

# **Behind Rebel Lines: The Incredible Story of Emma Edmonds, Civil War Spy Study Guide**

**Behind Rebel Lines: The Incredible Story of Emma Edmonds, Civil War Spy by Seymour Reit**

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# Plot Summary

Behind Rebel Lines by Seymour Reit, tells the true story of Emma Edmonds, who in April of 1861, answered the rallying cry of President Abraham Lincoln, who called upon the young men of America to join in the Union effort during the Civil War. Emma was twenty-one at the time. She had a slender build and had short cropped hair. She was in the habit of wearing men's clothes. She was raised in St. John, Canada, and had worn men's clothes for years while working on the family farm. Emma felt the resentment of her harsh and remote father who had wanted a son. The fractured relationship between Emma and her father led her, at sixteen years of age, to run away from home. An idealistic young woman, Emma headed for the United States, a nation that stood behind their words of freedom and liberty.

Emma loved her new country, and when President Lincoln called on the young men of America to volunteer for the Army at the start of the Civil War, Emma decided she wanted to help the cause and to protect and save the nation that she had grown to love. Emma had always climbed the highest tree and rode the fastest horse. An inner voice told her that she would not be happy with typical jobs given to women during the Civil War such as rolling bandages, knitting socks or working in textile mills where blankets were made for the soldiers. She wanted a role that was more exciting and, in her mind, having more impact on the war effort.

Emma decided she would pose as a man and join the Army. When she stood in line at the recruiting station in Flint, Michigan, she feared she would be exposed as a woman. Fortunately, for her purposes, the Union Army was so desperate for able-bodied men that they had foregone the physical exam. After she faced the recruitment board and answered some basic questions, she was told she would be sworn in and be assigned as a field nurse in a hospital unit. These positions were dangerous because they were in the line of fire and were only given to men.

Emma's story soon departed from those of other Civil War era women who posed as men and joined the army. After a Union spy was captured and executed, she volunteered, using the identity of Pvt. Franklin Thompson, to take his place. For the next two years, she periodically volunteered or was recruited for subversive operations. Devising convincing disguises, she entered enemy lines as a black male slave, a black female slave, a heavy-set, middle-aged Irish female peddler, a "butternut" [butternuts were Kentuckians who sympathized with the confederacy] and a male civilian who rose in stature within Louisville society.

Through her various identities and disguises, Emma Edmonds was able to gather valuable intelligence for the Union commanders. The information she was able to obtain greatly contributed to their successful campaigns. After the war ended, Emma was given a honorable discharge from the army and a life-long pension. She was the only female member of a Civil War veteran's association that had over 400,000 members.



# Chapter 1: April 25, 1861

## Chapter 1: April 25, 1861 Summary and Analysis

Union soldiers gathered at the Flint courthouse, anxious to go off to war. They were certain that the conflict would last less than three weeks. Emma Edmonds was in the line of young soldiers. She pulled her cap down low on her forehead, hoping that she wouldn't be discovered. She was used to men's clothing—that's what she had worn on her family farm in Canada for many years. Now at twenty-one, her slim and boyish figure and short cropped hair did not set her apart from the young men in line. The Union Army was so desperate for able-bodied men that they were foregoing physical exams. Still, Emma was nervous about being exposed.

Just ten days before, President Lincoln had asked for seventy-five thousand volunteers. The young men of America were answering his rallying cry—they were pouring into the recruiting station from every corner of the country. In her home town of Flint, Michigan, positions needed to be filled in the Michigan Volunteer Infantry known as the Union Grays. There were things she could do to help the cause that were usually assigned to women such as knitting socks, rolling bandages or working in a New England textile mill making blankets for the troops. These were all important and necessary jobs, but something was driving her to do more, a nagging sense that there was a bigger job waiting for her.

Emma had always been a risk taker, climbing the highest trees and riding the wildest horses. Her father had always wanted a son and he never got over his resentment for her not being that son. The relationship with her father was so fractured that at sixteen she ran away from her homeland and headed for the nation of "liberty and freedom." She loved her adopted country and wanted to fight to save it.

When the line she was in finally inched into the recruitment office, she identified herself as Franklin Thompson and her place of birth as St. John, Canada. She had hoped to get an assignment to a field hospital, a dangerous spot that was never given to women. She told the recruiter that she had a background as a medical orderly and hoped for an assignment in a field hospital. Her wish was granted within minutes—the Union Army was very short on field medical personnel. She was directed to a supply line where she was ordered to pick up the items she would need in the field. Emma, along with her peers, were sworn in and ordered to report to the depot at 5am the next day. They would be taken to Washington where they would become members of the Potomac Army.

Back in her rooming house, she tried on her uniform and equipment. Looking in the mirror, the transformation was complete—Emma Edmonds was gone and Franklin Thompson had arrived.



## Chapter 2: March 19, 1862

### Chapter 2: March 19, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Pvt. Thompson was ordered to tend to the soldiers lying sick or wounded in the medical tent. She was fatigued and was accused by the sergeant of holding her musket "like a mop." During training that day, Emma and her fellow recruits had been put through the paces—marching for hours in the hot Virginia sun, priming and firing their weapons endlessly and crawling through acres of mud. The war was lasting longer than anticipated. The Confederate troops were more skilled and able than first thought. Even though in her position Emma was a noncombatant, she had to undergo the skills training as the infantrymen.

The medical team was small, consisting of the head surgeon, Dr. Hodes, his assistant, Lieutenant Reese and four male nurses. There wasn't a large number of soldiers who needed care. Some were sick with dysentery or other minor conditions or injured from accidents or burns. A few had minor gunshot wounds from sniper fire. The nurses worked in teams, six hours off and six hours on.

