

Kady Brownell, Symbol of Loyalty and Patriotism

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This paper is dedicated to Kady Brownell for whom our Tent is named. It's about a woman who, like many brave men and women, served our country proudly and selflessly. But before telling her story, I'd like to say a few words on life in the military for women during the Civil War.

For generations the Civil War has been seen as a man's fight. Historians have focused on men who joined the Union and Confederate armies. We have heard about combat, life in military camps and prisons and sadly the loss of many lives, as the Civil War was one of the bloodiest in history.

But rarely have women figured into the story. Rather, historians have focused on self-sacrifices of women who served on the home front as nurses and spies, and on women left behind to tend the farms and support their families. Only recently have historians shown that women bore arms, charged into bloody battles and lived in military camps like men. Some were wounded or imprisoned while others may have died in action.

We may never know the extent of women's involvement. But what we know is that at least a thousand women on both sides enlisted in the War. Many posed as men. Others followed their husbands into service by signing up as army nurses and cooks. Like men, women experienced the hardships of warfare.

So why did women enlist? Women served for the same reasons as men. They earned pay and craved adventures away from home. They proved their ability and competence, and demonstrated their patriotism. In short, women sought opportunities closed to them. Remember, in the 19th century women didn't have the vote and few worked outside the home. The War allowed some, more daring women to escape the confines of their gender.¹

For me, Kady Brownell exemplifies the quest to expand women's roles. Kady was a real woman with a real story who marched off to war. She saw the front lines and witnessed the dangers of warfare. Both during the War and after as a veteran she encountered discrimination and red tape, and she realized the limitations placed on her as a woman.

Kady was not new to military life. She was born in 1842 in an army camp in Caffraria, South Africa. Her father, Colonel George Southwell was a Scottish soldier in the British Army. Her mother traveled to Africa to watch her husband on

maneuvers. Accounts of Kady's early years show she was well accustomed to the hardships of military life.

After her parents' death, family friends adopted young Kady. Sometime prior to 1860 she moved with them to Rhode Island where she became a weaver in a mill. It was here she met and married a mechanic, Robert Brownell.

After the fall of Fort Sumter, Robert enlisted in the 1st Rhode Island Infantry, a company of sharpshooters. Kady insisted on joining him, but he opposed. Determined, Kady met with Rhode Island's Governor William Sprague who was so impressed that he accepted her into his company. She left for DC where she found Robert. She enlisted with him and became the company's color bearer, a role placing her in the heart of danger.

Kady refused to be treated differently. She trained with the men and became one of the company's best sharpshooters. She also learned to use a sword, which she carried proudly as a symbol of her position as color bearer.

During the First Battle of Bull Run (1861), Kady stood on the line holding her flag until the advancing enemy was within a few hundred feet of her. What first appeared a Union victory turned into a bloody retreat of the defeated troops. Kady held her ground. In the confusion, a Union soldier led her out of harms way. He did not survive, but Kady managed to reach safety.

Along with her husband, Kady received her discharge papers after their enlistment. The couple re-enlisted in the 5th Rhode Island where she served as a nurse, "Daughter of the Regiment" and color bearer.

But it was in the role of heroine that Kady will be remembered. While preparing for battle at New Berne, she realized her company was mistaken as rebels. Kady immediately rushed to the front lines waving her flag until it was apparent the advancing forces were "friendly fire."

It was at New Berne that Robert's leg was shattered. Kady spent weeks nursing him, as well as caring for wounded Union soldiers and Confederate prisoners. Robert was honorably discharged. Kady also received her honorable discharge signed by General Burnside, together with her Sergeant's sword and the tattered flag she had carried so proudly.

Kady was the only woman to receive discharge papers from the Union Army. She was also the only woman to receive an army pension. In 1870 she was inducted into the GAR amidst protests from veterans who questioned her heroism at New Berne.

Like many vets, life was difficult for the couple. Robert found odds and end jobs, while Kady worked for the Park Service in New York. Although both had army

pensions, their incomes were small. Plus both now had health issues. There were medical bills to pay along with other expenses, making it difficult to make ends meet. They were later admitted to the Woman's Relief Hospital in Oxford, NY where they lived until Kady's death in 1915. Robert died the same year.

Kady's story is one of fraternity, charity and loyalty. It is the story of a woman who never lost sight of her goals even in the darkest moments. She is a patriot and a heroine. Perhaps Clinton Scollard best sums up her historical contributions in his poem "The Daughter of the Regiment," written in 1862. In ending, I'd like to read a few stanzas.

*"Who with the soldiers was stanch danger-sharer-
Marched in the ranks through the shriek of the shell?
Who was their comrade, their brave color bearer?
Who but the resolute Kady Brownell?"*

*Waving her banner she raced for the clearing:
Fronted them all, with her flag as a spell;
Ah, what a volley—a volley of cheering—
Greeting the heroine, Kady Brownell.*

*Gone (and thank God!) are those red days of slaughter!
Brethren again we in amity dwell;
Just one more cheer for the Regiment's Daughter!—
Just one more cheer for her, Kady Brownell.ⁱⁱ*

Endnotes

ⁱ Bonnie Tsui, *She Went to the Field: Women Soldiers of the Civil War* (Guilford, Conn.: TwoDot, 2003), p. 2.

ⁱⁱ See <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/daughter-regiment>.