

Women's History Month

That Shocking Female Surgeon in Trousers

Dr. Mary E. Walker, a Civil War physician, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1865. She had been refused a commission as an army surgeon, but volunteered at a Washington D.C. hospital. Later, Dr Walker worked as a field surgeon near the Union front lines. From there she was assigned assistant surgeon of the 52nd Ohio Infantry. It was during her service with the 52nd that she was captured by Confederates.

She was held briefly as a prisoner of war before being released. Dr. Walker was awarded the Medal of Honor for her courageous service in saving lives during the war. In an unusual turn of events, Walker's Medal of Honor was rescinded in 1917, along with some 900 others to "increase the prestige of the grant." True to form, Walker refused to return the Medal of Honor and wore it until her death in 1919. Sadly she died alone and almost penniless at the age eighty seven.

Ultimately, Congress and President Jimmy Carter posthumously reinstated her medal in June 1977. Dr. Walker has the distinction of being the only woman in U.S. history to have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Lucy Stone "Called No Man Master"

Born in 1818, Lucy Stone was destined to become a leader in reform movements. In 1843, she enrolled at Oberlin University, then the only college that would admit women. At Oberlin, she experienced her first work towards reform when she staged a strike for equal training and teaching positions. Stone was one of the leaders of the U.S. women's rights movement and abolition. So strong were her convictions, that she was excommunicated from the Congregational church because of her beliefs.

Stone married Henry Browne Blackwell in 1855. At their wedding ceremony, Blackwell pledged never to avail himself of the laws which gave a husband control over a wife's income and property. Stone kept her name after marriage starting a movement of "Lucy Stoners"-- married women who did not change their names after marriage.

Jerrie Cobb

Jerrie Cobb was among the unflown Mercury 13 astronauts. They were America's first female space fliers. Cobb, in fact, was the first woman in the U.S. to take and pass space flight tests. In 1960, Cobb ranked in the top 2% of both men and women tested for astronaut training. She had 10,000 flight hours in everything from crop dusters to blimps to B-17s. Her father, an Air Force officer, had taught her to fly when she was a preteen. The cruel twist of fate that doomed their space careers occurred after the secret candidate screening had been completed. NASA added one more rule. An astronaut must also be a jet pilot. With no women flying military jet fighters, Cobb and the other women saw the Mercury 13 program disbanded and any hope of space flight disappear.

Her second hope for space flight came decades later when NASA, sending then elderly astronaut John Glenn into space to investigate the relationship between aging and weightlessness, considered then other older Americans. However, Cobb never made it to space. She flies humanitarian missions to remote parts of South America.

Josephine Baker

She went to Paris in 1925 to dance in La revue negre. Baker became Paris's most popular music-hall entertainer, receiving star billing at the Folies Berge. In World War II she worked with the Red Cross and entertained Free French troops. With the fall of France in 1940 she became active in the resistance. Using her career as a cover, she became an intelligence agent.

During World War II, she was a heroine of the Resistance, earning the Legion d'Honneur. Baker's celebrity allowed her to travel much more freely than most people. She once carried military intelligence

reports out of France to Portugal, written in invisible ink on her sheet music. She also used her charm to persuade foreign consulates to process visas for associates, some of who traveled with her as a cover.

Her resistance activities were curtailed by a serious illness for which she was hospitalized in the Mers Sultan Clinic in Casablanca from June 1941 until December 1942. She was awarded the Croix de Guerre and received a Medal of the Resistance in 1946. In 1961, she received the Legion d'Honneur from Charles deGaulle. On her death in 1975, she was given a state funeral in Paris.

Willa Beatrice Brown

Willa Brown and Cornelius Coffey were among the first few black pilots in the nation in the years before WWII. They also were among the first of any color to win training contracts to teach WWII pilots. In addition to training some of the most celebrated African American pilots of World War II under the civilian program, together Brown and Coffey paved the way for integration of the aviation industry as they trained both black and white pilots. Brown later served in the Civil Air Patrol, being the first woman of color to receive a commission as a lieutenant.

Anna Baetjer

Born in Baltimore in 1899, Baetjer graduated from Wellesley with degrees in English literature and zoology. She came to the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health in 1920 when there were few female researchers at the School at the time, but sexism kept most stuck on a semi-permanent basis in low-paying junior positions. When Baetjer received her ScD four years later, William Howell, the director of Physiological Hygiene, offered Baetjer a faculty position at the School, but reportedly only if she promised not to marry.

At the time Baetjer became a faculty member in 1924, state health departments were becoming interested in how the home, the factory, and the streets made people ill. Baetjer remained the sole Physiological Hygiene faculty member for 15 years, equipped only with a modest annual budget (a fifth of her predecessor's) and a single research technician.

Despite the limited resources, Baetjer turned out a steady stream of research findings that had far-reaching impact. For a study for the U.S. Army shortly published shortly after the end of WWII, Baetjer found how the performance of female workers could be affected by physiological differences, such as lower average muscle strength, and sociological differences, like the household duties demanded of most women. Her recommendations included adjusting machinery and equipment to make it possible for female personnel to operate them without straining or overreaching, limiting the work week to 48 hours per week and teaching women to lift and carry loads properly.

A few years later, Baetjer made the crucial link between chromium exposure and cancer, saving hundreds to thousands of lives of industrial workers. In 1951, Baetjer was elected president of the American Industrial Hygiene Association becoming its first female president. Baetjer continued to teach and research at John Hopkins for 60 years until shortly before her death in 1984. (based on John Hopkins website)