When she laid down that evening, she recalled her first few weeks with the unit. She had been nervous about being discovered, especially during those times when privacy was essential. But she had managed and so far no one was the wiser. When she first arrived in Washington, Emma had time to explore the city. It was overflowing with uniformed personnel. Patriotic tunes were played in the streets by marching military bands while cavalry units rode down the street on their mounts. She had even seen President Lincoln a few times, waving from his upper floor window. The new Capitol building was under construction on Constitution Avenue.

After four months in Washington, her company boarded a paddle-wheel transport destined for Chesapeake Bay to Fort Monroe on the tip of the Virginia peninsula. Taking Yorktown, Virginia, was key to the Union Army's strategy in preventing the Confederate army from moving north to Richmond. The large Army of the Potomac, led by General George McClellan, was stationed in that area and would serve as a firewall against the advancement of the enemy.

But things were quickly escalating. An intelligence officer who had infiltrated the Confederate ranks had been exposed and was executed by firing squad. A Union patrol scouted the area for rebels hoping to uncover some important intelligence. Together these two factors would later lead Emma down a path of great risk and danger.



## Chapter 3: March 20, 1862

### Chapter 3: March 20, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Emma learned that Lt. James Vesey was a newcomer to Company B. Emma had known him when they both lived in Boston. Her friends in Boston had teased that she had been sweet on James. She was too busy to worry about that. She just was anxious to see her old friend. She had matured since he had seen her last, plus her short hair and dress would surely fool him. But if he recognized her, she might have to let her old friend in on her secret.

As Emma rushed over to the company tents, she passed a sight that was becoming familiar. The chaplain was reading a psalm as a small cluster of soldiers gathered around a new grave. She hesitated at the grave to pay her respects. Only then did she learn that the dead soldier was James Vesey. He had been out on a patrol the evening before and caught a musket ball in his neck. Emma was shocked and overcome with grief. James was only thirty years old. She would never hear his robust laughter again. With her friend's death, Emma realized that there would be many "James Veseys" killed in the war. When she first enlisted, she felt she was going off to an adventure. She was learning that hyped-up sentiment was a myth. That old nagging feeling to take action began to stir anew within Emma.

Emma, as Franklin, had become close to the wife of the chaplain, Major Butler, who volunteered her services to the wounded soldiers and who brought them special treats. The tears began to gush from Emma as she told Mrs. Butler about James' death. One thing led to another, and soon she confessed her masquerade to Mrs. Butler. Mrs. Butler was shocked but had no intention of turning Emma in. She had come from a rugged pioneer family and understood that spirit. Mrs. Butler had the notion that if she were younger, she might be doing the same thing. Emma felt better after her talk with Mrs. Butler—she had so much bottled up inside that she hadn't been able to share with anyone.

A few days later, Emma heard the rumors about the capture and execution of one of the Union's top spies. Emma's inner voice continued to steal rest from her. After sleeping on it one night, she woke up deciding that she had to test her mettle—she would volunteer for the covert operation.



## Chapter 4: March 23, 1862

### Chapter 4: March 23, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Mrs. Butler tried to discourage Emma from going into the battlefield. It was dangerous enough being a nurse. Major Butler, who did not know that Emma was a woman, helped "Franklin" study for the covert operation. He submitted her name for consideration to the commander. Emma underwent a barrage of questioning from a review panel who tested her patriotism, beliefs and knowledge of armaments. After a thorough review, the panel approved Franklin, who was required to take a special oath for secret agents. He was told he had wide-ranging latitude and that he could use whatever means necessary to gain the crucial intelligence.

Emma considered disguising herself as a Confederate soldier while in enemy territory but determined that was too risky. Other soldiers would be asking too many questions about what southern town he was from and what affiliations he had. Emma figured that the best way to go unnoticed among the Confederate Army was to disguise herself as a slave. She remembered seeing a minstrel show in Washington, so she contacted the captain of the mail boat and offered him a bribe to bring her back a minstrel wig. Mrs. Butler was going to help her complete her disguise. "Franklin Thompson" was now making way for a new identity named "Cuff".



## Chapter 5: March 29, 1862

### Chapter 5: March 29, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Standing before Mrs. Butler's mirror, Emma looked back at a dark-skinned young man with curly black hair who was wearing patched overalls and a red bandanna around his neck. She had darkened her skin with a mixture comprised of silver nitrate and water. Mrs. Butler gave her a small sack of food for her journey. Emma embraced Mrs. Butler and bid her good-bye. To test her new identity out, she popped in the medical tent. Dr. Hodes did not recognize her.

Emma met with the adjutant, who was shocked by her appearance. He led her through the sprawling area to the end of the encampment proper. There the adjutant left her—she was now on her own. She looked across the valley to the flickering lights of the Confederate's campfires. She was a little afraid but reminded herself why she was there. She had answered Lincoln's appeal to help save the country and she was avenging James's death.





## Chapter 6: March 30, 1862

### Chapter 6: March 30, 1862 Summary and Analysis

After night fell, Emma, as "Cuff", made her way across the valley. She moved cautiously, and the journey took her several hours to complete. Observing how long it took the sentry guard to march back and forth, Emma entered the camp when the guard was at the farthest point from her. She slept in a wooded area that night.

The next morning she awoke to the voices of several slaves who were singing as they walked through the woods. It was as good a time as any to test her disguise, so she stood up and greeted them, telling the slaves she was lost. The slaves were delivering breakfast to the sentry. They told Emma she could return to the camp with them after they made their deliveries. They gave her a biscuit and a cup of coffee, which she almost swallowed whole.

Back at camp, a Confederate officer asked Cuff why he wasn't working. Emma responded that she was planning on getting work in Richmond. The officer didn't like her answer and ordered a sergeant to put her to work. Walking through the camp, it looked very much like the Union camp. She noted that south of the city, the Confederate soldiers were building up a defense against the Union. Cuff was ordered to help dig a trench that would be used as a gun pit.

