

Harriet Tubman: Civil War Spy

By: Catherine Clarke Fox

Harriet Tubman is well known for risking her life as a “conductor” in the Underground Railroad, which led escaped slaves to freedom in the North. But did you know that the former slave also served as a spy for the Union during the Civil War and was the first woman in American history to lead a military expedition?

During a time when women were usually restricted to traditional roles like cooking and nursing, she did her share of those jobs. But she also worked side-by-side with men, says writer Tom Allen, who tells her exciting story in the National Geographic book, *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent*.

Tubman decided to help the Union Army because she wanted freedom for all of the people who were forced into slavery, not just the few she could help by herself. And she convinced many other brave African Americans to join her as spies, even at the risk of being hanged if they were caught.

In one of her most dramatic and dangerous roles, Tubman helped Colonel James Montgomery plan a raid to free slaves from plantations along the Combahee (pronounced “KUM-bee”) River in South Carolina. Early on the morning of June 1, 1863, three gunboats carrying several hundred male soldiers along with Harriet Tubman set out on their mission. Tubman had gathered key information from her scouts about the Confederate positions. She knew where they were hiding along the shore. She also found out where they had placed torpedoes, or barrels filled with gunpowder, in the water. As the early morning fog lifted on some of the South’s most important rice plantations, the Union expedition hit hard. The raiders set fire to buildings and destroyed bridges, so they couldn’t be used by the Confederate Army. They also freed about 750 slaves—men, women, children, and babies—and did not lose one soldier in the attack.



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Allen, who writes about this adventure and many others, got to know Tubman well through the months of research he did for the book. The historic details he shares bring Tubman and many other important figures of her time to life.



To gather the facts, Allen searched libraries and the Internet, and even walked in Tubman's footsteps. "I went on the river just south of the area where the raid took place," he says. "You are in that kind of country she would have known, with plenty of mosquitoes and snakes, and there are still dirt roads there today—so you get a feeling of what it was like."

Allen says his most exciting moment came when a librarian led him to written accounts by people who actually saw Tubman and the raiders in action.

"She was five feet two inches (157 centimeters) tall, born a slave, had a debilitating illness, and was unable to read or write. Yet here was this tough woman who could take charge and lead men. Put all that together and you get Harriet Tubman. I got to like her pretty quickly because of her strength and her spirit," Allen says.

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Read the story. Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. Harriet Tubman is best known for being a “conductor” in the Underground Railroad. She is also known as the first woman in American History to _____.

- A. Ride in a train
- B. Meet the president
- C. Lead a military expedition
- D. Serve in the Revolutionary War

2. Why did Tubman decide to help the Union Army?

- A. She wanted to fight for the South
- B. She wanted freedom for all of the people who were forced into slavery
- C. She wanted to form a union
- D. She had nowhere else to go

3. During this time, how did the Confederate Army make torpedoes?

- A. They made them with wood, copper, and dirt
- B. They made them in a submarine
- C. Filled barrels with water and put them in gunpowder
- D. Filled barrels with gunpowder and put them in water

4. Other than the library and the Internet, how did Tom Allen gather information about Harriet Tubman?

- A. He walked in her footsteps
- B. He sent her a message on Facebook
- C. Hired a detective
- D. He wrote a book

5. In the last paragraph, why does the author tell about Tubman’s size and illness?

- A. To make the reader feel bad for her
- B. To give the reader a description of her
- C. To explain to the reader that she had little, yet she accomplished so much
- D. To tell a story about Harriet Tubman being a spy

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ANSWER KEY

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