



DR. MARY EDWARDS WALKER AND THE MEDAL OF HONOR

By William M. McKinnon M.D.

By an act of Congress on March 3rd, 1863 the Medal of Honor was created as a permanent decoration "for officers and enlisted men of the army and volunteer forces who have distinguished or may distinguish themselves in battle during the present rebellion". Since that time some 3525 Medals have been awarded, with about 40% given during the Civil War. Only once has a Medal ever been awarded to honor a woman.

Mary Edwards Walker was born on November 26th, 1832 in Oswego, New York into a family of abolitionists, with parents who were "free thinkers", progressives who questioned many of the accepted customs of the times. She and her siblings were home schooled and worked on the family farm. Believing in dress reform, her parents allowed Mary to wear "bloomer" pants instead of the skirts and corsets women were expected to wear at the time, as she and her parents thought the usual feminine garments too restricting. Mary came to strongly oppose long skirts with petticoats not only for their discomfort and decreased mobility, but also because they collected dust and dirt that were felt to be carriers of disease. She became a strong advocate of dress reform and experimented with a number of new combinations of attire, eventually settling on trousers with suspenders under a knee length dress with a full skirt and a tight waist. Such attire became a lifelong habit.

After finishing her home schooling, Mary attended the Falley Seminary in Fulton, New York. Prepared as a teacher, she taught in Minetto, New York, where she was ridiculed for her clothing choices by her students and their parents. She left teaching and decided to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. She saved her teacher's earnings, was accepted into the Syracuse Medical College, and graduated in 1855 as the second female to do so. She married classmate Albert Miller, though she declined to include "obey" in her vows and she refused to take her husband's name. Together they started a practice in Rome, New York that failed, presumably as the public would not yet accept a female physician. She separated from her husband because of his infidelity and they were officially divorced 13 years later.



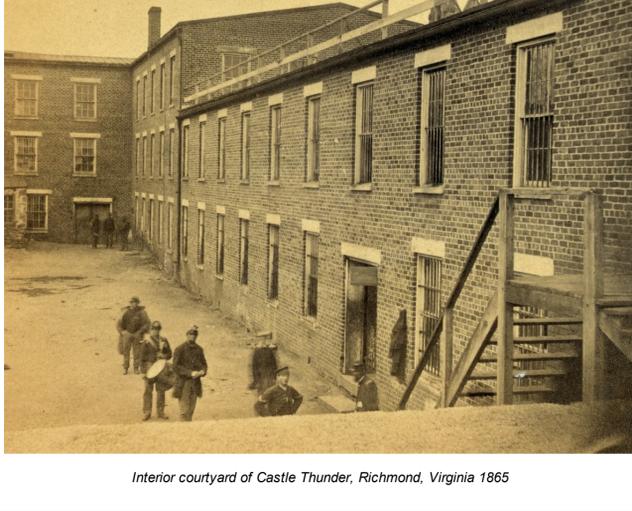
Young Mary Walker



Dr. Mary Walker in modified army uniform

With the beginning of the Civil War Dr. Walker volunteered as a surgeon for the Army but was rejected promptly because of her gender. She worked for a time as a volunteer nurse at First Bull Run and at the Patent Office Hospital in Washington, D.C. She thereafter began to work as an unpaid field surgeon on the front lines and was at Fredericksburg and Chickamauga. All the while, she continued to wear a modified men's uniform during her work, reporting that it made her duties easier.

In 1862 she volunteered as a spy, but again was denied. In 1863 she was finally hired as a contract assistant surgeon by the Army of the Cumberland—but remained technically a civilian. In this capacity she treated both Union and Confederate soldiers as well as many civilians on both sides of the lines. It was doing this that led to her capture by Confederate forces, and she was imprisoned as a spy in Castle Thunder in Richmond for four months in 1864. She was exchanged and was pleased to see that she was traded for a male Confederate surgeon with the rank of major, giving her some vindication. Filling a vacancy, she was later appointed contract assistant surgeon of the 52nd Ohio Infantry by Gen. George Thomas. Though she was weakened by muscular atrophy suffered while imprisoned, she continued to serve as a physician in several locations until the end of the war.



Interior courtyard of Castle Thunder, Richmond, Virginia 1865

After the war Dr. Walker requested a brevet promotion to major in recognition of her many services, including treating soldiers of both armies, helping civilians, and serving a time as a prisoner of war. Secretary Stanton could not grant her request though Generals Sherman and Thomas wished her contributions to be recognized. There was no legal provision for women to serve in the Army, much less a way for the Army to reward female service. President Andrew Johnson determined however that her contributions should be acknowledged, and she received the Medal of Honor in January 1866. She wore it proudly for the rest of her life.



Mary Walker with her Medal of Honor

After the war Dr. Walker never again practiced medicine but was very active as a reformer. She spoke up about women's rights, abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, suffrage, and dress reform. She gradually simplified her attire to that of a men's suit, complete with top hat. Her habit of wearing men's clothing got her arrested multiple times for impersonating a man. This continued until finally stopped by a judge and she was greeted by hearty applause as she left the courtroom. She said, "I don't wear men's clothes, I wear my own clothes".

She wrote two books, lectured, and appeared before Congress twice regarding women's suffrage. She became estranged from the leaders of the suffrage movement who viewed her as eccentric because of her choice of dress. Still, she continued to seek reform, wearing her usual attire and her precious Medal daily.



Mary Walker at a photographer's studio in her usual dress - with Medal of Honor and top hat.

In 1916 a review of requirements for the Medal by the Army resulted in the striking of 911 names from the list of recipients, including Dr. Walker and William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody. The honor she had held for 50 years was rescinded. The law required that recipients be officers or enlisted members of the military, and as she was still considered to have been a contract surgeon, she was considered ineligible. This was the rationale for rescinding her Medal, though it has been shown that some male honorees with similar credentials did not suffer this indignity.

Dr. Walker steadfastly refused to return the Medal and wore it until her dying day. She died on February 21, 1919 and was buried in her usual black men's suit in a rural cemetery in Oswego. In 1977, at the request of her niece her case was reviewed, and the Army Board for Correction of Military Records restored her medal posthumously during the administration of President Jimmy Carter. A U.S. postage stamp issued in 1982 honored her as the first female recipient of the Medal of Honor.

Dr. Walker, though unconventional and eccentric, was a tireless reformer for all causes linked to women's rights. Sadly, she never voted as the nineteenth amendment was not passed until a year after her death. She is remembered today by a group of ardent supporters, and there is a life-sized statue of her in Oswego where her Medal and other artifacts are displayed by the Oswego County Historical Society.

Despite what she felt was unfair treatment by the government she never lost her respect to her country. She wrote:

"When I am buried neath the ground, wrap that flag my corpse around, plant that flag above my grave, there let it wave, let it wave".



Walker photograph by C.M. Bell



Rural Cemetery, Oswego, New York

Photo courtesy Oswego County Historical Society



Mary Walker's statue in Oswego, NY

Photo courtesy Oswego County Historical Society

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



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