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BELLE BOYD

## A REBEL TO THE CORE

Confederate spy Belle Boyd received a personal note from General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson on May 23, 1862, thanking her for "the immense service that you have rendered your country." That service had been rendered earlier in the day as Jackson prepared to recapture the Union-held town of Front Royal, Virginia.

Boyd was staying with her aunt in Front Royal and had learned much about the state of the Union forces there. Speaking to one Federal officer,

the 18-year-old was told that occupying Union forces planned to burn the town's bridges after they retreated, to slow the Confederates' pursuit of their army. She communicated this information to Jackson's forces so that they could reach the town before the Federals destroyed their means of access. Running over open fields, Boyd waved her white bonnet at the Confederates as a sign to advance.

Later on, the female spy modestly admitted in her dramatic autobiography, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, "I could not but be aware that I had been of some service to my country."

Belle Boyd was born in Martinsburg, Va., on May 9, 1844. As a teenager she was intensely loyal to the South and helped to raise funds for the Confederate Army. She began her career in espionage after an insolent soldier defied her mother's wishes not to have the Union flag flown over her house. Boyd wrote: "I could stand it no longer...my blood was literally boiling in my veins. I drew out my pistol and shot him." Sympathetic Federal officers who conducted an inquiry into the shooting spared Boyd from punishment, and the vivacious young woman decided to obtain information from admiring Northern

officers and use it to further the Confederate cause.

Boyd found means to take advantage of gullible Union officers such as General James Shields, who allowed her to wander freely in her aunt's home while he and his men occupied it, and she also used her wiles to secure information from smitten soldiers. She wrote of one captain, "I am indebted for some very remarkable effusions, some withered flowers, and last, not least, for a great deal of very important information, which was carefully transmitted to my countrymen." She also smuggled weapons and medical supplies, and often sneaked through Union lines on horseback.

Boyd depicted herself as a Rebel to the core, but she also liked being thought of as a Southern belle. She wrote, "Our male relatives being with the army, we ladies were obliged to go armed in order to protect ourselves as best we might from insult and outrage." The Northern press saw Boyd quite differently, often depicting her as a camp follower or even as a prostitute.

On the orders of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, soldiers arrested Boyd in July 1862 for espionage and confined her in Washington's Old Capitol Prison. She was released a month later during an exchange of prisoners of war and dispatched to Richmond.

But Boyd soon resumed spying, and the following June she was once again arrested and sent to prison. Authorities released her this time only because she fell ill with typhoid fever.

After regaining her strength, the daring young woman set out on another dramatic escapade. On May 9, 1864, she set sail for England aboard the steamer *Greyhound*. "I was the bearer of dispatches from my Government to authorities in Europe," she later wrote. But a Union vessel soon captured her blockade runner, and once again the daring

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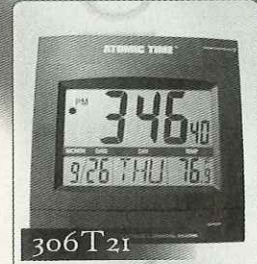
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spy became a prisoner. Her guard aboard ship was a handsome Union officer, Acting Ensign Samuel Hardinge, and the two began a courtship. She wrote of Hardinge: "[A]lthough our politics differed, 'Women,' thought I, 'can sometimes work wonders; and may not he, who is of Northern birth, come by degrees to love, for my sake, the ill-used South?'" Fearing that she would be imprisoned again once the ship arrived in Boston, Boyd wrote to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and asked that she be allowed to go to Canada. Welles agreed, but added that if she was ever again caught in the United States, she would be shot.

Boyd traveled to Quebec, Canada, then took a ship to England. Hardinge followed after the Navy dismissed him for allowing *Greyhound's* captain to escape. Boyd and Hardinge were married in London in August 1864, but he died the following year, leaving his 21-year-old wife alone with a child to support.

Pressed for money, Boyd wrote and published her autobiography in London in 1865. Contemporary critics found the book too sensational; nevertheless, it remains a full-bodied representation of the sweeping mood of the Confederate cause. After making her debut as an author, Boyd next turned to the stage. She returned to the United States at the end of 1866 and continued acting until 1869, when she married John Hammond, a businessman and former Union officer.

The Hammonds had four children together but divorced after 15 years of marriage. Two months later, the former Belle Boyd married a handsome but poor actor, Nathaniel Rue High, and soon began giving dramatic autobiographical narratives of her exploits as a Confederate spy. She continued acting until she died of a heart attack on June 11, 1900, while on tour.

By her life's end, Belle Boyd had tempered her passion for the Confederacy. Her performances in England and the United States had stressed the importance of the unity of the North and South, and because of this she won a following from veterans on both sides of the conflict. Her career culminated in a dramatic production ending with a plea for American unity: "One God, One Flag, One People—Forever!"

—Eliza McGraw

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