At the lunch break, the slaves were given only cornbread and gruel. The sergeants who supervised the work was harsh with them—bullying and threatening them. They worked until dark, leaving Emma's hands raw and bleeding. After a less than nourishing dinner, the slaves were allowed to wander around the camp. Cuff took advantage of this time, taking note of the artillery and memorizing the layout of the defensive trenches. One of the other slaves gave him a ragged blanket and he went off and sat under an old tree. He took a pencil and paper out and made notes of the equipment and layout he had observed earlier. She took out the bottle of silver nitrate and dabbed some on her face so that her color wouldn't fade.



## Chapter 7: March 31, 1862

### Chapter 7: March 31, 1862 Summary and Analysis

The next morning, Emma, as Cuff, found her hands were so blistered that she knew she wouldn't last an hour in the trenches. She bribed a kitchen worker with a shiny pen knife to change places with him. The other slave was happy to take her place in the field. Cuff's job was to take food to the crews manning the heavy artillery. Doing this work gave Cuff the opportunity to observe more of the equipment and layout. Cuff heard a conversation that General Robert E. Lee had visited the camp recently and complained that their defenses would never hold up to a Union assault.

Cuff also took note of where the "Quaker guns" were located. Quaker guns were logs that were painted black and from a distance looked exactly like cannons, making the Confederate appear more imposing than it was. Cuff recognized a civilian peddler who often visited at the Union camp. Cuff learned that the man was really a Confederate spy who was bragging to a group of rebel officers about how he lured a patrol unit into ambushes. Emma wondered if he was instrumental in James' death.

Emma felt that she had gathered information that the Union should immediately know about. It had been relatively easy to find a way into the Confederate camp but it would be a lot more difficult to get out. The slaves were penned in at night and if Cuff was caught moving through the compound at night, Emma would either be shot as a spy or hanged as a runaway. A Confederate officer unknowingly provided a way out for Cuff. A young lieutenant recruited Cuff to temporarily act as a sentry guard. A corporal gave Cuff a rifle, saying to keep his eyes open and shoot at anything that moves. If he fell asleep, Cuff was warned, they'd shoot him.

Emma knew she'd have to make a break for it before the lieutenant returned. The dark valley was so misty that she could hardly see two feet in front of herself. She made her way across the valley until she was almost back to the Union camp. But entering at night would be risky, so she snuggled up under a tree and went to sleep.



## Chapter 8: April 1, 1862

### Chapter 8: April 1, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Emma walked toward the sentry in the morning, waving her red bandanna at the confused looking sentry. She told him that she had urgent business with the lieutenant. A short while later, she was once again Franklin Thompson and was sitting across the desk from Colonel Shrub, the adjutant. Franklin took out her notes and briefed the Colonel on all his observations—the size of the encampment, the artillery and the layout. Franklin also told the Colonel about the fake cannons and the peddler who was a Rebel spy. The adjutant left the office to advise General McClellan of the intelligence that Franklin had gathered. McClellan returned to the adjutant's office to shake his hand and personally thank him. Emma, as Franklin, was allowed to keep the new Enfield Carbine as a reward for her work.

After washing the dark tint off and putting back on her regular uniform, Emma visited Mrs. Butler, who was relieved to see that she made it back safely. She was amazed when Emma related everything she had seen and done. Dr. Hodes was glad to see Franklin for another reason; the unit was very short-handed with her absence. The doctor scolded Franklin for taking time away from his work.

Based on the information that Emma provided, General McClellan ordered an all-out assault on the enemy camp three days after Emma's return. Although the Union army far out-numbered the camp, the Confederate army was helped by soldiers who were detached from another camp, making the battle more difficult than they expected. The hospital was soon filling with casualties. Franklin and the others had to work around the clock to keep up. As bloody as it got, Emma held on to her belief in the Union cause.

The conflict dragged on until the Army of the Potomac took Yorktown during the first part of May. McClellan ordered his men to fight their way toward Richmond, the Confederate capital. A period of heavy rain followed, making the advance of the Union army slow and arduous. The soldiers faced an obstacle when they reached the Chickahominy River, much of which was still under rebel control. McClellan ordered that a bridge wide enough for horse and carriage be built over the river. The construction of the bridge would take three weeks, which would allow the rebels to regroup.

The Union officers were frustrated with how to close in on Richmond. What was certain was that they needed more intelligence. A daring soldier would have to cross the river and infiltrate behind the enemy lines. Franklin Thompson immediately came to McClellan's mind.



## Chapter 9: May 20, 1862

### Chapter 9: May 20, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Emma, now disguised as an older woman, rowed silently across the Chickahominy River. Emma had shed her own identity along with that of Franklin and Cuff to become an Irish peddler known as Bridget O'Shea. Mrs. Butler helped Emma with her disguise, which made her appear as a heavy-set middle-aged female peddler. Mrs. Butler gave her a basket full of spools of thread, needles, matches and packets of tea. At the time there was an influx of Irish immigrants who were poor and sold their own items to earn money. Mrs. Butler allowed Emma to use her clothes. Placing a pillow around her middle made her fill out the dress and appear much heavier. Mrs. Butler dusted Emma's dark hair with flour to make it look gray and found an extra pair of eyeglasses she could perch on her nose.

Alighting from her boat, Emma remembered the layout of the enemy encampment and soon found the winding road that led to it. She walked a good distance before she found a tree that she could rest under for the night. The next morning, it was pouring down rain. She was soaked and slipped into a small house that appeared to be abandoned. However, once in the kitchen, she heard a moaning coming from another room. In the next room, she found a very young Confederate soldier who was very ill. She recognized his symptoms as typhoid fever. Emma felt it was her responsibility to care for the dying boy despite the fact that he was on the other side. She gave him water and decided to stay by his side. She comforted him, held his hand and sang to him. He was fading fast but was able to tell Emma his story. Lieutenant Allen Hall became sick when he was leading his men in battle at Cold Harbor. His men retreated but he was too sick to keep up with them. He found the abandoned house and crawled in. He gave Emma a gold pocket watch and asked her to give it to Major McKee of General Ewell's staff.

