THE FEMALE SOLDIER

By STEWART H. HOLBROOK

IT was very fitting that the 320th Liberty ship, launched from the Bethlehem yards at Baltimore on April 10 this year, honored the name of Deborah Sampson Gannett, the sole female soldier of the American Revolution. Were the Navy not so hide-bound in the matter of naming its fighting ships, it, too, could do worse than to name a cruiser or, at least, a destroyer for her; for Private Deborah was no bomb-proof rider of a desk and dictaphone, but a front-line fighting soldier, complete with musket, bayonet, powder and ball, and with a few extra flints in her pocket. What is more, the record shows that she performed her military duties "with more than ordinary alertness, gallantry, and fortitude," and "though mingling constantly with men she preserved her purity unsullied."

It should perhaps be pointed out at once that calling Private Deborah the sole authentic female soldier of the war is well advised. The much publicised Moll Pitcher, who for a century and a half has had an excellent press, and the lesser known Margaret Corbin, both smelled the smoke of battle, but they were not soldiers. Deborah

enlisted, was actually mustered in after no little trouble, and in her later years drew a regulation soldier's pension from the Federal government. Her descendants are alone in that they might, if they cared to, join the DAR solely on the strength of a female ancestor.

Deborah Sampson was a Massachusetts girl with illustrious forebears, among them being the doughty Captain Miles Standish, the hesitating but celebrated John Alden, as well as Abraham Sampson, William Bradford (the first American historian) and the charming Alice Southworth and Bathsheba La Broche. She was born at Plympton, not far from Plymouth. She had some early schooling, but her parents were poor, and when she was still in her teens she became a hired girl for a family at Middleboro, also in the Bay State. It was here, in 1782 when she was approximately twenty-two years old, that Deborah got the idea of enlisting in the Army.

To have an idea, for Deborah, was apparently tantamount to action. The notion of becoming a soldier no sooner struck her than she cut her hair, "borrowed" a suit of clothes be-

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longing to one Sam Leonard, and under the name of Timothy Thayer enlisted with the Continental recruiting officer at Middleboro. She was paid the enlistment bounty, probably of "one hundred paper dollars," which, because it was Continental money, did not amount to very much in actual cash. It was enough, however, to get Deborah-Timothy into trouble, for closely afterward she was seen at a tavern, "two miles East of Middleboro Four Corners" where she called for and presumably drank "spirituos liquors," and thereupon "behaved in a noisy and indecent manner." She was recognized by some foul person, and the remaining bounty money was taken away from her. She returned to her household duties in disgrace. As for Sam Leonard, he was so shocked, says an old account, "at the idea of his clothes having been used by a woman that he never wore them after."

Middleboro itself was shocked, and the First Baptist Church of that village, of which Deborah was a member, held a meeting and "withdrew fellowship," which meant excommunication. But one doubts that the determined Miss Sampson cared very much. By the time the Baptists got around to their churlish act, Deborah had secretly spun and woven some fine Massachusetts wool into cloth which she took to a local tailor and told him to make into a suit of clothes for a man, whom she described as a male relative of about her own build. When she got the two-piece job, she

disappeared from Middleboro, and long before the local Baptists had got around to unChristianizing her, she was away on one of the greatest adventures a woman ever had.

## II

One dark night in May — it was still 1782 — young Deborah got into her own coat and trousers. When the house had settled down to sleep, she tiptoed down from the shed chamber, out into the road, and made her way on foot to Worcester, a distance of more than seventy miles. She went directly to the recruiting office, and a day later was Private Robert Shurtleff in Captain George Webb's company of the 4th Massachusetts Regiment of Foot, commanded at that time by Colonel Shepard, later by Colonel Jackson. Quite likely she was put into a drill squad to learn the school of the soldier and the manual of arms. But there could have been little fuss about training. Early in June the 4th Massachusetts left Worcester on the long march to West Point, on the Hudson. A week later the regiment was crossing the Housatonic at New Milford, Connecticut, and presently was arrived at West Point, with Private Robert Shurtleff, or Deborah, holding her own on the long and dusty march.

One wonders what Captain Webb would have thought of a woman, a young woman, in his company. And what of Captain Webb's men? It is a subject that soldiers of all times have

discussed, this possibility of a female-soldier among them, a topic that has taken up endless hours of barracks-room conversation. But there seems to have been absolutely no suspicion of Private Deborah by her fellow soldiers, then or later, until an improbable incident, wholly beyond the girl's control, brought about the denouement.

