

Dr. Mary Edwards Walker

and the

Medal of Honor

by Dennis H. Black

Army Surgeon Mary E. Walker is the nation's only female recipient of the Medal of Honor. Of all things written of Walker, authors tend to reflect on her penchant for passionately espousing women's dress reforms and women's rights. Fiercely independent, self-reliant, and sternly willed, Walker truly was a character with whom few could reckon.

With the advent of the Civil War in April 1861, Walker (*right*), who had graduated from Syracuse Medical College, was determined to join the Union Army as a doctor. Denied a commission as a medical officer, she had little choice but to volunteer her services as an assistant surgeon. As a volunteer, she was assigned to the Washington, D.C., hospital that had been set up in the U.S. Patent Offices building and assisted in treating wounded soldiers who had besieged the city following the Battle of Bull Run.

Walker realized that hygiene was an integral component of saving lives. In 1862 she enrolled at Hygea Therapeutic College in New York City. Following the completion of coursework in the fall, she again traveled to Washington in anticipation of a commission. The

elusive assignment was not to be, and she again served as a volunteer in the backwoods of Virginia, where an outbreak of typhoid fever was ravaging the troops. By her own design, Walker wore a uniform of dark blue trousers with a gold stripe and the green sash of a surgeon. None dared challenge her boldness in securing a uniform of personal design.

Highly frustrated by her inability to gain official recognition for her devotion to treating the wounded and saving lives, Walker took the unprecedented step of writing her concerns directly to President Abraham Lincoln. Her letter spelled out her loyalty to the cause of the Union and her willingness to go anywhere, anytime, to administer to the ill, infirm, and wounded. Lincoln personally responded, saying only that he "couldn't force the acceptance of anyone contrary to the will of his commanders."

Walker volunteered where needed to treat the thousands of wounded who were pouring into the city after the Battle of Chickamauga, fought on September 19, 1863, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Other medical doctors and surgeons were incensed that Walker

would be allowed to administer to the medical needs of the wounded. To them, she was little more than a homeopathic herbalist, and suggestions from the highest in the medical corps went so far as to suggest that her medical training was a fantasy. However, by this time Major General Alexander McCook and Major General George H. Thomas had observed her accomplishments and tenacity following the Union defeat at Chickamauga.

While traveling behind enemy lines on horseback and adorned in her own unique uniform, Walker was captured by a Confederate sentry on April 10, 1864, and held as a prisoner of war at a prison called Castle Thunder in Richmond, Virginia. The prison was a foul place; Walker later noted the squalor, insects, vermin, and little food. Malnutrition was cause for her rapidly deteriorating eyesight.

Four months later, on August 10, Walker and a large group of other Union prisoners were secretly transported behind Union lines and exchanged for Confederate soldiers and a Confederate major.

Mary Walker was now a free woman, convinced that the elusive official duty she had long requested could not be denied.

Shortly following her release, she accepted an appointment as Acting Assistant Surgeon, United States Army, "but spent the rest of the war practicing at a Louisville female prison and an orphan's asylum in Tennessee. She was paid \$766.16 for her wartime service. Afterward, she got a monthly pension of \$8.50, later raised to \$20, but still less than a widow's pension." Walker was released from her contract on June 15, 1865.

In her heart, Walker was a true humanitarian, yet her legacy tends to be more identified with her lifelong personal independence, candor, dressing habits, and outspoken advocacy for women's rights. She was an avid reader, so following the war she became a published writer and highly sought after public speaker. Walker contributed articles to the dress reform journal *Sibyl* and published her recollections of the Civil War in a book, *Notes Connected with the Army*. Two of her books—*Hit*, published in 1871, and *Unmasked, or The Science of Immorality*, published in 1878—are evidence of her aggressive advocacy for the rights of women and her thoughts on suffrage, morals, sexual ethics, and civil liberties.