The rainstorm was still raging when Emma dozed off for a short period. When she woke, the soldier was dead. She covered him in his army blanket and prayed for him. She was determined to deliver the watch to Major McKee. But she had a mission she had to complete, too. Colonel Shrub had directed her to find out what was going on within the camp. She wasn't without fear, but knew she had to push on for the sake of the mission and for the sake of the Union.



## Chapter 10: May 22, 1862

### Chapter 10: May 22, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Emma was stopped by a sentry as she neared the camp. She explained that she had something from a dying soldier to Major McKee. The sentry arranged for her to ride in a supply wagon to the camp's headquarters, where she explained her story to General Ewell's aide. The Major was out on maneuvers so the aide arranged for some food for Emma and a place to relax. Emma listened to the chatter of the slaves and learned the names of some of the officers. After she rested a while, she picked up her basket and wandered around the camp where she drew no attention and was free to roam.

During her walk around the camp, she took note of the numbers of cannons and the layout of the defenses. Major McKee met with her later in the afternoon. He was saddened by word of the lieutenant's death and appreciated Emma bringing the watch to him. He wanted to give the Lieutenant Hall an appropriate burial and asked if Emma would lead a squad of men to recover his body.

Emma, riding a chestnut steed, led the recovery party. She probed one of the soldiers who accompanied her. He revealed that they were ready for a Union attack after the bridge was completed. But the rebels were ready for them—they had heavy artillery hidden in the woods. The Union soldiers would be ambushed when they started over. After the party picked up the dead officer, Emma was asked to ride up a short distance and act as lookout. She agreed and told the party to go on and return to camp ahead of her and that she'd catch up.

Once out of sight of the party, Emma headed her horse for the Union camp and dug her heels in the horse's side. Colonel Shrub was delighted with the information she brought back and told her she could keep the chestnut horse she rode back on for herself. Emma named the horse "Rebel."



## Chapter 11: May 30, 1862

### Chapter 11: May 30, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Once the bridge was completed, the Army of the Potomac was poised for attack. The battle raged on far longer than anyone expected. But finally after days of bloody fighting, a Union corps under General Fitz-John Porter won several key battles and were able to cut the railway supplies to Richmond. A storm whipped up that turned the roads to mud and destroyed part of the bridge. These obstacles caused a delay in the Union's advancement and the Confederate forces had time to regroup. What resulted was a very fragmented conflict with pockets of fighting throughout the region.

Headquarters had been impressed with Franklin's spying and horse riding skills. They needed a messenger to get important information to the field officers coordinate their efforts. Much to the displeasure of Dr. Hodes, Franklin was pulled from the hospital for this messenger duty. For days, Emma, riding atop Rebel, was delivering messages throughout all sorts of terrain including the swamps, muddy fields and woods. She found her missions exciting but she had a few close calls. Once she fell in with a cavalry unit that was attacked by sniper fire. In their fight with the renegade group, Emma escaped injury but several of her fellow officers were wounded and Rebel received a gash across his side that the horse was able to recover from.

On another occasion, Emma took a short cut and was relieved when she saw a line of blue coats walking along a field. They waved at her and she waved back and headed for them. Suddenly, she was under fire from Confederate soldiers. Only then did she realize that the Union soldiers were prisoners and had tried to warn her by waving her off. As she turned and bolted away, Confederate soldiers were in hot pursuit. A bullet caught her in the arm but she held on and raced even faster. She was very frightened when she saw a huge ditch up ahead. She had never jumped Rebel before, but now she had no choice. Rebel made the jump and he and Emma were well on their way back to the Union camp. The Confederates turned back, not wanting to risk man or horse to chase down one Union soldier.

Emma went immediately to Mrs. Butler's house. She couldn't be treated in the hospital because she'd have to take her shirt off and reveal her true identity. Mrs. Butler treated the the wound which had just nicked her flesh. She would be fine, Mrs. Butler told her, but she was lucky—this time!



## Chapter 12: June 10, 1862

### Chapter 12: June 10, 1862 Summary and Analysis

Emma was given a two-week furlough to rest and to take care of his wounded arm. She hitched a ride on a supply wagon that was heading to Williamsburg. She toured the city, but after a short time she became bored and volunteered as a nurse at the city's two hospitals. One hospital tended to Union soldiers and the other to Confederate soldiers. She saw no difference in their needs and divided her time between the two. After the two-week furlough, her arm was healed and she returned to camp just in time for the final battle of Richmond.

There seemed to be no clear victor and the Confederacy was strengthened by a new commander, General Robert E. Lee. The battle, known as the Seven Days' Battle, raged back and forth between the two sides. At the end, General McClellan was forced to withdraw his battered army. Emma's regiment was being dispatched to the Shenandoah Valley under the Federal Army of Virginia led by General John Pope. She was relieved when she learned that the Butlers were being transferred there, too.

The Confederate army was being led by General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and General Pope needed to learn everything he could about their plans. Private Thompson's reputation had preceded him and he was soon called upon to infiltrate the enemy camp. Emma revived her "Cuff" disguise, and during the hectic months that followed, Emma slipped behind enemy lines several times. Emma also created a new disguise—that of a black woman carrying a laundry basket. While she was tending to a wounded soldier, some official-looking documents fell out of his clothing. She quickly grabbed them and hid them under her dress. Although she had to venture through a dangerous battlefield, Emma happened onto a Union regiment who took her back to camp.

On another occasion, Emma disguised herself as a "butternut". Butternuts were Kentuckians who were Confederate sympathizers who wore fringed jackets made of buckskin. While serving as a courier during the period, Emma developed several cases of frostbite on her feet. But it didn't stop her—the mission was what she focused on, not her tender feet. At the end of 1862, Emma and the Butlers were transferred to serve in the Ninth Corps under General Ambrose Burnside near Louisville, Kentucky. It was at this post that Emma would take on her most dangerous assignment.



