

Entrenched in Secrecy on the Battlefields of the Civil War

Story by Adriana Schroeder, Illinois National Guard Historian

Pvt. Albert D.J. Cashier harbored an incredible secret that went undiscovered until 1911. Cashier enlisted with the 95th IL Regiment August 3, 1862 at age nineteen and mustered out with them on August 17th, 1865. After the war, Cashier suffered a broken leg in a car accident while doing odd jobs for State Senator Ira Lish. In the course of setting the broken thigh, the town doctor discovered that Albert Cashier was actually a woman, Jennie Rodgers to be exact. The Senator and the doctor only shared the information with the Chesbro sisters, who cared for Cashier and in turn were also sworn to secrecy. No one knows how the shocking news leaked, but by 1914 the public could read about her in the papers.

Little is known about Cashier's early life except that she was an Irish Immigrant. When pressed, Cashier offered up several popular stories. These yarns ran the gamut of her mother dressing her up as a boy, or was it her stepdad? Did he also bestow the name Albert on her as she once stated? Did she stow away on a ship dressed as a boy? Or did she romantically enlist with her lover as she told the Chesbro sisters? Whatever the reason, clearly she wanted her early years and reason for passing as a man kept private as she habitually told conflicting stories following her leg injury to the entrusted doctors and caregivers.

Before the Civil War, she did odd jobs as a laborer, farmhand and shepherd, and found male attire better suited to her work. Adopting a male persona elevated Cashier's social, economic and legal status in antebellum society. When asked why she enlisted, Cashier said, "the country needed men and I wanted excitement!" Already used to heavy manual labor, she easily adapted to life as a Soldier.

The Army suited Cashier. Her comrades admired the little soldier with the Irish brogue, known for her raw courage, heroic bravery and spunk. She tirelessly proved herself time and again on the field of battle. While the 95th laid siege to Vicksburg, Cashier was captured during a reconnaissance mission. The humiliation of being found out in her unit was one thing, but by the enemy? She fought back by knocking down the guard, stealing his weapon and ultimately outrunning everyone involved in the ensuing chase. On another occasion she climbed up a fortification to taunt the rebels into revealing their positions. One veteran recalled how she shimmied up a tree to rescue a captured Union flag, all the while exposing herself to the deadly accurate aim of nearby confederate snipers.

Easier to seek out decent wages as a man, Cashier continued her masquerade after the war. Illiterate, with no family, she had to rely on her ingenuity and wits to earn a living and by this time was comfortable in her disguise. She settled in Saunemin, IL in 1869 and worked as a farmhand, laborer, child sitter, janitor, real estate caretaker and town lamplighter. The Chesbro family grew so fond of Cashier they set a place for her at the dinner table, bought her a house and a plot in the family cemetery.

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In 1890 Cashier obtained a veteran's pension. Since the leg wound never fully healed she applied and received entrance into the Soldier and Sailor's Home in Quincy, IL as a disabled veteran. The secret held under the cloak of the doctors and nurses. Under constant stress of interrogation surrounding her past by curious doctors, her mental health deteriorated. Deemed too fragile to be cared for at the home, Cashier was sadly declared insane and sent to Watertown State Hospital. Adding to her plight, around this time, her closely guarded secret became public knowledge, prompting the pension bureau to launch a fraud investigation. At the onslaught of media frenzy, Cashier became fearful and withdrew. Her only solace in day to day life was the many visits that she received from her outraged combat brothers. Helpless to intervene in her treatment, they stood by their comrade to the very end. Incensed that the institution forced her to wear dresses, they could hardly bear to witness the humiliation of a Soldier who displayed such fearlessness in battle. Unable to function well in long skirts, a feeble seventy year old Cashier tripped and broke her hip, the rest of her life confined mostly to her bed. Believing the state negligent, committing Cashier only to save money, the comrades loudly voiced their criticism of her treatment and became fiercely loyal and protective of her. The loyal friends rallied around Cashier, defending her honor when the Pension Bureau insinuated that she must have been insane her whole life.

On Oct. 10, 1915 Cashier died. She was buried in uniform with full military honors in Sunnyslope cemetery in Saunemin, IL. There are approximately 400 women known to have served in the Civil War, there are undoubtedly many more who will be lost to history.

Women have served in the United States Army since 1775 with the beginning of the American Revolution to the current conflict. Throughout the U.S. Army's history, women have proven that when freedom is threatened, they have the hearts of warriors and have responded with invaluable service. The role of women in today's military is increasing. Women are doing the same jobs as men and continuing to train to the same standards as their male counterparts. More women are assuming leadership roles and responsibilities that weren't possible 20-30 years ago. Throughout military history, women have proven that when freedom is threatened, they have the hearts of warriors and have responded with invaluable service.