Why did Harriet Tubman become a spy and scout for the Union Army during the Civil War and what events led up to her making that decision? Tubman believed that her leadership skills she had used to help free fugitive slaves before the war had greatly prepared her for a role with the Union forces on the battlefield. These leadership skills combined with a passion and commitment to fight for freedom for her people would make her a valuable person.

Tubman’s devotion to helping her people came many years before the civil war started in 1849. It started in the early 1850’s after she had escaped from slavery in 1849. She began her work on the Underground Railroad because the “slavery question came to dominate national political debate.” (pg 19 Humez) She worked with many prominent abolitionists such as William Still, Frederick Douglas, and probably the most famous John Brown, during the anti slavery movement in Philadelphia. But it wasn’t so much her abolitionist views that drove her to great risks to rescue slaves in the south, it was the strong attachment she had to her family who were all slaves in the south. Tubman made her first mission into the south in 1851 to rescue her husband John Tubman. However, when she arrived in Maryland she had learned he had taken a new wife. “This was an important personal turning point for Harriet Tubman. It seems, and that allowed her to focus all of her energy on a on a newly articulated mission for the next decade, the rescue of her entire family from slavery” (pg. 23 Humez).

This newly articulated mission led her to work with abolitionist John Brown, in an attempt to start slave uprisings in the south. These two had mutual admiration for each other as Tubman quoted that “He is the most of a man, naturally, that I ever met with” (pg. 32
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Humez) with Brown, at times referring to Tubman as “general”. In early 1859 in their second meeting Brown had tasked Tubman with recruiting fugitive slaves to help him take over an armory at Harpers Ferry in Virginia. The idea was to gather munitions to where Brown would be able to supply arms to blacks in the north. They would then send out individual raids into the south to start slave uprisings in hopes of scaring the south to disband slavery. The raid took place in October of 1859 and was quickly put down by General Robert E. Lee. The whereabouts of Tubman at the time of the attack are still unclear to this day, but it is believed that “her strong survival instinct may have protected her in the end” (pg 174 Larson). By the summer of 1860, Tubman had completed eight out of nine successful missions into the south, rescuing not just family but fugitive slaves as well. The dramatic stories of her rescues led her to be a celebrity in local newspapers in the north and a hero to many in the black community.

By early 1861, tensions between the north and the south had grown so bad that civil war was almost inevitable. Several states in the south started to secede from the union and “declaring their collective sovereignty as the Confederate States of America” (pg 145 Clinton). The official beginning of the war came in April 1861 with the Confederates firing on Fort Sumter. This lead to Lincoln to call to arms 75,000 volunteers to put down the Confederate rebellion. Because of this “Tubman and her African comrades threw themselves into the fray to help shape the war as well as to help win it” (pg 147 Clinton). Tubman took her first assignment at Fort Monroe as a civilian to help take care of “contrabands” that would come into the camp after being rescued by the Union Army. Tubman took on the challenges of caregiver without complaint by serving as a cook, laundress, and nurse. “During the wars earliest weeks, even if Tubman had more militaristic aspirations, she devoted herself to domestic duties” (pg 149
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Clinton). However, after several months of volunteer work at Fort Monroe, the war not going in the favor of the Union after deadly battles at Bull Run and Shiloh. Tubman decided to try to use her extraordinary talents and her ability to blend in as an attempt to gain access into doing work as a spy for the Union Army. Tubman’s first attempt came in late 1861 and early 1862 when she volunteered to go to Port Royal, South Carolina as part of the “Port Royal Experiment”. It was a “brave plan not just to educate the slaves but to help move the slave labor system from slave to waged based” (pg 293 Lowry). She believed if she could enlist in this military program, she could be good use to her country as well as her people. She had been doing Guerilla tactic warfare for almost twelve years. She had journeyed through enemy territory and knew how to figure out the logistics of maneuvering through rough terrain such as rivers, swamps and wetlands. Because of her extensive background in scouting, she was introduced to Governor Andrew of Massachusetts in early 1862. He had known of her previous record and accomplishments and he believed that because of her knowledge and experience “she will be a valuable person to operate within the enemy’s lines in procuring information and scouts” (pg 294 Lowry). Her initial orders were to go to New York and board a naval vessel headed for South Carolina. However, a change in plans left Harriet in New York to run a clearinghouse for which she distributed clothes and supplies to black people coming from Massachusetts. She did this work for ten months until early 1863 when she finally arrived in Beaufort, South Carolina. Upon her arrival she went straight to work overseeing the distribution of food and clothes to Union soldiers. She also set up a washhouse to teach freed women how to cook, clean and sew for the Union soldiers. This gave the newly freed women their first opportunities to make money and to live their lives with some independence. Even
though Tubman early on was working more as a nurse and a cook “her closet associates seem to have understood that her actual mission from the beginning was spying for the military” (pg 51 Humez).