## Chapter 13: February 17, 1863

### Chapter 13: February 17, 1863 Summary and Analysis

While General John Morgan was carrying out raids on Union regiments, a gala was held at the Kentucky State House. A handsome young man, Mr. Charles Mayberry, who was not in uniform, caught the attention of the debutantes who were dressed in their finest. There were rumors about the mysterious man's background but they were all wrong. Mr. Mayberry was actually Emma in yet another disguise.

Kentucky, along with Missouri and Maryland, was considered a border state. The people of Kentucky were divided on the question of slavery but did not want to secede from the nation. Kentucky in general stayed neutral in an effort to solve their dilemma. But when Kentucky was invaded by a rebel army, a Union army was sent into the strategic city of Paducah. The state could no longer remain neutral and officially sided with the Union. But there were many southern sympathizers among the Kentucky ranks and the Union wanted to stop leaks that would sabotage its efforts. Emma was once again called upon to be an operative. This time her mission would be different. She would be gathering intelligence not from the enemy but from among her own ranks. Her main goal was to learn the identity of the top rebel agent who was funneling information to the Confederacy.

Emma, as Mayberry, rented a room at a boarding house run by a woman who was reportedly a southern sympathizer. She was able to listen in on conversations between her and other boarders. Emma was able to work her way into Louisville society and by the time the gala was held, she—as Charles Mayberry—had the reputation of being pro-southern. At the state party, Mayberry made contact with P. N. Aylesworth, a wealthy merchant and known rebel supporter. Mayberry arranged to meet him the next day at this shop. At their meeting, Emma asked Aylesworth for a job. Aylesworth agreed to take him on as his bookkeeper on a trial basis.

Mayberry worked hard and Aylesworth was extremely pleased with his performance. Emma soon learned that Aylesworth's company was a front for rebel activities. She became suspicious of a frequent visitor, Mr. Hall, who would meet with Aylesworth behind closed doors. She didn't have any concrete evidence that Mr. Hall was the agent the Union was looking for. Time was marching on and she knew she had to come up with a plan.





## Chapter 14: March 10, 1863

### Chapter 14: March 10, 1863 Summary and Analysis

Emma, as Mayberry, announced to Aylesworth that he decided to join the Confederate Army. Aylesworth told Mayberry he'd have two horses saddled in the back of the shop the next night after dark. Mr. Hall would accompany him to the Confederate camp. They would then catch a barge at Garnettsville that would take them to the southern lines. Emma got word to her Union contact who told her to follow through with the plan. Union soldiers would be waiting to arrest him and Hall. Emma had done another great job.

The next night, Emma met with Aylesworth and Hall as planned. Hall was suspicious but Aylesworth vouched for Mayberry. Emma grew even more nervous when she spotted Hall's .44 pistol. Just when Emma thought the Union regiment had missed them, she heard a voice order them to stop and raise their hands. They were arrested and taken to the Union camp. Hall was jailed and Emma was set free and congratulated. The next day, Emma learned that Hall had secret Union plans in his possession. They also discovered the names of two more spies who were arrested along with Aylesworth. This time Emma's reward was a Confederate sword that had been confiscated from an officer. She took the sword for safekeeping to Mrs. Butler. Neither woman knew that it would be her last souvenir and that trouble of a different kind lay ahead for Emma.



# Chapter 15: May 6, 1983 and Chapter 16: What Happened After

## Chapter 15: May 6, 1983 and Chapter 16: What Happened After Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 15: May 6, 1983

A few weeks later, the regiment was transferred to service under the Vicksburg army, led by General Grant. Vicksburg was a Confederate railway center. If the Union could capture the city, it would cripple the southern forces. But naturally it was well-guarded. Grant had ordered numerous assaults but had failed to overtake the Confederate forces. Grant and his forces dug in and a long siege ensued. Many casualties—both soldiers and civilians—resulted from the bloody conflict. Emma, Mrs. Butler and the nurses worked around the clock to tend to the injured.

Emma fell sick from malaria, or as it was know then, "swamp fever". She was given quinine but saw no improvement. She had to either continue working or be hospitalized. She had successfully posed as a man for two years. She couldn't admit herself to the hospital and give up her career and be humiliated when her true identity was revealed. The only solution she could come up with was to run away, recover from her illness and then return to Vicksburg when she was well. She slipped out of camp and made her way to Cairo, Illinois. She purchased women's clothing and signed into the hospital for treatment.

She remained in the hospital for several weeks, during which time Vicksburg had surrendered to the Union and General George Meade's army had defeated Lee in the Battle of Gettysburg. The war was definitely turning in the Union's favor. She felt uplifted until she read in a Cairo newspaper that Pvt. Franklin Thompson was listed as AWOL. She bought a ticket to Washington where she immediately was hired as a nurse. Injured soldiers were pouring in the nation's capital. She kept up on the status of the war as best she could.

In April, 1865, the Union finally occupied the Confederate capital. A few days afterward, General Lee surrendered to General Grant. The war was over. Emma was in the crowd when President Lincoln gave a speech from the window of the White House. Emma's heart was full—her beloved country was saved.

### Chapter 16: What Happened After

After the war, Emma kept on with her nursing career. She also wrote the memoirs of her time in the Army as a nurse and spy. Emma had made a total of eleven subversive missions behind enemy lines. Her book, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, was a success and sold thousands of copies. Ever the patriot, Emma donated her share of the



book sales to the war relief. Some thought her account was scandalous but the editor, W. S. Williams defended her, reminding the readers of the patriotism she possessed for her adopted country. Only a few rare copies still exist of her original book.

Emma reunited with a childhood friend, Linus Seelye, who she married in 1867. The couple returned to the United States and lived in Cleveland. The couple had three sons, one of whom joined the U.S. Army—like his mother. Emma never fully recovered from her bout with malaria. She was bothered by Pvt. Thompson's dishonorable discharge and petitioned the Army for a review. She requested that she have her military rights restored, receive any back pay that was due to her and be given an honorable discharge. The US Congress debated her case and on July 5, 1884, she was granted the honorable discharge she sought and was awarded a bonus and a pension of twelve dollars a month.

