

## Women's Equality Day and the United States Army

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Every year on August 26, the Department of the Army celebrates Women's Equality Day in commemoration of the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment which gave women the right to vote. This observance recognizes the struggle, dedication, and accomplishment of men and women who fought for women to have a voice in our government. A fascinating yet little known piece of this history involves the service of American women in World War I.

The national movement for women's equality began as early as the Revolution with visionaries such as Abigail Adams imploring her husband to, "Remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors . . ." as he headed off to the Continental Congress. Decades later, in 1848, the First Convention for Women's Rights was held in Seneca Falls, New York. By the end of the convention, 68 women and 32 men signed a Declaration of Sentiments stating, "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men and women are created equal." Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were among the most well known signers. Thirty years after the convention, an amendment to the Constitution was proposed by Susan B. Anthony but it languished and struggled to gain popular support.

Nevertheless, the suffragettes persevered and continually pressured political leaders for support, even as the United States entered the First World War in 1917. At the time President Woodrow Wilson was in strong opposition to the measure. Women picketed his administration across the country and even handcuffed themselves to the gates of the White House in protest. Yet, less than two years later, Wilson did what today is known as a "flip-flop" and came out in favor of women's right to vote.

A significant factor in Wilson's change of heart from 1917 to 1919 was the role American women played in World War I. While not allowed to enlist in the Army, the necessities of this brutal war provided opportunities for women to serve. These women primarily made their contributions in either Civilian Welfare Organizations or Military Organizations.

Women flocked to Civilian Welfare Organizations in a desire to find a way to help the war effort. The Red Cross had the primary function of looking after the sick and wounded, the YMCA provided for the instruction, amusement, and moral welfare of the troops, and the Salvation Army assumed humanitarian efforts both at home and abroad.

Prior to World War I, the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) was the only Military Organization in which women could serve. Established in 1901, the ranks of the ANC numbered in the hundreds at the beginning of the war but swelled to over 20,000 by the end of World War I.

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Other military organizations soon turned to women to fill critical roles. The Medical Department hired female reconstruction aides for the first time. Realizing it was more beneficial and effective to train wounded soldiers with new skills in order to live independently, the Army Medical Department developed this new profession which centered on the concept of re-education for the sick, wounded, and mentally ill of WWI.

The Signal Corps contracted female telephone operators to run the switchboards in France. These women, nicknamed "Hello Girls," were bilingual in French and English. They managed the complicated communications lines and earned great acclaim from General Pershing.

The Ordnance Corps and the Quartermaster Corps also hired women to serve as clerks, typists, and administrators. All of the women who served during World War I demonstrated independence, sacrifice, and loyalty. Yet, these women were contracted, not enlisted, by the Army. Thus upon their return to the states, they did not receive military benefits or veteran's status.

There is no question that the dedicated service of these women helped convince President Woodrow Wilson that women deserved the right to vote. When the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment came up for vote in 1918, President Wilson asked the Senate, "Are we alone to ask and take the utmost that our women can give, - service and sacrifice of every kind, - and still say we do not see what title that gives them to stand by our sides in the guidance of the affairs of their nation and ours? We have made partners of the women in the war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right?" The selfless sacrifice, loyalty, and dedication of women who served in World War I moved a president and a nation to action.

However, despite Wilson's support, the proposed amendment failed passage by two votes and it would be another year before the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment would pass in Congress. The story of women's right to vote is a brilliant example of perseverance and dedication. The observance of Women's Equality Day is a wonderful opportunity for the Army to celebrate its role in helping propel the passage the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.