

Women NCOs: Before Their Time
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By SGM Sherri La Croix, #450

Women performed heroically in many battles over the centuries. Officially, women did not have the right to serve in the military service, but a bending of a few rules did happen. Some took charge, some used their ingenuity, and others felt a sense of duty or patriotism. There are numerous women that are considered NCOs today. So what is an NCO?

A Noncommissioned Officer, NCO, is many things and ever adapting to the changing world and soldiers. There are many things which guide a soldier in military life and their leadership qualities. By giving them these regulations and policies, values, creeds, and slogans to follow help them become an NCO.

Let us look at Be, Know, and Do. Be, is character and competence. Know is, Interpersonal, Conceptual, Technical and Tactical skills. Do, be a leader.

Some of our values come from the acronym LDRSHIP. (Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage).

Given to them is the NCO Creed, an oath we live by.

The Army slogans have a way of perpetuating moral and competition. An NCO earns and learns all of these things. The NCO of today is flexible and trains for more than just war. Training challenges of the NCO today are peacekeeping, disaster relief, and working with other foreign soldiers. As an NCO, we must train and mold our future NCOs to prepare for anything.

SMA Jack L. Tilley summed it up best when he said,
Lead by example,
Train from experience,
Maintains and enforces standards,

Takes care of soldiers,

Adapts to a changing world”.

Of all of these things are our NCOs. So why do people serve in the military?

Several words come to mind: duty, loyalty, conscription, and patriotism.

Mostly looking at war, battles, and conflicts. During the Civil War, WW I, and WW II most soldiers felt a sense of loyalty, duty, and patriotism. But in Vietnam and Korea conscription seemed the major factor, as well as, stopping the spread of Communism. History has shown that women have participated in battles and wars for centuries.

Egypt with the most notable woman warrior was Cleopatra VII, known as Cleopatra the Great. She fought and won many battles. Even after defeat, she did not give up. It was her armies, and navies, her world conquering ambition, and her savvy in the ways of war and politics that drew the Roman leaders to her. (Jones p.111)

The Amazon women are thought of as mythical warriors. Stories of how they dressed and bore arms were like fairy tales. They wore long trousers, mid length coats, leather boots, Phrygian hats and carried small crescent shields, a light battle-ax and a short sword. There were tales that the women would have the right breast removed so they could draw their bows more efficiently. What a sacrifice to war.

Most of us now know about the Chinese woman warrior, Hua Mu-lan. Hence the movie “Mulan”. This woman felt so compelled to serve that she hid her sexuality from her fellow warrior. There is a traditional play that honors her, “She had much fighting ability, and could act the leader. Her body passed through one hundred battles, always at the front, and compared to the fiercest soldiers, she was still better”. (Jones p.24)

Here in North America, the Native Americans had many women warriors. Some fought side by side with their husbands, some fought on their own, and some had their own secret society of women warriors. Just to name a few: Ehyophsta, Brown weasel, queen Wetamoo, Chief Earth Woman, and Old lady Grieves the Enemy. Most of these women warriors fought without prejudice or restrictions.

Many women in the U.S. had to hide their sexuality or faced racism. There were several women who went to battle with their husbands. Some of them engaged in battle or supported the war effort in other ways. Many women enlisted by hiding their sexuality, but their discovery was inevitable. These women felt such patriotism that they risked their lives to fight. The women of color also faced discrimination on sex and color. Look back at those who did fight knowingly or while performing their duty had their identity revealed.

In 1787, Alice Merrill fended off numerous Indians during a raid on their home one night. The Indians seriously injured her husband, so she used an ax to hack at her opponents while trying to close the cabin door. She killed one that came down the chimney and two more who successfully knocked down the door. The rest of the Indians fled after taking such a loss. The Indian tribesmen then named her "Long Knife Squaw". She was an NCO.

There are three women that took part in defending Indians, Sarah Buchanan, Susan Everett, and Nancy Mulherrin. The Shawnee, while raiding a settlement in eastern Tennessee, is when these three women went into action. First they noticed the large number of Shawnee Indians and had to find a way around them to return to the fort. They charged the Indians, while giving cavalry commands to confuse the Indians. They all reached the fort. Even though the colonists were out numbered, Sarah rallied the men to fight. As the men's ammunition ran out, suddenly, all three women arrived with home made ammunition. The ammunition made was

from pewter plates melted down by these women. Sarah found an old blunderbuss and proceeded to rig it up, so her husband could fire it. After firing several rounds from this weapon, the Shawnee retreated. If it had not been for the courage and ingenuity of these women, the fort would have fallen and everyone would have died. These women are NCOs.

One of the most well known woman warriors of the American Revolution is Mary Hays McCauley. She fought for seven years in the Pennsylvania State regiment of Artillery. She went to war along side her husband. She performed several heroic acts. During a retreat from Fort Clinton, her husband dropped the match to light the cannon; she picked it up and lit the fuse. She did this in the face of the British attacking. She escaped without harm. She usually divided her time between assisting her husband at the cannon and giving water to the soldiers, from an old chipped pitcher, on the front line. This is how she earned the name "Molly Pitcher". As the battles went on she continued to support her husband and the soldiers. Her husband, during the heat of the battle, received a fatal shot. She took his place and began firing so rapidly and accurately that she drew the attention of General Greene. He introduced her to George Washington and he was so impressed, he presented her with a commission of sergeant in the Continental Army. She was truly an NCO.

Finally, there is a women warrior who is now in the spotlight. She is Cathy Williams. This woman had to overcome both sex discrimination and racism. She was a slave that became a laundress for the Union, which led her to become a Buffalo soldier. In the summer of 1861 she was liberated by the 8th Indiana Infantry Regiment, and became contraband under the rules of the Civil War. She received very good treatment from them. She carried two washtubs weighing between 30 and 40 pounds wherever they went. She spent three and one half years with this regiment. While traveling with them she saw black soldiers in Arkansas, which left her wanting

to be a soldier. After the regiment deactivated, she decided she wanted to be a Buffalo soldier. With the help of her cousin and a friend she enlisted into the Active Army as William Cathay. She began her assignment with the 38th U.S. Infantry. She avoided detection of her sexuality, through careful planning and help from her cousin and friend. She is the only documented black female to serve for nearly two years, from 1866 to 1868, as a Buffalo Soldier. Because of her rheumatism, she could no longer function comfortably as a soldier. Because of her deteriorating health, she decided she had to leave the military. Upon which her true identity is revealed. She continued to be around military personnel. She opened her own laundry business around a military camp. Some believe she enjoyed military life and being a part of it. In spite of all she did, the illnesses she went through, and suffered in the Army, she never received a disability pension. She died at the age of 82. She truly is an NCO.

All of the women listed in this article performed exemplary, as did many others not listed or written about. Most of these women did not receive pay, or allowed to enlist in the United States military. For their deeds women received recognition, ridicule and unfair treatment. All in all, these women and their heroic deeds proved they are NCOs before their time.

Works Cited

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