Portsmouth Division VCC
Recruit Training Aides

Hannah Snell
Alias James ‘Jemmy’ Grey
1723 - 1792
HANNAH SNELL

- Hannah Snell was born on the 23rd April 1723 at Friar Street, Worcester. She was the daughter of a hosier and the Grand Daughter of a professional soldier who had been killed Malplaquet. In 1740 at the age of 17 she was orphaned and therefore travelled to Wapping in London to live with her elder sister Susannah Gray. It was there that she met and fell in love with a young Dutch Seaman named James Summs and all his stories of service in the Marines.

- In January 1742 at the age of 19 they married and quite soon after Hannah became pregnant, however seven months after getting married Hanna’s husband returned to sea and subsequently vanished. Hannah convinced herself that her husband had been press ganged into the Army or Navy, so when her daughter Unfortunately died prematurely at the age six months old she borrowed her brother in laws clothes to disguise herself as a man and by binding up her breasts, she also assumed her brother in law’s name (James “Jemmy” Gray) and set out to try and find her wayward husband.

- James Gray (Hannah Snell) arrived in Coventry where troops were mustering after the 1745 rebellion and enlisted in Guise’s Regiment of Foot, which were the forerunners of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. With the background of a military family she probably realised this was the only way to travel. “James Gray”, who looked a sturdy figure with a fresh complexion, marched to Carlisle with the Regiment but fell foul of a Sergeant who put her on a charge alleging “Neglect of Duty”. She was subsequently sentenced to 600 lashes, but this was generously reduced to a mere a 500. Hannah was tied to the barracks gate, which probably concealed her chest and took her punishment.
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Hannah later deserted not just because of the injustice she had suffered but because she recognised a recruit from Worcester as a former neighbour who might have betrayed her. She stole civilian clothing and made her way to Portsmouth where she joined Frazer’s Regiment of Marines.

At that time an expedition was being prepared for the East Indies. As a Marine she boarded the sloop “HMS Swallow” and sailed cheerfully to the notoriously dangerous and unhealthy location. It is amazing that despite the conditions of shipboard life, with cramped space, poor rations and interminable boredom, she was able to keep her secret. Indeed she was so well thought off that she was appointed Mess Sergeant.

The Fleet’s objective was an attack on the French post at Pondicherry on the Indian coast south of Madras. Hannah was one of 2,500 troops sent to reduce a fort. Again she won the respect of her comrades for steady courage. On one occasion she calmly shot dead one of a French patrol, which had killed Marines while they landed stores. Later Hannah forded a river, chest deep, with other troops to capture a French stronghold. In an all out offensive Hannah fired off 37 aimed shots before suffering multiple wounds herself, six in one leg and five in the other.
Worse still, she had a musket ball in the groin which she did not mention to surgeons realising that her sex would be discovered immediately, so with the aid of a negro woman servant, she managed to locate and extract the ball herself. Three months later she was discharged as being fit for duty, but more trouble was in store in this extraordinary adventure.

On the Man-o-War “Eltham” bound for Bombay, the Chief Officer noted that Marine Gray had a fine voice and ordered her to sing for him. Hannah protested that it was no part of a soldier’s duty to sing and was subsequently clapped in irons for five days and given 12 lashes. This time she managed to conceal her sex by tying a large handkerchief around her neck and spreading it across her chest.

Throughout her extraordinary adventure Hannah never failed to make enquiries about her missing husband, and on the return voyage to London, the ship called at Lisbon. She learned that a man called “Summs” had murdered someone in Genoa and had been killed by being thrown into the sea in a weighted sack. Her reason for posing as a man had vanished, so when the ship docked in Portsmouth on 25th May 1750 Hannah travelled with the Marines to London before abandoning her disguise and returned to wearing female clothing.
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Hannah presented a petition to the head of the British Army, The Duke of Cumberland, requesting financial recognition for her service so while the military were examining the truth to her claim she not surprisingly became a personality and appeared in a double role theatre act giving drill displays as “Bill Bobstay” a sailor, and “Firelock” a soldier.

Finally the Army accepted Hannah’s claim and awarded a Sovereigns Grant for land and a Chelsea Pension. She leased a tavern in Wapping, which was known as “The Female Warrior”, and or “The Widow in Masquerade” In 1759 at the age of 36 Hannah married her second husband Samuel Eyles and after his death she married her third husband Richard Hadgood in 1772 at the age of 49.

Finally Hannah’s story finishes when on 8th February 1792, at the age of 69 one of Britain’s best-known female soldiers, dies in the notorious lunatic asylum, Bedlam. She was buried in Chelsea Hospital graveyard.