As would be expected during this time of our nation's history, having a woman receive the nation's highest honor for valor did not set well with some. Thus, during the Medal of Honor "Purge of 1917," when 910 recipients were stricken from the Medal of Honor Roll, Walker was one of the first to go. Although she was directed to return her medals to the govern-



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, C. 1860-1870

ment, she refused, and was seldom seen without them pinned to her jacket. Not surprisingly, no government or military official ever attempted to retrieve them.

Walker retired to her Oswego family farm, and became reclusive as time took its toll on her physical and mental abilities. Virtually peniless, Walker died on February 21, 1919, and is buried in the Rural Cemetery, on Cemetery Road, near Oswego, New York. Her Medal of Honor is displayed at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Walker's deeds were not "event specific" as with other recipients, as attested by the citation read and signed by President Andrew Johnson. Rather, she was selected for her dedication, loyalty, self-initiated exposure to great peril, and valor in facing the hardships of imprisonment.

It was now a known fact that Walker not only selflessly provided for the medical needs of the soldiers of the Union, but was also known to often travel and administer to the medically needy behind enemy lines. It was the latter that caused some to assert she was a spy for the Union, although conclusive proof was never exhibited.

However, it is known that once, when in Chattanooga, Walker passed behind enemy lines, and while there obtained information that was passed on to General Sherman. As a result, Sherman modified his operations and prevented enemy confrontations that could have created substantial setbacks. Conjecture is that this is but one of the reasons that the field recommendation to President Lincoln for Walker to receive the Medal of Honor came from Major General Sherman.

What Walker had experienced, the facts of which were known to two of the Union's greatest generals, William Tecumseh Sherman and George H. Thomas, and the fact that President Lincoln had himself intended that Walker be so honored, makes it understandable that she was selected for the medal. Although this was well over a century ago, there are those purists yet today who feel that the "intent" of the award policy was violated. Regardless, the final decision was made by Executive Order of the President of the United States, Andrew Johnson, after thorough consideration of events.

By Act of Congress in April 1916, which created the Medal of Honor Roll, it was stipulated that the award should be made for action "involving actual conflict with an enemy, by gallantry or intrepidity, at the risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty." The new rules were the basis by which the Medal of Honor Board rescinded Walker's medal, along with those of 909 other recipients.

All arguments became moot on June 10, 1977, when Dr. Mary E. Walker's name was returned to the Medal of Honor Roll, following a recommendation of the Army Board for the Correction of Military Records to Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander under President Jimmy Carter.

Walker was born in Oswego County, New York, on November 26, 1832. Her parents, Alvah and Vesta Walker, had five daughters, with Mary being the youngest. The family livelihood was obtained by the labors of all from their 33-acre farm. Although quite practical, the nonconventional and rugged clothing of the farm would become

an enlightened character statement for Walker.

Walker was enchanted with her father's many books. Reading was her personal triumph, and the books fed an insatiable appetite for knowledge. Alvah, a self-taught "country doctor," influenced his youngest daughter, and before long she recognized an innate desire to pursue that honored profession of medical service.

Like her sisters, Mary Walker began a career of teaching at the age of 16. Although this profession was both challenging and intellectually rewarding, Walker longed for the right opportunity to enter medical school. This she did in 1853 at the age of 21. Walker graduated from Syracuse Medical College two years later.

While at Syracuse, Walker dated Albert Miller, also a medical student. Miller proposed a matrimonial and professional union that would place them at his medical practice in Rome, New York. They were subsequently married, although Mary refused to change her name, and directed that the word "obey" be removed from the wedding vows. She attended the wedding in trousers and jacket.

Their marriage was so unmistakably wrong that it was destined for failure. Shortly after they married, Walker learned of her husband having an active, ongoing affair. She sought a divorce, but due to the stringent laws of the land and the social stigma of the time, their severance never occurred until 1869.