When two of Tubman’s abolitionist friends arrived in Beaufort in 1863 General Thomas Higgenson and Colonel James Montgomery, the beginnings of the spy network started for Tubman. They wanted to expand federal spies into the interior of the south, and by mid 1863 Tubman had been given approval to line up a roster of scouts to map out the interior of the south. To perform this job successfully she had to establish a trust among the black slaves in the south. At times they were standoffish toward her because of her preferential treatment, such as the government rations she received, but she quickly relinquished this privilege to gain a stronger bond between her people. She worked out her place of residence in South Carolina to meet potential scouts and spies “those who have knowledge of the land, the water and especially the families living in the rebel territory above Saint Helena Sound and along the rivers to the north of Beaufort” (pg301 Lowry).

It was during this time that Harriet met Walter Plowden; a black man from New York who had came to South Carolina at the beginning of the war in 1861 by following a Union Army unit. He had been in the region for awhile and was able to convince Tubman that he knew enough about the areas around Beaufort and the areas where plantation owners had slaves for her to use him as a scout. They worked together to gather intelligence for Union generals and drew up the plans for an eventual raid up the Combahee River to rescue over 800 slaves. Over a period of a few months Tubman had managed to build up her own tiny army that was solely
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based on scouting and spying. This group of nine men would serve undercover with her in upcoming union campaigns.

The longer Tubman was in South Carolina and the more valuable the information she was able to find out about rebel forces, she believed that she should be the one to lead or co-lead the Union forces into battle. She believed it was too risky to just pass off information to someone else who wasn’t as knowledgeable. To do this she would have to find a Union officer to agree with her. There was one man who had trusted her enough to let her lead some future union missions and that was Colonel James Montgomery. Montgomery was a West Point Graduate who had fought with Tubman’s close friend John Brown in Kansas in the mid 1850’s. He was a staunch abolitionist who believed that “praying, shooting, burning and hanging are the true means to put down a rebellion” (pg 314 Lowry). Tubman’s partnership with Montgomery would eventually lead her into direct armed conflict and put her in a position to witness some of the most horrific fighting in the east during the Civil War. Both of them would lead newly recruited black soldiers into battle who had been allowed to enlist after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln on January 1st, 1863. By the end of May 1863, Tubman had finished all the plans for the raid up the Combahee River, “the object of which is to destroy rebel lines of communication and to gather recruits from among the laborers” (pg 316 Lowry). Tubman had mapped out the river so well that she knew when high and low tides would occur. She had sent out word to the nearby slaves to listen for a signal and when they heard it, to drop everything and run toward the river. Montgomery and Tubman had decided that the best time to conduct the raid would be in the beginning of June.
On the night of June 1st 1863, Harriet Tubman became the first woman to lead an armed expedition during the Civil War, called the Combahee River Raid. Her months of successful planning and spy missions before the raid provided details about how many rebel forces were in the area, as well as details about the heavily mined waters and which route would be the safest but quickest to take. Overall “for Harriet the raid will offer her the first opportunity she had to go head to head with a lifelong enemy and, using skill, deliberation, and force, to take away from them what never was theirs to begin with” (pg 317 Lowry). At 9:00 p.m., the raid started from Port Royal and went toward the interior of the Confederates in South Carolina, twenty five miles up the Combahee River. Three boats carrying three hundred Union soldiers made their way up the river. Up to this point, few women had done this in United States military history, Tubman was in command and being called the “general” by Montgomery and her fellow troops. On the morning of June second, the union boats reached the outskirts of the rebel location, where Montgomery sent in his black regiment on gun boats to the banks of the shore where the signal was given for the slaves to run. As this happened Tubman stood at the front of the boat waiting for any sign of a response from the rebel forces, but they were caught off guard only one lone confederate colonel on duty sighted the black soldiers, and sent one of his men to warn soldiers not stationed far away in Chislomville. The operation proceeded as planned for the Union Tubman’s vessel was able to maneuver safely passed confederate mines in the river. Toward the end of the raid a small detachment of rebel soldiers arrived near the Combahee River with orders to stop the Union troops as best they could. “They failed to make any substantial dent in union activities. They reportedly stopped only one lone slave from escaping, shooting her in flight.” (pg 167 Clinton) and the rest made it to the gun boats without
the Union soldiers incurring one casualty and saving close to 800 slaves. On the way back down the river Colonel Montgomery ordered his troops to burn everything this included houses, fields, stores, and warehouses as a way to keep the rebel forces from using any of the resources in the area. This raid was a success because it weakened the rebel forces along the Combahee River taking away their “most valuable livestock” (pg 216 Larson) and it gave Colonel Montgomery close to two hundred new recruits for his regiment. After the raid critics from both the north and the south could no longer exercise the idea that blacks were unfit for duty, this was a well executed mission thanks in part to Tubman and her valuable skills as a spy. The use of black troops in this raid reminded the confederate soldiers of what was to come with defeat in the future. Official military reports give Colonel Montgomery the credit for the success of the Combahee River Raid, but the soldiers on the battlefield afterwards recognized that it was Harriet who deserved the credit for the victory. Tubman was the hero of the day and she was extremely proud of the job that black soldiers had done under increasingly difficult circumstances. She believed that “we colored people are entitled to some credit for that exploit” (pg 216 Larson) With this victory for the Union the Confederates realized in one day what had took the Union almost one year to figure out, and that was “Harriet Tubman was an effective and formidable secret weapon whose gifts should never be underestimated” (pg 170 Clinton)

