

Mary Edwards Walker: The Only Woman Awarded the Medal of Honor

Cailin Elise Meyer

Dr. Mary E. Walker (1832–1919) is the first woman to be appointed as the U.S. Army assistant surgeon, and the only woman to have received the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."¹

Walker (Fig. 1) graduated with honor from Syracuse Medical College in 1855, at the age of 23. At the start of the Civil War, she travelled to Washington, DC, seeking a commission as an Army surgeon or, barring that, as a contract surgeon. Both requests were denied, due to the lack of policy regarding the hiring of women physicians.² Although Walker then volunteered her expertise as a nurse, she never stopped requesting a commission as an Army surgeon.

After 3 years, she was attached as a contract surgeon to the 52nd Ohio Infantry. Major Generals Sherman and Thomas noted that, as a contract surgeon, she "... passed frequently beyond our lines far within those of the enemy, and at one time gained information that led General Sherman to modify his strategic operations as to save himself from a serious reverse and obtain success where defeat before seemed to be inevitable."³ Although with the 52nd Ohio,



FIGURE 1. Dr. Mary E. Walker, seen wearing her Medal of Honor. Walker was the first woman to serve the U.S. Army as a contract surgeon and the first and only woman to receive the Medal of Honor (NCP1635, Otis Historical Archives, NMHM).

MoGer International, in support of the National Museum of Health and Medicine, Defense Health Agency, 2500 Linden Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

The National Museum of Health and Medicine (NMHM), a Department of Defense (DoD) museum founded as the Army Medical Museum in 1862, is committed to documenting the nation's military medical heritage while sustaining a repository of contemporary medical technology to advance military medicine. This series of articles illuminates objects and collections of interest to AMSUS readers. For more about NMHM, visit www.medicalmuseum.mil.

The contributor hereby certifies the contribution to be a work of the U.S. Government, which has been prepared by an officer or employee of the U.S. Government as part of his or her official duties, and therefore, precluded from copyright protection under 17 USC §105. The contribution is in the public domain by operation of laws of the United States.

The opinions and assertions contained herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NMHM or the DoD, any of the military services or other DoD components or any other government agencies, and does not constitute an endorsement by the DoD of any of the opinions expressed, or any information, products or services contained therein.

doi: 10.7205/MILMED-D-15-00573

she often tended to the medical needs of nearby civilians; this led to her capture on April 10, 1864 by Confederate forces near Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁴ She was held in a Richmond prison for 4 months before being released in a prisoner exchange. After her release, Walker was finally



FIGURE 2. Pocket Surgical Kit: This kit was used by Walker during the war (M-151.00361). Pocket surgical kits were designed to be compact and customizable, allowing surgeons to carry the tools they found most useful on their person for small surgeries or emergencies. (Disclosure: This image has been cropped to emphasize the subject.) (NaMHM photo by Matthew Breitbart/Released).

awarded a commission as an acting U.S. Army Assistant Surgeon on October 5, 1864.⁵

President Johnson presented Walker with the Medal of Honor on January 24, 1866 for her services during the war.⁶ However, on April 27, 1916, Walker's medal was among 911 that were rescinded because of "no evidence of distinguished gallantry."⁷ Walker, however, refused to surrender the medal, and died in 1919. After reviewing her records, the

Assistant Secretary of the Army ordered that her name be reinstated on the Medal of Honor Roll on June 10, 1977.⁸

Mary Walker's pocket surgical kit (Fig. 2) is part of the National Museum of Health and Medicine's (NMHM) historical collection and is on display at NMHM today.⁹ These small, lightweight kits allowed Civil War surgeons easy access to the most useful tools while working in the field. Mary Walker's pocket surgical kit was donated to the museum by her grandniece, Helen Hay Wilson, in January 1974.

REFERENCES

1. U.S. Department of Defense: Military Awards for Valor-Top 3. Available at <http://valor.defense.gov/DescriptionofAwards.aspx>; accessed December 12, 2015.
2. MD Personality: Courageous Physician. MD 1978; 22(7): 144-154.
3. Army Board for Correction of Military Records: Reference File No. 13.9, May 4, 1977: 3. Accession Records on File. Silver Spring, MD, National Museum of Health and Medicine.
4. Army Board for Correction of Military Records: Reference File No. 13.9: 3. Accession Records on File. Silver Spring, MD, National Museum of Health and Medicine.
5. Army Board for Correction of Military Records: Docket Number AC-76-07656, May 4, 1977: 3. Accession Records on File. Silver Spring, MD, National Museum of Health and Medicine.
6. Army Board for Correction of Military Records: Docket Number AC-76-07656:4. Accession Records on File. Silver Spring, MD, National Museum of Health and Medicine.
7. Army Board for Correction of Military Records: Reference File No. 13.9:5. Accession Records on File. Silver Spring, MD, National Museum of Health and Medicine.
8. Department of the Army Office of the Assistant Secretary: Memorandum for: The Adjutant General, Subject: SFMR-WALKER, MARY E. (Deceased), Dated June 10, 1977. Accession Records on File. Silver Spring, MD, National Museum of Health and Medicine.
9. Accession Records 1992.0009. Silver Spring, MD, National Museum of Health and Medicine.