Intent on advancing her education after the break-up of her marriage, Walker enrolled for the 1860 fall term at the newly established Bowen Collegiate Institute at Hopkinton, in Delaware County, Iowa. Bowen was in its infancy, with a mere 98 students, and the

conservative Presbyterian views of the trustees and instructors were foreign to Walker, an independent thinker. Walker was readily recognized around town because of her attire—she liked to wear “bloomers.” From the beginning, Walker was viewed as a “mischief-maker,” according to Miss Cooley, a Bowen instructor who loudly opposed Walker’s desire “to share in the rhetorical exercises provided for the gentlemen, and her insistence on studying German.”

The young men at Bowen had organized a debating society. One evening Walker attended and asked to be admitted as a member. Membership was allowed, but upon learning of Walker’s action, Cooley had Walker suspended from the institute. After being joined by all but two of the men in a procession

and parade of protest to “downtown” Hopkinton, the young men of Bowen were also suspended. Rapidly realizing the error of their ways, the boys openly repented and were allowed to return to their studies. However, Walker’s suspension was permanent.

Befriended by but a few citizens, Walker remained in Hopkinton for a short time, during which she occasionally aided Dr. Cunningham in his medical practice.

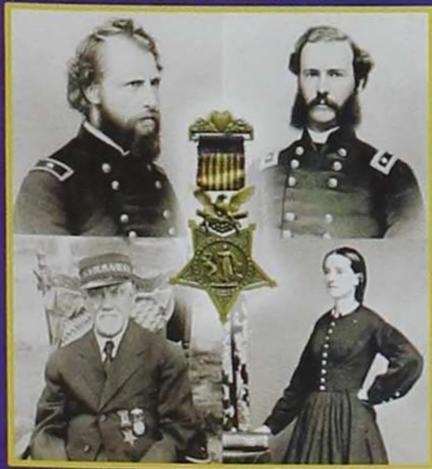
Mary Edwards Walker will forever be a legend in the annals of American history, and not just because of the Medal of Honor or the controversy that followed. Her entire life was composed of remarkable events.

Perhaps the final proof of her

notoriety occurred on June 10, 1982, when the U.S. Postal Service issued a 20-cent postage stamp with the designation, “Dr. Mary Walker, Army Surgeon,” placed above her portrait, and “Medal of Honor” directly beneath. A fitting tribute, for undeniably and irrevocably Walker was now nationally recognized as being both an “Army Surgeon” and a “Medal of Honor” recipient. ❖

Dennis H. Black served in the Iowa House of Representatives for seven terms. Since 1993 he has represented Senate District 21 in the Iowa Senate. He has been fascinated with the Civil War since his youth, when he learned that both of his paternal great-great-grandfathers were casualties of the war.

PROFILES OF VALOR
IOWA'S MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS
OF THE CIVIL WAR



BY DENNIS H. BLACK
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Profiles of Valor: Iowa's Medal of Honor Recipients of the Civil War, by Dennis H. Black. 480 pages; more than 90 photographs of recipients, medals, and Civil War-related scenes. \$44.95/hardcover; \$29.95/softcover. Members of State Historical Society receive a 10% discount. Order from State Historical Society Museum Store (515) 281-7395.

New Book Lauds Iowa's Civil War Heroes

The preceding article on Mary Edwards Walker is reprinted from *Profiles of Valor: Iowa's Medal of Honor Recipients of the Civil War*, written by Dennis H. Black and published by the State Historical Society of Iowa.

In the book's introduction Black recounts, “I was a member of Iowa's Capitol Planning Commission when the decision was made to construct a new historical building just west of the capitol. During one ‘slow’ legislative day, I walked the two blocks down the hill, west, to the State Historical Library to do a little research on our beautiful state capitol. While sitting at a library table, I noticed a copy of *The Annals of Iowa* left on the table by a previous visitor. When I opened the [1905] book, the pages fell to an article by Colonel Charles A. Clark: “Congressional Medals of Honor and Iowa Soldiers.” Black adds, “Life has not been the same since!”

Black took on the challenge of researching “not only these heroes’ acts of intrepidity, but also their attachments to Iowa and their life journeys following the war.”

Proceeds from the sale of *Profiles of Valor* benefit the State Historical Society of Iowa.