

Women History Month

Presents

ALWAYS – Women in the Military!

Women have always served in the military, although not always recognized. During the Revolutionary War, women followed their husbands to war serving in military camps as laundresses, cooks, and nurses. For one year Deborah Sampson served in George Washington's army disguised as a man. She was later honorably discharged after being wounded and her gender was discovered. She even eventually received a military pension from the Continental Congress.

At the request of Commodore Stephen Decatur, two women, Mary Marshall and Mary Allen, served as nurses aboard the USS United States during the War of 1812. Elizabeth Newcom enlisted in the Missouri Volunteer Infantry as Bill Newcom during the Mexican War. She marched over 600 miles to the winter camp in Colorado before she was discovered and discharged.

The American Civil War found women serving as administrators of hospitals, as nurses and as cooks, as spies and some disguised themselves as men to serve as soldiers, on both sides – Union and Confederate. Dr. Mary Walker became the only woman during this time to receive the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor. Walker, born in Syracuse, NY, to "free thinking" abolitionist parents, graduated from medical school in 1855 at age 23, when only a handful of women in the country were qualified medical doctors.

The Spanish American War fought between May and August of 1898 is considered a turning point in the history of the United States. About 1,500 women served as nurses assigned to the U.S. Army hospitals with many more serving as support staff, spies and even disguised as men serving in the military.

It was during the last two years of World War I, fought from 1917 through 1918 that women were allowed to join the military. Approximately 33,000 women served as nurses and support staff in the military with almost 400 nurses dying in the line of duty. Although for this time, this was a

significant number of women serving, these numbers were multiplied more than ten times during World War II with over 350,000 women serving from 1941 through 1945, home and abroad.

Women served as mechanics, ambulance drivers, pilots, administrators, nurses, and in other non-combat roles. Eighty-eight women are captured and held as POWs (prisoners of war).

The Marine Corps was strictly a “male” military until World War II except for 305 Marine Reservists popularly termed “Marinettes,” who served during World War I. By late 1942, the unprecedented manpower demands of the two-front war led to personnel shortages. Although Corps Commandant General Thomas Holcomb had initially opposed recruiting women, he followed the example of the Army, Navy, and Coast Guard and began a drive to replace men by women in all possible positions. The Marine Corps Women’s Reserve was established in early 1943.

In 1948 Congress passed the Women’s Armed Service Integration Act granting women permanent status in the military entitling them to veterans’ benefits. During the Korean War fought from 1950-1953 over 50,000 women served at home and abroad with approximately 500 Army nurses serving in combat zones and Navy nurses serving on Naval hospital ships.

One would think by this time the presence of women in the military would be secured, not so! In 1965 with the US becoming involved in Vietnam women were not stationed to Southeast Asian combat zones in significant numbers for almost two years in spite of servicewomen’s requests for deployment. The military argued that combat zones, especially in the environment of Southeast Asia, were inappropriate for women. Even Army Corps Director Brigadier General Elizabeth Hoisington discouraged sending Army women to Vietnam.

However, with the mounting male casualties the presence of nurses and other service women increased in Southeast Asia, and by the time American troops withdrew from Vietnam, more than 10,000 women had served. Almost 6,000 of these women were nurses and medical specialists. Seven Army nurses and one Air Force nurse died in Vietnam.

During the invasion of Panama in 1989, CPT Linda Bray became the first woman to lead US troops in battle. CPT Bray commanded of the 988th Military Police Company out of Ft. Benning, GA, and ordered her assault team to fire on soldiers of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) who refused to surrender their positions at a dog kennel. She anticipated a routine operation, but the battle turned into a three-hour, infantry-style firefight.

In 1990, women comprised 11 percent of active duty military personnel and 13 percent of reserve forces. Despite their expanded numbers, women's roles in large-scale military operations remained unclear and untested. But during 1990 and 1991, more than 40,000 servicewomen deployed to Southwest Asia during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and the role of women in the military passed another milestone. Many faces in the news were those of women at war working as soldiers, side-by-side with their male colleagues and often in leadership roles. The media covered the sacrifices and challenges involved in leaving their families and interviewed husbands and children, proud of their mothers and wives. The American public responded favorably to this image.

Today, America is marked its first Veterans Day in 2016 under a new policy which opened all military jobs up to women — including ground combat forces and elite units like the Army Rangers and Navy SEALs. The Army took the lead last year when its famed Rangers special operations school graduated its first-ever female candidates — Capt. Kristen Griest and 1st Lt. Shaye Haver. Appropriately, the elite regiment's motto is "Rangers lead the way." As a result, Griest is expected to become the Army's first female infantry officer. In April the Army approved 22 additional women as officers in armor and infantry units, which were once open only to men.

Women in the Armed Forces currently number about 205,000, which is down from a peak number of nearly 229,000 in 1989 as the end of the Cold War neared. But by percentage, more women serve now than ever before: 15.5%. There will always be people, men and women who will have a dimmed view of women in the military, especially in a combat or combat support role, but women will **ALWAYS** push forward for inclusion and equality. **If I can do it, Let me do it!**