

Women's History Month - 2011

Throughout the month of March, we celebrate the history of American women whose contributions have blazed trails for empowerment and equality. We look to the past to commemorate their stalwart determination to break down barriers in the face of adversity, and we look to the future where we carry forth the legacy of our mothers and grandmothers to ensure equality.

Women have played a vital role and continue to be an invaluable and essential part of the Army family. They have served in the United States Army since 1775, and these women, both uniformed and civilian, have served with distinction in every war this nation has ever fought.

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From the early years of the Revolutionary War, women have stepped forward to serve alongside men for the cause of freedom. They tended the sick, mended clothes, served as spies and even manned cannons on the battlefield.

During the attack on Fort Washington, New York, in 1776, standing alongside her husband John, Margaret Corbin handled ammunition for a cannon. When he was fatally wounded, she took his place at the cannon until she also was wounded.

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In 1782, at twenty-two years of age, Deborah Sampson became the first woman known to enlist as a Soldier in the American Army. She put on male clothing, adopted the name Robert Shurtliff and enlisted in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Sampson was wounded in her left thigh during the Battle of Tarrytown in New York, and to keep her secret safe, she treated herself.

Eighty years later, during the Civil War, Doctor Mary Walker served as assistant surgeon with General Burnside's Union forces. She was captured by Confederates in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and imprisoned in Richmond, Virginia as a spy.

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Eventually, she was released and returned to serve as a hospital surgeon at a women's prisoner-of-war hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. After the war, President Andrew Johnson awarded her the Medal of Honor. Doctor Walker is the only woman to have been awarded this highest honor.

These women, and countless more like them, served with courage, competence and confidence that set the conditions for their daughters and granddaughters to step forward to serve as Army nurses in the Army Nurse Corps in 1901, operate telephones as "Hello Girls" in the Army Signal Corps in Europe during World War One, fly planes as the Women's Air force Service Pilots, and man radios following D-Day in Normandy as part of the Women's Army Corps during World War Two.

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This year, we commemorate the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Korean War. This was the first test of the United Nations' resolve to stand against tyranny in all its forms. Twenty-one nations banded together with the United States and South Korea in a remarkable display of solidarity to turn back naked aggression and stem the tide of communism.

Captain Viola McConnell was the only Army nurse on duty in Korea at the start of hostilities. She escorted seven hundred American evacuees, mostly women and children, from Seoul to Japan aboard a ship which normally had accommodations for only twelve passengers. She cared for the evacuees and worked with a medical team organized by the passengers.

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She later returned to Taejon (TAY-žhŭn), Korea to aid in the care and evacuation of the wounded men of the Twenty-fourth Division. Captain McConnell was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for her heroic performance of duty in assisting with the evacuation of Americans from Seoul and, later, the Oak Leaf Cluster to the Bronze Star Medal for her outstanding service in Korea.

Approximately Five Hundred Forty Army Nurse Corps Officers, including Captain McConnell, served throughout the Korean Peninsula in twenty-five medical treatment facilities, such as evacuation, field and station hospitals; hospital trains and Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals, also known as MASH. These nurses exhibited courage beyond measure and distinguished themselves in their dedication to duty in the midst of combat.

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Women play crucial roles around the world today, and their sacrifices in this noble effort underscore their dedication to serving their country particularly in Afghanistan where women contribute to the counterinsurgency mission while serving on Female Engagement Teams that meet with Afghan women to gain understanding and insight into the country's culture.

Today, more than One-hundred Seventy-Six Thousand Five-Hundred women serve in the Army - more than Fourteen thousand are deployed as truck drivers, military police, interpreters, journalists, intelligence analysts, doctors, lawyers, pilots and unit commanders.

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Any deployed Soldier, regardless of their gender, military specialty or unit mission, may find themselves in hostile action, but the number of women serving in the Army continues to grow. In Nineteen Eighty-Three, women accounted for Nine-point-Eight percent of the total Army. Now women make up nearly sixteen percent of the total Army.

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Female Soldiers, like Sergeant Leigh (LEE) Ann Hester, who was awarded the Silver Star for her action in combat, serve in a conflict where the front lines are blurred, and you can find them serving alongside and doing the many of the same jobs as their male counterparts in Iraq and Afghanistan. You will even find women at the highest ranks of the Army, like four-star General Anne Dunwoody.

The Army must maintain its combat edge during this period of persistent conflict, and this would not be possible without the contributions of its female Soldiers.

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As we honor the women who have shaped our Nation and our Army, we must remember that we are the ones to write the next chapter of women's history. The Army will build on the progress of the trailblazers of the past and look to the limitless potential of women that lies ahead.

We must carry on the work of the women who came before us and ensure our daughters have no limits on their dreams, no obstacles to their achievements, and no remaining ceilings to shatter as they continue to serve as the strength of the Army and the strength of the nation.