What was she like, this authentic Amazon, this Yankee girl who fought and lived with soldiers? Contemporaries agree that she was tall, muscular, had good eyes, and "a not unpleasant voice" (whatever this may mean). In movement she was "erect, quick, and strong." One who knew her said that "her countenance and voice were feminine." Another thought she was "masculine-like." Whatever the case, she appears to have given serious thought to her general outline, her profile, for she bound a bandage tightly around her breast; and, wrote one who knew her, "it is not improbable that the severe pressure of this bandage served to compress the bosom, while the waist had every natural convenience for augmentation." This is quite possible, for most women have found that the waist is given to "augmentation" even if cared for. One can guess that when Private Deborah was encased in her bandages and the shapeless homespun clothes of the period, she had the shape, or lack of shape, of her indubitably male buddies.

Soon after arrival at West Point Deborah saw action in a sharp skir-

mish at Tappan Bay, during which "she suffered a slash from an enemy saber." This was close in-fighting. A bit later she was wounded in the side by a musket ball, in an engagement at East Chester. It felled her, but she got right up again and kept moving. She told an enquiring surgeon that the wound was merely a scratch, that she would be all right; and then she hid herself in the woods for several days, living alone and caring for her wounds. She feared "discovery of her true sex" more than she feared bleeding to death. Incidentally, the musket ball was never removed from her body.

Private Deborah was hardly recovered from her wound when she was sent with a small detachment to Fort Ticonderoga, and from there went to western New York to fight Indians. There is no record of any fighting on this expedition, but Deborah must have continued to conduct herself gallantly, for presently she was made an orderly on the staff of General Paterson, in Philadelphia. What was described as "malignant fever" was loose in that city and the hospitals were filled with stricken soldiers. The disease struck Deborah terribly hard, and she was presently moved into the hopeless ward of an army infirmary. As she lay on a pallet, unconscious and seeming hardly to breathe, Doctor Binney came through on his rounds. Seeing the motionless figure, he put his hand on the patient's chest to learn whether the heart was still beating. It was —

and good Doctor Binney's heart must itself have skipped a beat or two. For a moment he stood in amazement at the discovery he had made; then he went to tell the head nurse about it.

Private Deborah Sampson was immediately moved elsewhere and put in care of a female nurse. When General Paterson was told about the kind of orderly he had on his staff, he delivered himself of a stupendous understatement. "This is truly theatrical!" he said. But the general had a sense of humor. When Deborah had recovered from her illness, he had her come to West Point and there permitted her to don female garb and to "parade down the ranks in front of her erstwhile comrades in arms," the probably sheepish men of Captain Webb's company of the 4th Massachusetts Regiment of Foot, not one of whom recognized this girl as the late Private Robert Shurtleff.

Little imagination is required to guess the remarks and barracks-room discussion that followed — aye, that followed time without end whenever two or more veterans of Captain Webb's company were left to talk over old times and lost opportunities. All that has come down to us of these discussions is seemly, and is to the effect that Deborah was a rattling good soldier who never once acted otherwise than in a highly "military and courageous manner." Not once during her army days was "she found in liquor," which was something of a record among the Continental troops. It was also recalled that she never had

indulged in horseplay, and "never wrestled, nor suffered anyone to twine his arms around her shoulders."

There is no record of a Welcome Home celebration for Deborah, who was honorably discharged in November 1783. Middleboro missed a grand opportunity. But Middleboro couldn't hold her. She married Benjamin Gannett of Sharon, Massachusetts, moved to that town, and became the mother of three children — Earl, Mary, and Patience. In 1792 the Massachusetts legislature, taking cognizance of the Commonwealth's unique veteran, granted the sum of £34 to Mrs. Gannett. In 1805 the Federal pension office allowed her a pension of \$4 a month, increased to \$6.40 in 1816, and in 1818 to \$8, for life. In 1838 Congress by a special act granted the sum of \$466.66 to her heirs.