Eventually Emma and Linus relocated to Texas, where the climate was more favorable. They stayed there until her death on September 5, 1898. After the war, a group of Civil War veterans formed a society known as the Grand Army of the Republic. Of the four hundred thousand ex-soldiers who were listed as members, Emma Edmonds was the only female.



# Characters

## Emma Edmonds

Emma Edmonds was born in St. John, Canada, in 1839. She had been a disappointment to her father, who always wanted a son. She was a tomboy and always climbed the highest trees and rode the fastest horses. She wore men's clothes as she worked in the fields of her father's farm. But she wasn't a boy and the schism between father and daughter widened. By the time she was sixteen she decided to go it alone and ran away from home. She headed to the nation to Canada's south that she admired for its defense of liberty and free. To the United States, "liberty" and "freedom" were not just words: they comprised the country's foundation and values.

When Emma was twenty-one, President Abraham Lincoln rallied the young men of America to join the Army to help in the fight to save the Union in the Civil War. Once she fooled the recruiting officers and was sworn in as an officer, her path took off in an unexpected direction. When a Union spy was captured and executed, Emma—who was known as Pvt. Franklin Thompson—volunteered to fill the position. She devised a convincing disguise, becoming "Cuff", a male black slave. After this first mission, she had ten other dangerous assignments that took her behind enemy lines. She gathered crucial intelligence that help Union commanders wage successful campaigns against the rebel forces.

Although first listed as AWOL, Franklin Thompson's true identity was revealed. Emma was eventually given a honorable discharge and an Army pension. She was honored as the only woman in a Civil War organization called the Grand Army of the Republic that had over 400,000 members.

## Mrs. Butler

Emma Edmonds was a twenty-one-year-old woman who posed as a man so that she could join the Army and fight on the Union side during the Civil War. She became friendly with a very nice older woman, Mrs. Butler, who was the wife of the Army chaplain of Emma's company. Since Emma had to keep her true identity secret, everyone, including Mrs. Butler initially, knew her as a man named Private Franklin Thompson.

When Emma discovered that a dear friend, James Vesey, had been killed by enemy fire, Emma was distraught. She went to the only person she could think of who would comfort her in her loss. Mrs. Butler was understanding and sympathized with her grief. One thing led to another and Emma became so emotional that she revealed to Mrs. Butler that she was really a woman. She was sure that Mrs. Butler would have to report her, but she was pleasantly surprised to be wrong. Mrs. Butler admired her strength of



character and patriotism. She would keep her secret. Mrs. Butler confessed that if she were younger, she might be right alongside her.

Emma probably could not have accomplished the intelligence work she did without the help of Mrs. Butler. Mrs. Butler helped Emma with her disguises, even allowing her to use her own clothes when Emma was going to pose as a heavy-set, older woman. When Emma was wounded by a sniper's bullet, it was Mrs. Butler to whom she turned. Emma could not admit herself into the hospital because she'd have to undress and be examined by doctors and thus be exposed as a woman. Mrs. Butler treated her wound, which enabled Emma to keep her true identity secret and continue her important role in the war.

## **Private Franklin Thompson**

Twenty-one-year-old Emma Edmonds entered the U.S. Army as Franklin Thompson. She was able to maintain this false identity for two years.

## **Cuff**

For her first espionage mission, Emma took on the identity of a black male slave she dubbed "Cuff". She wore patched overalls, a red bandanna and a curly black minstrel wig as his disguise. As Cuff, she was able to infiltrate the enemy camp and learn valuable information about the Confederate's plans and equipment.

## **Bridget O'Shea**

Bridget O'Shea was one of the identities that Emma took on in her undercover missions. As Bridget O'Shea, Emma wore Mrs. Butler's clothes and put a pillow around her midsection so she looked like an older, matronly woman. Mrs. Butler dusted her dark hair with flour to make it look like gray hair.

## **Charles Mayberry**

When Union officers felt there was sabotage going on among their ranks, Emma was recruited to infiltrate Louisville society as a young businessman. As Charles Mayberry, Emma was able to rout out the major sources of the intelligence leaks.

## **James Vesey**

Emma got word that an old friend of hers, James Vesey, was in her regiment's camp. She was desolate when she learned that James had died from a gunshot wound and was in her camp for burial.

## **Dr. Hodes**

Dr. Hodes was the head of the field hospital that Emma was first assigned to as Private Thompson. Dr. Hodes was irritated when Thompson was pulled from his duties to run special missions for the commanding officers.

## **P. N. Aylesworth**

P. N. Aylesworth was a wealthy merchant in Louisville, KY. He was known to be a Confederate sympathizer and was eventually exposed to be a rebel agent through the work of Emma as Charles Mayberry.

## **Lieutenant Allen Hall**

When Emma was disguised as Bridget O'Shea, she found shelter in an abandoned house. Also in the house was a Confederate lieutenant, Allen Hall, who was dying of typhoid fever. Before he died, he asked her to see that his major got his pocket watch. Emma carried out his final wish.



## Objects/Places

### St. John, Canada

Emma Edmonds was born in St. John, Canada. At sixteen years of age, she ran away from home and relocated to the United States, where she lived the rest of her life.

### Flint, Michigan

Emma was living in Flint, Michigan, when President Lincoln put out the rallying call for the young men of America to join the Union Army in its Civil War effort. Emma posed as a man and enlisted at a recruiting office in Flint, Michigan.

### Enfield Carbine

After successfully completing her first covert mission as the black slave, "Cuff", the Union commander presented Emma with an Enfield carbine that was confiscated from the Confederate army in appreciation of her work.

### Rebel

When Emma, disguised as the matronly Irish peddler, Bridget O'Shea, returned to the Union camp from an undercover mission behind enemy lines, she was given the chestnut horse she rode back on in appreciation for her duty. She named the horse Rebel.

