



# The Case of Dr. Walker, Only Woman To Win (and Lose) the Medal of Honor

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WASHINGTON, June 3—Sixty years ago today, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, a commissioned surgeon in the Civil War, was stripped of her Medal of Honor by a government review board. Dr. Walker is the only woman ever to receive the medal, which also may be the reason she lost it.

Today, not for the first time, a resolution is pending in the Senate Armed Services Committee to restore the medal—the nation's highest award for courage in combat—posthumously to Dr. Walker.

And on May 4, the Army Board for the Correction of Military Records, acting in behalf of Secretary of the Army, Clifford L. Alexander Jr., held a hearing to consider the case of Dr. Walker. The Board has sent its recommendation to Secretary Alexander, although Army spokesman refuse to say what the recommendation might have been, or what the Secretary's action will be.

The medal was awarded to her by President Andrew Johnson on Nov. 11, 1865. Generals William T. Sherman and George H. Thomas had recommended the medal; President Lincoln had signed their testimonial before his death.

***Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, dressed in men's attire and wearing her medal, in 1912.***

Dr. Walker was cited for her role as the first female surgeon in the United States Army. The original citation has been lost, and no copies are known to exist. In 1917, the Adverse Action Medal of Honor Board revoked the medal, claiming to have found ambiguities in her status as a member of the Army and too little evidence in the record to support her possession of the nation's highest award for valor.

Dr. Walker was one of 911 who were stricken from the role of Medal of Honor holders in 1917. The massive review had been ordered by Congress and has never been repeated. William F. Cody, the famous "Buffalo Bill," was among those who lost the medal, and the review board struck the names of 864 members of the 27th Maine Infantry Regiment when it was discovered that the entire regiment had received medals because of a clerical error.

The resolution to restore the medal to Dr. Walker was introduced by Senator Edward W. Brooke, Republican of Massachusetts, and co-sponsored by Senator Birch Bayh, an Indiana Democrat. The matter was brought to Senator Brooke's attention by Anne Walker of Mt. Vernon, Va., who describes herself as "a distant niece" of Dr. Walker and whose campaign for the return of the medal is close to a full-time job.

"Dr. Mary lost the medal," Mrs. Walker said recently, "simply because she was a hundred years ahead of her time and no one could stomach it."

Mrs. Walker may be right. Dr. Walker was a lifelong suffragette and, from the time of the Civil War,

she wore men's trousers and frock coats. She gave feminist lectures attired in full men's evening dress, with the Medal of Honor dangling on her left lapel.

Through the 1870's, she worked out of the suffragette headquarters in Washington with Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Mary Livermore, and Belva Lockwood. The women were much ridiculed, and in her top hat and coat, Dr. Walker became a favorite target. "That curibus anthropoid," a New York Times reporter called her.

Dr. Walker was born in Oswego, N.Y., in 1832 and was graduated from the Syracuse Medical College in 1855 as the only woman in her class. After the first Battle of Bull Run, she came to Washington to offer her services to the Union. She nursed the wounded on the battlefields of Virginia and Tennessee, was commissioned, spent four months in a Confederate prison, and was exchanged "man for man" for a Confederate major.

She drifted out of Washington late in her life, and retired to her family's farm at Oswego. She was 83 when her medal was revoked, but she kept it nevertheless, and wore it until she died two years later in 1919.

Her niece, Mrs. Walker, took her plea to Presidents Nixon and Ford before she enlisted Senator Brooke in her cause. Senator Brooke had been her Senator until she moved from Boston in 1974.

Dr. Walker's Medal of Honor was never reclaimed. It resides today in the Oswego Historical Society.