

Sally Tompkins

CAPTAIN, CONFEDERATE ARMY



by Robert S. Holzman

JEFFERSON DAVIS dedicated his autobiography "To The Women Of the Confederacy . . ." Many of them aided the military in invaluable ways, and some proudly bore honorary titles; only one woman was granted a regular army commission by the Secretary of War.

The opening of the Civil War in 1861 found Miss Sally Louise Tompkins living at the Arlington House in Richmond with her mother and sister. Sally was then 28 years of age. She was quite small, not over five feet in height, but there was dignity and force in her presence. She was not a beauty, but it was said of her that she had "a splendid face." A portrait of the period shows her long, determined mouth, narrow eyes, her hair parted straight down the center and tightly drawn back to expose her ears.

Sally was born on November 9, 1833, at Poplar Grove, Mathews County, Virginia. When her father died, the family left their rambling frame house with its tall portico and moved to Richmond. It would have been easy for her, by

reason of the family wealth, to take a steamer from the Cape Fear River, and go to Europe to stay "for the duration" but she felt it her duty to remain in Virginia.

At the start of the war, Richmond had a population of about 37,000 persons, but there were few hospitals. The South had no effective national hospital or relief organization such as that in the North. Caring for the first of the war wounded was thrust upon untrained civilians. Warehouses were overcrowded with disabled soldiers. Temporary structures were hastily nailed together. But that was not enough. "Every house was opened for the wounded," recorded one Southern woman. "They lay on verandas, in halls, in drawing rooms of stately mansions . . ."

After the first Battle of Manassas, the great vans of the Southern Express Company brought in cargoes of suffering, gray-clad men. Judge John Robertson sent Sally a message that, as his family had moved to the country for an indefinite stay, she could make use of his spacious town house. She equipped this building (at the northwest corner of Third and Main Streets) at her own expense. On July 31, 1861, ten days after First Manassas, she opened the doors of what she called the Robertson Hospital for the care of wounded and sick men from the battlefields. The government assigned six surgeons to the hospital.

Sally took her mother's old cook

to the hospital to handle the kitchen. Another cook was loaned by Dr. Spotswood Welford. Bandages and linen were supplied by townspeople of high and low station; and women who could not stand the sounds, sights, and odors of a hospital, rolled bandages at home. Food was purchased by Miss Tompkins or was donated by patriotic Southerners. Medicines were from captured Northern stocks. Later, when medicines and drugs were declared by the North to be contraband of war, the necessary articles were furnished by blockade runners.

AT FIRST there was no shortage of assistance. An observer told how one young girl approached a sick man with a pan of water in one hand and a towel over her arm. "Mayn't I wash your face?" she asked him. "Well, lady," he replied, "you may if you want to. It's been washed fourteen times this morning. It can stand another time, I reckon." Because of the Tompkins' family name and social prominence, the Robertson Hospital became the focus of Richmond's wealth, beauty and fashion each day. But after the first flush of patriotic enthusiasm, the hospitals were regarded as the place for only the most stout-hearted women. Sally directed the work and provided what was needed. So careful was the attention furnished here that word of it spread widely, and many wounded men from dis-

tant places begged to be taken to her establishment.

In the midst of everything was Sally Tompkins. She had a medicine chest strapped to her side, a Bible always in her hand. The patients quickly learned that they could not argue with her. She used her own ample means generously but unlike certain private hospitals, she did not charge her patients. Outrageous charging was only one of the abuses that led the Confederate government to order that private hospitals be discontinued. Because of lack of over-all control, and for reasons of economy, the government thought it advisable to consolidate Richmond's numerous hospitals into a few large ones, such as Chimborazo, Camp Jackson, Camp Winder, and Howard Grove.

The order directed that all soldiers in private hospitals be transferred to institutions under direct governmental control. Soldiers could be treated at no hospital except one that was under a commissioned officer with a rank not lower than that of captain, which was the rank of an assistant surgeon.

While ambulances for the transfer of her patients waited at the door, Miss Tompkins went to see the president of the Confederacy to ask that her hospital be exempted from the order. She brought along her hospital register. Dr. William Berrien Burroughs later wrote in *Southern Practice*: "The number of men returned to the army was

very large; in fact, her hospital record of deaths was lower than—and her record of soldiers returned to their commands was greater than—that of any other hospital in Richmond."

