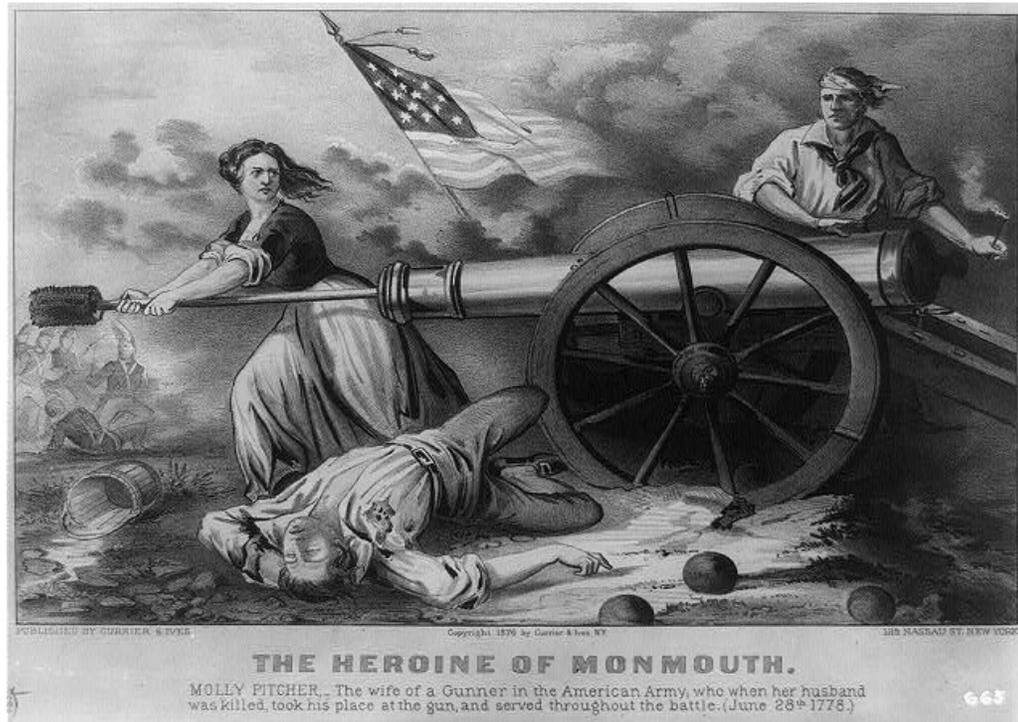


Margaret Corbin: Molly Pitcher?



(Library of Congress)

Molly Pitcher simply did not exist during the American Revolutionary War. Like “Rosie the Riveter” of World War II fame, “Molly Pitcher” was the nickname given to the many woman who fought alongside men, whether disguised in men’s clothes or not. Historians disagree on who the "real" Molly Pitcher was; however, "Molly Pitcher" may be a composite image inspired by the actions of a number of real women. Several scholars tend to believe that Margaret Corbin’s actions during the war formed this composite image.

When New York City fell to the British in the Fall of 1776, General George Washington and his badly defeated Continental Army fled across the Hudson River. Only remnants of Washington’s army remained at Fort Mifflin, perched high above the river, at the northern tip of Manhattan Island. On November 16, the fort came under attack. Among those held up inside were John Corbin and his twenty-five year old wife, Margaret Cochran Corbin. When the British assault began, John assumed his position as an assistant gunner, but soon was forced to take over the cannon when the gunner was killed. Margaret immediately replaced her husband, helping carry water to cool down the cannon so John could swab, reload, and fire the cannon again. But soon thereafter, John fell dead. Margaret did not hesitate as she stepped into John’s place, loading and firing the cannon herself. She could not grieve for her husband for British forces were closing in on the fort. Suddenly, Margaret felt a searing pain as grapeshot struck her shoulder, chest, and jaw. Seeing Margaret fall, soldiers rushed to her side and carried her safely from the front line.

When the smoke cleared, the British had seized Fort Mifflin and captured Margaret. They paroled all the wounded soldiers, ferrying them across the Hudson River to Fort Mifflin, where she was taken by wagon to Lancaster, Pennsylvania to recover. Although her jaw and chest lacerations eventually healed with time, Margaret never recovered the use of her left arm. In an unexpected move, Congress acknowledged her wartime service by generously granting her half the pay and allowances of a soldier in the service of the Continental Army.

Corbin returned to New York after the war, settling in Highland Falls. Rather than serving as a heroic figure, she became a figure of scorn. As she died in 1800, many of her neighbors did not realize that the woman they relaised as a sharp-tongued, alcoholic knows simply as “Dirty Kate,” was in fact a Revolutionary War hero whose wartime heroics may have served as the symbolic image of Molly Pitcher.

Source: Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Women: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York, 2006), xi, 138-9.