

# Fighting to Serve: Women in Military Medicine

*Let the generations know that women in uniform also guaranteed their freedom.*

Mary Walker, MD



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**H**oping to make a career in nursing, my mother, a newly graduated registered nurse, enlisted in the US Army Nurse Corps shortly after the United States entered World War II. When she married my father, a US Army doctor, in 1942, she was summarily discharged (the Army Nurse Corp changed its policy and permitted married nurses to serve later that year), while my father went on to decades of distinguished service in military medicine.<sup>1</sup> My mother always regretted being unable to advance through the ranks of the US Army as other woman nurses did in her training class.

March is Women's History Month. My personal narrative of discrimination against women in military medicine is a footnote in a long volume of inequitable treatment. This column will examine a few of the most famous—or rather from a justice perspective, infamous—chapters in that story to illustrate how for centuries women heroically fought for the right to serve.

A theme of the early epochs of the American military is that women were forced to come to the difficult realization that the only way to serve was to conceal their identity. In 1776, Margaret Cochran Corbin felt called as her husband did to defend the new nation. She dressed as a man and joined him at the ramparts, helping load his cannon until he was killed, and took over firing at the enemy. Even after being shot, she remained in the ranks, entering the Invalid Regiment at West Point, New York, dedicated to caring for other injured soldiers. As recognition of her exemplary service and battlefield injury Corbin became the first US woman to receive a military pension. The Veterans Affairs New York Harbor Healthcare System Manhattan campus is named in her honor.<sup>2</sup>

The hypocrisy of the military's gender politics was nowhere more evident than in the case of Mary Walker, MD, and the Congress-

sional Medal of Honor. Walker graduated from Syracuse Medical College in 1855. At the beginning of the Civil War, Walker's request to enlist as a surgeon was refused on the grounds of her gender. She declined to be a nurse, and instead volunteered for the Army where she cared for the wounded in various hospitals. Her medical degree was accepted in 1863, enabling her to become a paid surgical officer in the War Department, including 4 months as a prisoner of war.

An early and avid feminist, Walker wore men's clothing and when she was arrested on the charge of impersonating a male, declared the government had given her permission to dress as a man to facilitate her surgical work. Walker separated from the military in 1865 and President Andrew Johnson awarded her the Congressional Medal of Honor that year. After Walker's death in 1917, the Medal of Honor was rescinded on the grounds that she had never actually been commissioned and the medal could not be awarded to a civilian. It took 60 years of lobbying before President Jimmy Carter restored her award in 1977.<sup>3</sup> That millions of women have served in the military since the Civil War, and Walker remains the only woman among the 3517 service members to have won the nation's highest military honor, underscores the ongoing injustice.<sup>4</sup>

February commemorated Black History Month and a second theme that emerges from the study of the history of women in military medicine is intersectionality: How race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities overlap and interact to generate distinctive forms of discrimination. Ethicists have applied the concept of intersectionality to health care and there are a plethora of examples in military medicine.<sup>5</sup> Despite a dire need for nurses in the first and second world wars, and a track record of their exemplary service in prior conflicts, the government

repeatedly set up arbitrary obstacles barring highly-qualified Black nurses from enlisting.<sup>6</sup> Technically allowed to join the Army Nurse Corps in 1941, Black nurses confronted bureaucratic barriers that restricted them to only caring for Black servicemen and prisoners of war, and racial quotas that resulted in 500 Black nurses vs 59,000 White nurses that served during World War II. Black nurses and their supporters in government and society persisted, and once in uniform, broke through barriers to achieve administrative and clinical excellence.<sup>7</sup>

My mother's experience mirrors that of thousands of women whose dreams for a career in military medicine were shattered or who enlisted only to find their aspirations for advancement in the service thwarted. Medical historians remind us that due to bias, much of the book of women healer's accomplishments remains unwritten, itself a testimony to the pervasive and enduring marginalization of women in Western society. Yet, as this brief glimpse of women in military medicine shows, there is sufficient evidence for us to appreciate their impressive contributions.<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting on this sketch of women's struggle for acceptance in military medicine in March 2024, we may presume that the fight for equity has been continuously trending upward.<sup>8</sup> President Joseph R. Biden appointed, and even more surprisingly, the US Congress confirmed Rachel Levine, MD, as US Department of Health and Human Services Assistant Under Secretary for Health in 2021, making Levine the highest ranking openly transgender health official in the history of the US government.<sup>9</sup> Levine also has the distinction of being the first 4-star admiral in the Commissioned Corps of the US Public Health Service and the only transgender person to achieve this rank in any branch of the US uniformed services.<sup>10</sup>

However, research suggests that the history of women in the military is far more like an undulating curve. A 2019 study of academic military surgery found evidence of gender dis-

parity even greater than that of the civilian sector.<sup>11</sup> True and lasting equity in federal health care practice will require all of us to follow the inspiring examples of so many women known and unknown who fought the military establishment within for the right to heal those wounded fighting the enemy without.

### Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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Mary Walker, MD.  
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