Sally was determined that "her boys" should not be taken from their beds. But, as the order had been the result of an act of the Confederate Congress to absorb the private institutions into the military organization, President Davis felt he could not ignore the law. His methodical mind worked out a solution: he would have her commissioned as an officer in the Confederate army; then she could continue to direct her hospital as an integral part of the military organization. On September 9, 1861, L. P. Walker, the Secretary of War, signed her commission as Captain of Cavalry, unassigned. As a captain, she could issue orders and draw army rations. She accepted the commission, but would not let her name be placed upon the payroll.

"I had the rank and title, everything except the pay," she explained.

WOMEN bandaged wounds, fanned flies, brought water, washed the disabled, hunted for ice and supplies. Some volunteer workers discharged their own obligations by bringing in their servants for the less glamorous tasks, but the work got done. Women of means visited the hospitals daily with gifts. Some women cultivated poppies for opi-

um and laudanum. A generation after the war, a minister wrote that "more than to the surgeons, the credit of any comfort or sunshine in the hospital was due to our noble women . . ."

Many southerners resented the presence of females in the hospitals. One worker declared that "There is scarcely a day passes that I do not hear some derogatory remarks about the ladies who are in the hospitals, until I think, if there is any credit due them at all, it is for the moral courage they have in braving public opinion."

But such carping made no impression upon Captain Tompkins. The only personal reaction that she noticed was the frequently-repeated offer of marriage. She would smile and say, "Poor fellows, they are not yet well of their fevers."

Her hospital functioned until June 13, 1865. During this period

there were 1,333 admissions. Only 73 men died in the institution, a very low record for those days.

After the war, Captain Tompkins did not forget her interest in the soldiers of the Confederacy. She was a prominent figure at military reunions for many years. The family fortune was lost in the war, but at the 1896 reunion in Richmond, she rented a large house to provide shelter for the veterans.

As her meager funds failed, she went to live in the Home for Confederate Women in Richmond. She was not forgotten, and her eulogies did not wait for her death. The Sally Tompkins chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy was formed in her honor.

The only woman officer of the Confederate army died in Richmond on July 25, 1916, at the age of 83. She was buried with full military honors.



THE ONCE ILLEGAL

by Standish O'Connor

TAX

Our annual April bane was once declared unconstitutional...

THE April 15, 1959, deadline is still to come, but income tax, like the weather, is always a topic of conversation. "Death and taxes" have for centuries been considered an inevitable combination, but the United States income tax is less than 100 years old. The income tax authorized by the 16th Amendment to the Constitution has been a permanent fixture of Federal finance for only 45 years.

The first income tax was levied in 1861, during Lincoln's first year in office, as an emergency act to help finance the Civil War. It laid a tax of three per cent on annual income in excess of \$800. The next year, the exemption was lowered to \$600, and on incomes exceeding \$10,000 (a fortune in those days) the rate was raised to five per cent.

These assessments continued until 1870, when a bill came before the House to reduce internal revenue. That the tax was unpopular may be inferred from a cartoon of 1870. Entitled "The Financial Inquisition," it pictured President Grant as "the Grand Inquisitor"

and Uncle Sam chained to the floor, five iron weights on his chest, each representing a postwar year of income tax burden. "Associate Inquisitor" John Sherman says: "Well, well, Uncle Sam does stand a good deal of pressure. Executioner, keep piling the weights on." And down comes a sixth, labelled "1870 Income Tax."

In the House, Dennis McCarthy, of New York, moved to strike out the income tax clause altogether. He argued: "This tax is unequal, perjury-provoking, and crime-encouraging, because it is at war with the right of a person to keep private and regulate his business affairs and financial matters."

Jacob Ela, also from New York, disagreed. "I believe the income tax as at present paid is one of the most just taxes laid and affects no person who has not received a net income above the amount required for the reasonable support of a family." McCarthy's motion was defeated 124 to 60.

In the Senate, another New Yorker opposed the income tax feature.