

Harriet Tubman: Civil War Spy

By Catherine Jones-Pa

Harriet Tubman is well known for taking her role as a “conductor” in the Underground Railroad, which had 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, even writer Tom Allen, who tells her cooking 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 “COM-buh-ee”) 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 visits about the Confederate positions. She knew where they were hiding along the shore. She also found out where they had placed torpedoes, or bombs filled with gunpowder, in the water. At the early morning daylight on some of the South’s most important rice plantations, the Union expedition led by Tubman 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 didn’t lose one soldier in the attack.

