

VIVIAN MORGAN – a local author of a book entitled ‘Cross-dressed to Kill’ was the speaker for Bosham WI Zoom meeting on 2nd June. Many years ago Vivian had found a book in a bookshop about women who had dressed as men in order to do something patriotic and to fight as a soldier. With no knowledge of military history Vivian decided to research more into this subject and, after spending time in the British Library and travelling to the US National Archive in Washington, some time later her book was finished. Her talk was accompanied by many very interesting slides showing pictures of the women.

In her book she highlights 21 women of European, British, Irish and American nationalities covering the timespan between the 17th and 20th centuries (300 years of constant war taking away husbands and menfolk), but there were many many more women from Prussia, Russia, Spain and Israel that became spies, put their lives at risk and fought on the front line.

Hundreds of young women changed their identity, their name and dressed as men to fight as soldiers. They cut their hair, bound their breasts and joined up. They felt they had a right to fight for their country and found it exciting and challenging.

The uniform at that time made it easy to conceal a feminine shape with jackets, baggy shirts and trousers. Washing was also rare, so there’d be no embarrassing moments in the ‘ablutions’ department.

Once discovered and their stories told, some were royally applauded and rewarded for their actions and the public packed the theatres to see them.

However, not all found fame and glory as many were killed in combat.

Eleanora Prohaska 1785-1813 became August Renz. She was shot and died in battle just a few weeks after joining up.

Hannah Snell 1723-1793 was a volunteer soldier and called herself James Gray for 5 years. She then went to Portsmouth, became a marine and sailed to the East Indies on board HMS Swallow. She was shot in action, but survived and after leaving the service she returned home in 1750 to live with her sister in Wapping and at that time revealed she was a woman whilst at a local pub. The Royal Chelsea Hospital recognized her service and she was granted a military pension.

Here’s another ‘first’ - Margaret Ann Bulkley was the first woman to qualify as a doctor known as Dr. James Miranda Stuart Barry. She became a military surgeon in the British Army. Born in Cork in 1795 obtained a medical degree from the University of Edinburgh Medical School then served first in Cape Town, South Africa and subsequently many parts of the British Empire.



She also served in Malta, Corfu, the Crimea and Canada. Later she went to the West Indies where she concentrated on improving housing, welfare and working conditions for the troops. Her last posting was to Canada as Inspector General of Hospitals where she fought for better food, proper medical care and treatment for all, including prisoners, lepers, soldiers and their families. She also introduced fruit to the diet of her charges.

It wasn't difficult to enlist as a volunteer as war needed an endless supply. Recruiting sergeants were sent out to get 'anyone' (fit or otherwise) to join up. They would get 'the King's Shilling' to serve as a new recruit in the Royal Navy or the British Army.

Joan of Arc in 1431 – wearing male dress (in her case – armour) was considered to be 'an abomination to God and man and in violation of canon law'. Apparently, if she had worn a woman's dress, she probably would not have been burned at the stake. However, women still took the greatest risk of being arrested and punished.

Even as recently as 1967 John Laffin (a historian) said 'A woman's place should be in the bed, in a crinoline or terylene rather than in battledress, wheeling a pram rather than driving a tank'.

Women were labelled as being 'mental' if they had these sorts of tendencies. In 1723 Deborah Sampson had the energy and spirit of her brothers. She was a hero of the American Revolution when she disguised herself as a man called Robert Shurtleff and joined the Patriot forces. She was the only woman to earn a full military pension for participation in the Revolutionary Army. She once said 'Why can I not fight for my country too?' She had no regrets about taking disguise. She also said 'I am indeed willing to acknowledge what I have done, an error and presumption. I will call it an error and presumption because I swerved from the accustomed flowery path of female delicacy, to walk upon the heroic precipice of feminine perdition!'

By 1853 women could be in conflict zones without disguise (Florence Nightingale – Crimean War. One of the requisites was that they had to be past 30, plain – almost to repulsion! Further ahead – after WWII women were allowed to be permanent soldiers when NATO countries agreed to it. These days women in the services hold very senior positions. Indeed, in all walks of life women work at very high levels with huge workloads and much responsibility. How things have changed!

The next Zoom meeting will be held on Wednesday, 7th July at 2.30pm. We welcome anyone who would like to 'tune in', to see if you like us and perhaps come along to join our 'REAL' meeting on 1st September at 2.30pm to Bosham Village Hall. If you would like further information please contact the President – Rosemary Keating on 01243 839953.

Jennifer Fidler