

## Mary Edwards Walker

The Medal of Honor is awarded in the name of Congress to a person in the Armed Forces who distinguishes him or herself by gallantry and intrepidity, by risking life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in military action against any enemy of the United States. The first Medal of Honor was awarded to J.D. Irwin in 1861, a Dublin born Irishman who paved the way for a long line of Irish born recipients of the Medal of Honor, 257 in total. Eight civilians have been Medal of Honor winners and only one woman. She is the subject of this article.

Mary Edwards Walker is the only woman to receive the Medal of Honor. She was born in Oswego, New York on November 26, 1832. She was a pioneer



woman physician and a supporter of the woman's rights movement of the late 1880's especially the right to vote. She was also ahead of her time as she studied medicine and in 1855 received a physician's certificate from the Syracuse Medical College. By 1858, only about 300 women physicians had graduated from medical schools while 18,000 men had. Later she was to lead a movement aimed at ending the social restrictions on women's dress. She believed women should wear whatever they wished and became known for wearing trousers. Medical schools began to experiment with various models of the "reform dress," disparagingly known as "bloomers" after Amelia Bloomer, a key advocate of women's dress reform. The fact that she was a

"woman physician" and wore men's clothes was felt by many to be a threat to the "natural" social order. Mary married a fellow student, Albert Miller, soon after graduation. They set up a joint practice but the marriage did not last and they were divorced. She did not remarry.

Soon after the start of the conflict between the North and South in April 1861, Dr. Walker tried to get a commission as a surgeon in the Union Army. Besides being deeply patriotic, she felt the conditions of warfare would give a woman physician the recognition that would open the path for other women to enter the medical profession. Mary was not able to persuade the Army's Medical Department to give her a commission as a military surgeon. It was with great reluctance that female nurses were finally allowed to go to the war front as it was "no place for a woman." The argument that it was "natural" for a woman to confront emergency circumstances and that they

would replace the men currently employed as nurses convinced the Army Medical Department to allow women to work in military hospitals at the front lines. But in the case of women physicians it was not believed that it was natural for a woman to perform surgery or even perform a physical exam especially if the patient was a soldier and a man. In the fall of 1861 Dr. Walker was able to get a position as a temporary, voluntary, and noncommissioned doctor under a surgeon at a hospital that treated wounded and sick Indiana troops. She spent two months at the Indiana Military Hospital where she performed all the duties of a medical doctor including assisting at operations. Finally she was compelled to leave since she was an unpaid volunteer and had used up all her funds. Dr. Green, her supervisor, offered to share a part of his salary, but she declined as she felt he needed it for his family. She went home to Oswego but returned to Washington at the end of 1862. Late in the fall, she headed for the Warrenton, Virginia, encampment of the Army of the Potomac commanded by General Burnside, where with the permission of the medical director, she treated the wounded and sick veterans of the Second Battle of Bull Run and the Battle of Antietam. After convincing the authorities in Washington that the soldiers would receive better medical care in Washington, General Burnside assigned her to accompany the wounded to Washington. After delivering Burnside's troops to Washington, she left for Fredericksburg, Virginia where she was directed by the managing surgeon "to take any cases I chose and dress them preparatory (sic) to sending them to Washington." A Dr. Preston King, who had been with her at Fredericksburg, wrote to the federal government an account of her work with the troops, describing her as "physician and surgeon" and requesting some compensation for all she had done. At this time the Government did employ up to 5,500 contract surgeons who remained as civilians but received the pay of first lieutenants. No compensation was granted to Mary Walker.

Back in Washington, Dr. Walker devoted her time and energies to establishing homes for women who sought to care for sick or wounded soldiers. Again she returned to the battle front to assist the wounded soldiers of the Battle of Chickamunga, in Cumberland, Tennessee. The surgeon-in-charge refused to employ Mary as anything but a nurse. Her work with the wounded was recognized by General George H. Thomas, Commander of the Army of the Cumberland, who became her champion. Eventually General Thomas was able to assign Dr. Walker as a civilian contract surgeon under the command of Colonel Dan McCook, stationed at Gordon's Mills near Chattanooga. Dr. Walker's duties as a contract surgeon were limited as the soldiers were in relatively good health, but the civilians in the surrounding areas near Chattanooga had suffered as a consequence of the recent battles. Dr. Walker, with Colonel McCook's permission, spent a good deal of her time carrying supplies out into the community and treating

medical cases as needed.

On April 10, 1864, only two months after her assignment to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Ohio, Walker was captured by the Confederacy when she went too deeply into enemy territory. Unable to determine what to do with Dr. Walker, Confederate officers assigned her to a prison camp in Richmond to await an exchange as a prisoner-of-war. After four months, Dr. Walker was exchanged, but her health had deteriorated to a state where she lost sixty pounds and her eyes and vision were impaired, which affected her ability to practice medicine in the postwar years. Walker returned to Washington to recover her health and to plan for her future. She returned to the army, still as a contract surgeon, but as the surgeon-in-charge to the Louisville Female Military Prison which housed Confederate women arrested for spying and other anti-Union activities. In March 1865, harassed by her many opponents who never forgave her gender, she requested a transfer to the battle front. Request denied, she spent the final weeks of the war in Clarksville, Tennessee in charge of an orphan asylum and refugee home. On May 5, 1865, her longtime opponent in the Army Medical Department, Dr. George Cooper, advised her that her services were no longer needed. Dr. Cooper had never accepted Mary Walker's credentials as a doctor.

Dr. Walker did not return home but instead pursued a commission as a peacetime military surgeon on the basis of her contributions during the war. Her supporters and opponents sent letters to President Andrew Johnson who assigned the final decision to the Judge Advocate General J. Holt of the War Department of Military Justice. His opinion was that she not be granted a commission because of her failure to pass Dr. Cooper's board of examiners who felt that, although she was not qualified as a doctor, she should be given a reward for her services on behalf of the Union. Accordingly, on November 11, 1865 President Johnson signed a bill to present Mary Edwards Walker with the Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service.

Dr. Walker was delighted with the medal and wore it on her lapel throughout the rest of her life. As usual with Dr. Walker, her medal was not to be permanent as it was revoked along with the medals of 910 recipients. It had been found that a number of medals had been awarded under unusual terms. In one case a number of men from Maine were offered the medal to re-enlist. At long last, in 1977 Mary Walker's medal was reinstated by President Jimmy Carter.



(Written by Joseph McCormack, September 2005)  
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