

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.

