
Defense Report

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Dr. Mary Gets Her Medal Back— Maybe Others Should, Too

Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander has approved a recommendation to return a Medal of Honor to the only female recipient, Civil War contract physician Mary Walker. The medal was withdrawn, along with about 900 others, when it was decided they did not meet award criteria established many years later. The decision by Secretary Alexander culminates several years of pressure by Dr. Walker's descendents and women's rights activists.

The medal was originally awarded to Dr. Walker by President Andrew Johnson in 1865. After being denied a commission as an Army surgeon, Dr. Walker became a civilian contract physician and worked long and hard caring for battlefield casualties and sick prisoners of war. At that time the Medal of Honor was the only decoration for valor and it was sometimes awarded for acts not in keeping with the intent of the medal. In fact about 800 of those later withdrawn had been given to members of a Maine regiment as a reward for reenlisting. In 1915 a board of officers reviewed all Medal of Honor records and found that about 900 were unjustified, including the one awarded to Mary Walker.

A wide range of military decorations was later established to deal with degrees of valor and to differentiate between heroism in combat and meritorious non-combat service. Using criteria in effect since World War I, Dr. Walker (*if* she had been a commissioned medical officer) might have been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal but not the Medal of Honor since her activities did not involve valor while in direct combat with a hostile force.

A few notable civilians have been awarded special *Congressional* Medals of Honor—Charles Lindbergh and George M. Cohan for example—for non-combat deeds but that was not the same medal awarded to combat heroes. One of the 900 whose medal was taken away was Buffalo Bill Cody who got his for valor while serving as a civilian scout with the Army.

Secretary Alexander and the Army's Board for the Correction of Military Records should be applauded for their effort on Dr. Mary's behalf. She was not only the first female recipient but—and everyone seems to have ignored this point—the first *civilian* recipient of a purely military medal. We must assume that the board uncovered additional evidence that made Mary Walker more unique than Buffalo Bill Cody. We hope that the unique feature of her case is not her femininity alone.

Having assuaged the ire of Mary Walker's relatives and supporters the Board and the Secretary might find it at least equitable to take a renewed look at the records of about 100 other one-time Medal of Honor holders—those, like Cody, who were carried into oblivion by the rush to expunge the Maine Volunteers.