### III

But the end of the war did not retire Deborah permanently to the fire-side. In 1802 she became what must have been the first woman lecturer in the United States, certainly the first female soldier to appear on the platform. Who put her up to this isn't of record, but she must have had some urging and it doubtless came from one Herman Mann, who took a great interest in this veteran of the war for independence. Somebody prepared the lecture for her. It was also printed as a pamphlet and sold at shops, and it contains some of the most flowery flights and resonant

periods of post-Revolutionary oratory.

Deborah's first lecture was delivered at the Federal Street Theater, Boston, in March 1802. Her talk was filled with noble abstractions about liberty and females and the rigors of war. "Wrought upon," she told her gaping audience, now looking on the only female soldier they were ever to see,

"wrought upon at length, as you might say, by an enthusiasm and a phrenzy that could brook no control, I burst the tyrant bonds, which *held my sex in awe*, and clandestinely, or by stealth, grasped an opportunity, which custom and the world seemed to deny, as a natural privilege and whilst poverty, hunger, nakedness, cold and disease had dwindled the *American Armies* to a handful — whilst universal terror and dismay ran through our camps, ran through our country — whilst even WASHINGTON himself, at their head, though like a god, stood, as it were, on a pinnacle tottering over the abyss of destruction, the last prelude to our falling a wretched prey to the yawning jaws of the monster aiming to devour — not merely for the sake of gratifying a facetious curiosity, did I throw off the habiliments of *my sex*, and assume those of the warrior, already prepared for battle."

The spelling, the italics, and the capitals are Deborah's, or, rather, her ghost-writer's. The above and more, much more of the same, brought her auditors up in their seats, but she kept the best part of her act for closing. In this bit she appeared — apparently in some sort of uniform — with a regulation Army musket and went through the manual of arms, "briskly and with perfection," said one who

saw her, "and she brought the musket butt smartly down to the floor with a thud." If there had been any other acts, this drill with the Old Betsy would have stopped the show.

From Boston Deborah went on to Worcester, then in succession to Providence, Holden, Brookfield, Springfield, Northampton, Albany, Schenectady, and Ballston Springs. Apparently she had to make all lecture and hall arrangements herself, for she kept a diary of the tour and in it commented on the way she was received in the various towns, and also, in good Yankee style, kept track of her expenses. At Albany, for instance, she had to pay \$2 "to Old Key Keeper," probably the janitor, and to Mr. Barber went \$3 for printing. She had to pay forty-eight cents for "sweeping court house," twenty cents for cleaning candle sticks, and a mere seventeen cents "for Brushing Seats." In the meantime her board and room cost \$6, which does seem to be rather high, and \$1.34 went for washing. Soldier or no, she was a woman still, and one item in her expenses at Albany was \$1, "for Dressing my Haire."

Deborah's lecture, which appears to have had a wide sale in pamphlet form, was probably the work of the aforesaid Herman Mann, of Sharon, who also wrote and published a dubious biography of the lady. This book was subjected to no little higher-criticism by persons who knew Deborah, and was revised by Mr. Mann's son, with countless "corrections and deletions." Although anti-

quarians accept the newer manuscript, with minor reservations, and consider it carefully done, it has never been published.

If Deborah ever went on a second lecture tour there is no record of it. She seems to have settled comfortably into life at Sharon and to have become in time a local matriarch, unique in that she was a blown-in-the-bottle veteran of the Revolution. She died April 29, 1827, aged about sixty-seven, and was buried in nearby

Rockridge cemetery. A street in Sharon has been named for her.

I can't learn whether the First Baptist Church of Middleboro ever extended fellowship to Deborah, after their ill-considered action in 1782. I hope she remained in a state of excommunication. And there is no record to indicate that either Plympton, where she was born, or Middleboro, where she was so shabbily treated, ever produced another so distinguished citizen as Private Deborah Sampson.



## CORN STILL GROWS

BY INEZ CLARK THORSON

HE used to say when he was very small  
And rode with me, warm days, upon the plow,  
At planting-time, "I want to be as tall  
When I'm a man . . . as tall as corn. . . ." Somehow  
It seems but yesterday. As time went on  
He sprang up like the corn, clean-cut and straight,  
And he was tall. . . . Then war . . . and he was gone.  
And now I know I need not watch and wait  
For he will never come to be a part  
Of Spring, and there is nothing to be said  
Save that the corn still grows and while the heart  
Knows utter hunger, people must be fed.