

Celebrating Women Serving their Country

By Gaea Honeycutt

Women have served proudly and with valor in the armed forces since the War of Independence. Our national history is filled with little known facts of women's military service. Does it surprise you to know that there's a Women's Memorial right here in the Metro Area at Arlington National Cemetery? Or, that the National Air and Space Museum features women pilots throughout its exhibits?

In all branches and from all cultures, American servicewomen have blazed a trail through the military, opening the doors of opportunity for other service women and civilians alike. They join the armed forces for the same reasons as their male counterparts—to serve, to find purpose, or to earn a living. Women soldiers continue to face discrimination and fight against gender role stereotypes to serve their country, while they fight for opportunities their male counterparts take for granted. Despite these obstacles, servicewomen continue to make inspiring accomplishments.

Gender is no longer a barrier for entering most lines of military service, but it once was. Deborah Sampson Gannett dressed as a man and used the name Robert Shurtliff to join the Army during the Revolutionary War. She served for three years and endured two gunshot wounds before being discovered by a doctor treating her for brain fever.

Dr. Mary E. Walker is distinguished as the only woman to receive the Medal of Honor. She spent years volunteering at hospitals while being denied a proper salary by military officials in Washington. When she headed for the frontlines of the Civil War, she worked for room (or tent) and board. Her work often took her behind enemy lines, and at one point, she was captured and imprisoned for four months by Confederate forces.

During the first World War, the Army routinely rejected the applications of Puerto Rican doctors, male or female, until there was an insufficient number of anesthesiologists and other medical staff. Not long after she reported for service in San Juan, Dr. Delores Pinero found herself on the frontlines of the battle against the Swine Flu. Alongside four male doctors, she operated a 400-bed facility as the pandemic raged across the globe for two years.

The first African American woman to become an officer in the Illinois Civil Air Patrol was Willa Brown. She earned her pilot's



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and commercial licenses as well as a Master Mechanic Certificate. Through her efforts to train and promote black pilots, she helped pave the way for African Americans to serve in the Army Air Corps and fight in the second World War.

More than 485,000 women have served in military conflicts from the Spanish-American War to Desert Storm. More than 200,000 (14.5%) women serve in the Armed Forces and close to 150,000 (17.2%) in the reserves. Alarmingly, last year a bill was introduced in the House Armed Services Committee that limited the positions women could hold in the military. Without the military's support, the bill was soundly defeated by strong citizen and advocate pressure. Although women in the Army still can't serve in direct combat units, they can serve in combat support units, one of the many positions last year's bill proposed barring for women.

During National Military Appreciation Month, it is important that we remember and celebrate the women who have served our country with such bravery. To learn more about the women in the military, visit the Women's Memorial at www.womensmemorial.org. This living memorial and educational institution is an ideal resource for a journey into the history and contributions of women soldiers. It is also a place to offer donations and support the women currently serving in the military. We owe these women our respect and admiration for their service to our freedom as Americans and to our freedom as women. Please take some time this month to give them the honor they deserve.