### Sword

After exposing southern sympathizers among Union ranks, Emma was presented with a Confederate sword that was taken from a lieutenant who surrendered after a battle.

### Minstrel Wig

On her first spy mission, Emma decided that if she appeared to be a black slave she would have no trouble getting into the enemy camp, which had a large number of slaves who worked for the soldiers. To look authentic, she bribed the captain of a mail boat to bring her a wig that actors used in minstrel shows.



## **Louisville, Kentucky**

Kentucky was a border state that tried to stay neutral. Once they were forced to choose, they threw their support behind the Union effort. Emma, disguised as businessman Charles Mayberry, worked her way into Louisville society and eventually exposed rebel sympathizers who were funneling intelligence to the Confederacy.

## **Cairo, Illinois**

When Emma came down with a serious case of malaria, she was forced to either keep working or check herself into the Army hospital. She couldn't do the latter because she would be exposed as a woman. Her only option was to run away, get treatment and then return to duty. She fled to Cairo, Illinois, where she was admitted into a hospital and eventually recovered from her illness.

## **Washington, D.C.**

Emma spent time in the nation's capital before and during the war. It was after the Civil War ended, however, that she was in the crowd when President Lincoln addressed the country from a White House window.

## **Abandoned House**

Emma, disguised as Bridget O'Shea, sought shelter in an old abandoned house in enemy territory. She found a young Confederate soldier inside who was dying from typhoid fever. His last request was that she return a gold pocket watch to his major. Emma fulfilled the dying young man's request.





# Themes

## Taking Risks

The world's population is comprised of many ethnicities, creeds and races. However, that same world's population can, in another sense, be divided into just two distinct groups: risk takers and non-risk takers. The protagonist of *Behind Rebel Lines* falls undeniably into the former group. Beginning her life on a farm in rural Canada, Emma Edmonds tried to make up for the disappointment that her father felt in having a daughter and not a son. She wore men's clothing, worked in the fields, climbed the highest trees and rode the wildest horses. Still, a resentment remained within her father.

As the schism between daughter and father grew, Emma struck out on her own at just sixteen years of age. Not only did she run away from home, she ran away from her country. Out in the world alone, Emma decided to try her luck in the United States, a nation that held the same values that dwelt within her own heart. But her running away pales in comparison to what she ventured into a few years later. When President Lincoln asked for volunteers for the Union Army at the onset of the Civil War, he was talking to the young men of the country. But Emma felt he was talking to her and answered his rallying cry. She posed as a man, fooled the recruiting officer and was sworn in as Private Franklin Thompson.

Emma's risk-taking took on new meaning when she volunteered for covert operations that would bring her across enemy lines and into great peril. She was risking exposure as a woman on the Union side and facing exposure as a Union spy on the Confederate side. During her two years in the Army, Emma successfully carried out eleven covert missions. She provided invaluable intelligence to the Union commanders, which enabled them to wage victorious campaigns against the Confederacy.

## Believing in a Cause

Emma Edmonds was an idealistic young woman. And it would take a very idealistic person to follow the path that she chose. She posed as a man and joined the Union Army to help in its struggles and efforts during the Civil War. Many would have a difficult time understanding why the slightly-built young woman would want to risk her life when such heroics could have been left up to men. The account of Emma Edmonds' two years in the Army as told in *Behind Rebel Lines* makes several references to Emma's "inner voice," a voice that told her she must do more. But the question lingers: why would this young woman feel so driven to unnecessarily place herself in danger?

Emma was a natural-born Canadian citizen. When she became disillusioned with her home life and country, Emma was drawn to the young nation to the south that stood for the fundamental things she believed in: freedom and liberty. She had been in the United States several years before the Civil War broke out. Emma had come to love her



adopted country and when President Lincoln appealed to the young men of America to volunteer for duty with the Union Army, something deep and enduring stirred within her. She wanted to do more than the jobs that are typically given to women in a war effort. She was compelled to really be part of the conflict and not sit on the sidelines.

It was Emma's love of country and her own "rebel" spirit that propelled her to risk life and limb to serve and protect the country and values that she held dear.

## Breaking Rules

Every schoolchild is taught to follow rules. Rules are everywhere. Every time a person takes a walk or drives his car, he is surrounded by signs telling him what he can and cannot do: "Walk, Don't Walk" signs and red lights, yellow lights and green lights all dictate our movements. When Emma Edmonds decided to join the Army to fight for the Union during the Civil War, she knew exactly what she was doing and she knew that she was breaking many laws.

Emma Edmonds, a natural-born Canadian, moved to the United States because she was enamored with the ideals that stood behind the country—those of liberty and freedom. Emma, a tomboy and never afraid of risk and challenge, wanted to help her new country. However, in her mind she could do way more for the Union effort than rolling bandages. Emma followed an inner voice that told her she must fight for her adopted country—she took the word "fight" quite literally.

Emma decided to break one of the biggest rules that one could imagine. She decided to disguise herself as a man and enlist in the Union Army. Emma decided to take path that was fraught with lies and uncertainty. Standing in the line at the recruitment center, she naturally feared exposure. However, when she was approved—luckily the physical exam had been foregone—she had to take an oath and swear that she had told the recruiting officer the truth, that she was Franklin Thompson and would fight to protect and serve the Union. She lived as a man for two years. While she without question helped the Union cause, there is no getting around the fact that her service was based on lies.

Emma Edmonds acted out of patriotism and for a cause in which she fervently believed. But Emma Edmonds bent the rules to fit her goals. According to historic records, approximately four hundred women lied about their gender and served as men during the Civil War. The number of women who broke the rules does not justify the actions of one. Things turned out well in Edmonds' case; however, further study would be necessary to learn if some of the women who lied about their identity led to problems within the Army ranks. Some say rules are made to be broken, but in most cases rules are made for very good reasons.

