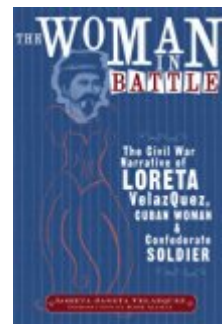


Loreta Janeta Velazquez. *The Woman in Battle: The Civil War Narrative of Loreta Velazquez, Cuban Woman and Confederate Soldier.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. lxvi + 606 pp



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Reviewed by Corey Reigel

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Since everyone likes a mystery, this book has something for all. If it is all true, then Loreta Velazquez was the most fascinating and fortunate person you have never heard of before. She wore a uniform and passed herself as an officer to participate in combat and later served as a spy. In these adventures, she met many important people and traveled great distances. In this reprint of the 1876 autobiography, Velazquez is reminiscent of Woody Allen's Zelig, able to appear so unobtrusively in the background, yet present at many important events. Or perhaps this is a compilation of several women's experiences, packaged by the original publisher into a more commercially acceptable form. When we study history, we occasionally encounter someone who genuinely had a

life filled with amazing coincidences and adventures worthy of the best novels. When dealing with American Civil War autobiographies we often discover the author's self-serving distortions of the truth. So which one is Loreta Velazquez?

Born into an aristocratic Cuban family, Loreta Velazquez moved to New Orleans as a young lady. There she met a dashing officer in the United States Army. Since her family disapproved of the relationship, she eloped with him and they spent the years before the war at different army posts. When the Civil War began, Velazquez was an enthusiastic supporter of secession and desired to serve the Confederacy. So she purchased an officer's uniform and made adjustments to make herself look more convincingly like a man. With

some assistance from friends, she became the dashing Lieutenant Harry T. Buford, who is at first a recruiter for the Confederate Army. Later the transvestite Buford serves in combat at the Battles of Bull Run, Balls Bluff, Fort Donelson, and Shiloh. Although wounded, her secrets are not revealed. Later Velazquez returns to female clothing to serve as a spy, a smuggler, and a counterfeiter. Along the way she meets President Abraham Lincoln, President Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War Cameron, a great many generals, and even had an opportunity to kill General Grant. When the war ends she begins a series of travels overseas and on America's Western frontier. If it is all true, that is.

Certainly there were women who disguised themselves and served in combat as well as women who served as spies. Was this book actually a compilation of several women's experiences? For example, the author often provided considerable details about recruiting or combat, yet other important elements of Velazquez's life are suspiciously brief. Although she married four times, her husbands conveniently die, and one is not even named, leaving the widow free to pursue her wartime ambitions. Similarly, her children, born before the war, also die accommodatingly when the war begins so that she is freed of all obligations. In a book profuse with details, her children are never even named. There is also a shift in the style of narration from the transvestite Lieutenant Harry T. Buford in the first half of the book to the lady spy of the last half. The woman soldier provides bountiful details that accurately reflect the battles in which she fought, but the lady spy conveniently skips over considerable details and moves rapidly from one operation to the next, and manages overseas travel with no difficulty. The explanations are incomplete. For an era famous for hardship, Velazquez never suffers for want of funds, rather money often appears just when it is needed. Is it all true and serendipity or is it literary license?

Afficionados of the American Civil War will find this a fascinating reproduction. For Women's Studies, this is instructive as an exception to the rules of social mores and gender roles in nineteenth-century America. This would be a welcome addition to public and university libraries. Although too long for use in college courses it might be an interesting research tool. If you enjoy puzzles, this could be for you.

Why has not Sandra Bullock made a movie out of this book?

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