The battle of Charlestown was also another battle where the Union used Tubman’s resources as a spy to get information on the rebel forces. After days of bombardment on rebel forces, the Union believed they had weakened them enough to conduct a full scale frontal assault. On July 17th the black regiments of the Massachusetts 45th were called into action and
that evening that had moved into position. “Tubman had followed the regiments up the coast to their positions outside Charlestown Harbor. Probably there as a nurse and cook, but perhaps even as a scout” (pg 220 Larson). Tubman witnessed the damage inflicted on the black Massachusetts regiments. Later in life Tubman gave a description of the battle at Charlestown by saying “and then we saw the lighting, and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder, and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling, and that was the drops of blood falling; and when we came to get into the crops, it was dead that we reaped” (pg. 220 Larson). After the battle, Tubman was left to care for the wounded and ill soldiers, under difficult and dreadful conditions, recalling that no matter what she did to help conceal soldier’s wounds they would always get covered with flies. The Union lost over fifteen hundred men compared to one hundred seventy four for the Confederates. The Massachusetts forty fifth was one of the hardest hit units incurring over two hundred fifty casualties.

Shortly after the battle of Charlestown in early 1864, Tubman wanted to go home on leave to care for her parents who were in New York. However, General Gilmore who was in command decided not to allow her to go, feeling that her services as a spy had contributed greatly too many successful Union missions in the eastern theatre of the Civil War. “She has made it a business to see all contrabands escaping from the rebels, and is enable to get more intelligence from them than anybody else” (pg 222 Larson). In one of Tubman’s last missions she went to Jacksonville, Florida with Colonel Montgomery and his black regiments. The mission was to destroy the Confederate Atlantic and Gulf railroads, but on February 20th, 1864, the Union soldiers were hit unexpectedly by surprise rebel fire. The 8th United States Colored Troops (USCT) which was a new regiment took part in the mission and sustained heavy
casualties due to the fact that they had never seen battle before. The rebel fire sent the Union troops into disarray, but eventually they came back and fought hard “earning the regiment a place on the rolls of Civil War heroes” (pg 224 Larson). In less than two hours, over half of the colored unit had been killed. It isn’t clear to this day if Tubman went into battle with Montgomery’s forces, but she did tend to hundreds of wounded soldiers that had been brought to nearby railroad station after the battle. Whatever type of situation came up during the Civil War “Tubman continuously reinvented herself, adapting to and accommodating the immediate requirements of wartime crisis with stunning success” (pg 212 Larson). Tubman continued to serve as a scout and a spy with the Union forces in the eastern theatre until the spring of 1864, when she came into financial troubles and asked for leave to go home, she was never considered a soldier and her on and off again status as a scout and spy made consistent payment by the United States government for her services hard to come by. It isn’t clear if Tubman ever made it back to South Carolina, she got very ill in November of 1864 in New York, and after recovering she had trouble getting a pass from the war department to travel back to South Carolina. According to the records, Tubman was persuaded by a group of young nurses in Philadelphia “that the need for her services was great, so she changed her plans, traveling instead to Fortress Monroe at Hampton, Virginia, to care for the sick and wounded black soldiers (pg 228 Larson).

The thing that made Harriet Tubman so valuable to the Union during the Civil War was her “experience with dangerous secretive missions, as well as her absolute antislavery loyalty” (pg. 49 Humez) Tubman’s prior missions working on the Underground Railroad and with John Brown and Frederick Douglas gave her the leadership skills and ability she needed to have a
very successful military career, one that many people believed couldn’t happen for an ex slave
let alone a woman. Her ability to work behind enemy lines to gather intelligence for Union
Commanders almost always gave the union an advantage over the Confederates in the eastern
theatre in South Carolina. This successful intelligence gathering also provided her the ability to
provide close relationships with the new freedmen and women from the south which
eventually earned her the title of “Moses of her people”