# Style

## Perspective

Behind Rebel Lines - The Incredible Story of Emma Edmonds, Civil War Spy by Seymour Reit is told in third person narrative. Since the story is based on part from Emma Edmonds' own memoirs, of the story is based largely from her point of view. There is an official element to the account, however, since the author references the U.S. Army and National Archives files as source materials. The story has a scholarly quality as well since the works of eminent historians were also cited as references used in writing the account.

Even though the story is told in the backdrop of the raging Civil War that the nation endured in the early 1860s, no partiality emerges from the author's writing and he maintains this neutrality throughout the telling of the story. There was no focus on blame or culpability for the war by the author. Emma Edmonds herself demonstrated a kind of neutrality even though she was on the side of the Union and fought for its victory and survival. When it came to injured soldiers, she saw no difference between wounded Union soldiers and wounded Confederate soldiers. To her, their need for care was just the same.

Since this work is a historical account of real events, much of the story is told through exposition, although there are passages of dialog that the author created to fill missing gaps and to add dimension. However, the imagined dialog remains true to actual events and times and real individuals.

## Tone

Behind Rebel Lines, the true story of Canadian Emma Edmonds, is told in a straightforward way that is both informative and entertaining. The chronicle of two years in the life of Emma Edmonds who went to war posing as a man to save the adoptive country she loved is told with an air of authenticity. The account is based on historical record and Emma Edmonds' own memoirs which she published after the war in a book titled Nurse and Spy in the Union Army.

The realism of the book is not just the result of a skilled writer. In the book's introduction, author Seymour Reit points out his account of Edmonds' army experiences during the Civil War are based on United States Army records and files from the National Archives. He also relied on the works of noted historians such as Bruce Catton, Sylvia Dannett, Mary E. Massey, and Philip Van Doren Stern.

It was the author's intention to keep Emma Edmond's story as close to actual events as possible. All the dates and places and people referenced are actual and real. The author was loyal to the real story and did not depart from the facts in order to add additional drama. The only elements of the story that are fictionalized are the

conversations of the principals which, out of necessity were created by the author, but were based on the events of the time.

## Structure

The non-fiction work *Behind Rebel Lines* is comprised of sixteen short to medium-length chapters. The chapters are numbered and are each headed by a specific date that provides a time-frame for the story. The main portion of the book, which tells the true story of the young woman who disguised herself as a man so she could join the Army during the Civil War, covers approximately a two-year time period. The account begins in April 1861 and ends in May 1863. The last chapter provides an update on what course Emma's life took after the Civil War ended.

Prior to the first chapter, the author, Seymour Reit, provides a brief introductory section that summarizes Emma Edmonds' experiences in the Union Army while posing as a man. Reit points out that historians estimate that as many as four hundred women fought as men during the war. He explains that what separates Emma from the other women was the type of fighting she did. She took on the most dangerous of assignments during her service, that of spy and courier.

The author provides an account with good pace and is not bogged down by an overabundance of detail. The story is told in a chronological order that has only a sparse use of flashback passages. Author Reit employs the use of the cliffhanger and foreshadowing which provide intrigue and elevate interest.



## Quotes

"I am naturally fond of adventure, a little ambitious, and a good deal romantic—but patriotism was the true secret of my success."

Introduction, p. ii

"The young men were in high spirits. They laughed and joked as if they were leaving on a picnic instead of going off to fight a war."

Chap. 1, p. 1

"Taking all she owned in an old burlap sack, she fled to a country where she knew words like liberty and freedom had real meaning."

Chap. 1, p. 5

"How could you know the limits of your courage if you never put it to the test"?

Chap. 3, p. 26

"You're a stubborn one and you'll do what you have to do. But stubborn's different from foolhardy."

Chap. 5, p. 33

"You fall asleep on duty, boy, we'll shoot you like a dawg."

Chap. 7, p. 50

"Typhoid fever was a killer that took no sides. In both armies, the disease was doing more harm than all of the bullets, swords, and shellfire."

Chap. 9, p. 61

"A friend. . . had just come from Washington. He told them President Lincoln had aged ten years over the past few months."

Chap. 9, p. 64

"One hospital was for Union men, the other for Confederates. Emma saw no difference and divided her time equally between the two. As far as she was concerned, wounds were wounds and pain didn't play favorites."

Chap. 12, p. 81

"People in Kentucky were about evenly divided—they supported slavery but didn't want to secede and destroy the Union. It was a dilemma, and Kentucky tried to solve it by



staying neutral."  
Chap. 13, p. 88

"It was not my intention, or desire, to seek my own personal ease and comfort while so much sorrow and distress filled the land. But the great question to be decided was, what can I do? What part can I myself play in this great drama?"  
Chap. 16, p. 109

"Should any readers object to some of her disguises, it may be sufficient to remind them it was from the purest motives and most praise-worthy patriotism that she laid aside for a time her own costume and assumed that of the opposite sex, enduring hardships, suffering untold privations, and hazarding her life for her adopted country in its trying hour of need."  
Chap. 16, p. 109



## Topics for Discussion

Where did Emma Edmonds come from? Why did Emma run away from home? Why did she move to America and why did she love her adopted country so much?

Why did Emma volunteer to join the army and portray herself as a man? What person inspired her to join the army? In what traditional ways did women contribute to and support the Civil War cause?

In what various ways did Emma disguise herself during her spy missions for the Union? In what ways did she risk her life? During which mission was she wounded?

What disease did Emma come down with? Why did she leave the Union camp for her recovery? What city did she travel to for her recovery?

What good news did Emma receive while she was hospitalized with her illness? What bad news did she learn about while recovering in the hospital?

What did Emma do after the war? What was the name of the book Emma wrote about her experiences during the Civil War? Why was the reaction of some people to her war time stories?

How was Emma treated unfairly by the Army? What redemptive actions did the US Congress take on her behalf? Emma Edmonds was the only female member of what veteran's association?