

Civil War Female Surgeon: US Senate Bill 82 containing a provision for a "Medal of Honor" was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on December 21, 1861. The medal was "to be bestowed upon such petty officers, seamen, landsmen, and Marines as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry and other seamanlike qualities during the present war.

The Medal of Honor is the highest military decoration awarded by the United States government. In total, 3,475 medals have been awarded to 3,456 people; 3,455 men (of whom nineteen were awarded it twice) and 1 woman.

Mary Edwards Walker was born to abolitionists Alvah and Vesta Whitcomb Walker in Oswego, N.Y. in 1832, the youngest of five daughters with one younger brother. The entire family worked the family farm. Alvah, a self-taught country doctor and Vesta, an elementary school teacher, allowed their daughters to wear clothes suited to farm labor not women's style of the time.

Her parents believed tight-fitting women's clothing was unhealthy. This belief was zealously adopted by Mary who, as an adult, would advocate dress reform for women in her own pursuit of women's rights. She often wore men's clothing as women's jeans and slacks were non-existent, and bloomers were unacceptable.

Both parents believed in education and equality for their son and daughters. The first schoolhouse in town was built on their land. Mary attended the school where her mother taught, and it was her father's medical books that spurred her interest in medicine. Her parents' encouragement instilled in her confidence she could become a doctor, albeit it was a time when females were not allowed formal medical training.

As a young woman, Walker entered Syracuse Medical College, the first medical school to accept women and men equally. She worked as a teacher at the same school where her mother taught in order to earn enough money to pay her way through medical school. It cost \$165 and consisted of three 13-week semesters.

Walker graduated in 1855 at age twenty-one, the only woman in her class the second American woman to earn a medical degree. The first was Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell in 1849. Dr. Mary Walker opened a medical practice but failed to attract patients.

In 1856 Dr. Walker married fellow medical student Albert Miller. She wore a man's coat and trousers at their wedding and kept her last name. They moved to Rome, N.Y., began a joint medical practice that did not prosper most likely due to the fact that folks were not yet receptive to women physicians who were not trusted or respected at that time. Her marriage also did not prosper. Miller proved to be unfaithful and they separated after four years. Dr. Walker briefly attended Bowen Collegiate Institute in Hopkinton, Iowa in 1860 but was suspended after refusing to quit Bowen's all male debating society.

Dr. Walker then set up another medical practice. With social growth and more women venturing into public positions, this practice proved successful. One of her ads in the Rome Sentinel read, "Those ... who prefer the skill of a female physician ... have now an excellent opportunity to make their choice." Times for women were beginning to improve thanks to social advocates such as Dr. Walker and the steps they took into places opening spaces for women.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Dr. Walker went to Washington, DC with the

intent to join the Union Army as a medical officer. Unthinkable to the men in command that a woman (in trousers no less) could perform surgery and give medical examinations, she was denied enlistment. She volunteered, received no compensation for her surgical work, most done as a field surgeon in makeshift hospitals set up near the front lines. She served under Dr. J.N. Green as his acting assistant surgeon and performed many of his duties for almost two years although her medical credentials often were questioned.

Dr. Walker wearing a modified version of a male officer's uniform was captured by Confederate troops in April 1864, taken hostage and imprisoned. She acted as a spy and her outrage at the improper prisoner rations resulted in the addition of wheat bread and cabbage. After four months she was released and returned to the 52nd Infantry where she continued her medical work at Louisville female prison and an orphan's asylum in Tennessee.

In October 1864, Dr. Walker finally became commissioned as an acting assistant surgeon earning \$100 a month, the first female surgeon commissioned in the US Army. President Andrew Johnson, acting on the recommendations of Maj. Gens. William T. Sherman and George H. Thomas, signed a bill in November 1865 that gave Dr. Walker the Congressional Medal of Honor. The citation recognized her "valuable service to the government," devoting "herself with much patriotic zeal to the sick and wounded soldiers, both in the field and hospitals, to the detriment of her own health," and enduring "hardships as a prisoner of war."

After the war, Dr. Walker became a writer and lecturer advocating for issues as health care, temperance, women's rights and dress reform for women. She wrote two books that discussed women's rights and dress and she introduced use of the postcard. She interacted with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton on women's suffrage and agreed with Anthony that women already had the right to vote and Congress needed only to enact enabling legislation. Anthony's words in the Nineteenth Amendment state that the "right to vote cannot be denied on account of sex," not that the right to vote can now be given to the ladies.

In 1917 the US Congress changed the criteria for the Congressional Medal of Honor and Dr. Walker's medal was revoked. That year her health began to decline. She refused to return the medal and wore it illegally every day until her death two years later at age eighty-six. Dr. Walker had a plain funeral but an American flag was draped over her casket. She was buried in her black suit instead of a dress. Her birthplace is marked with a historical marker.

Family and friends lobbied incessantly to have Dr. Walker's medal reinstated. Sixty years later in 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed an order doing just that -- citing Dr. Walker's distinguished gallantry, self-sacrifice, patriotism, dedication and unflinching loyalty to her country despite the apparent discrimination because of her sex.

A 1982 US postage stamp was issued in her honor, and in 2000 the Women's Hall of Fame at Seneca Falls, N. Y. inducted the only woman awarded the US Congressional Medal of Honor, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, Civil War female surgeon.

Sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medal_of_Honor;
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