

The service of Medal of Honor recipient Dr. Mary Walker, 1864

Introduction

A graduate of Syracuse Medical College, Mary Walker served as a doctor during the American Civil War and was the only female acting assistant surgeon in the Union Army. In April 1864, Walker was captured by the Confederates in Tennessee and was held in the women's ward at Castle Thunder in Richmond, Virginia, as a prisoner of war. Following her release in August 1864, President Lincoln summoned Walker to Washington, DC, to discuss her imprisonment. In this letter, written after her meeting with the President, Walker urges Inspector General James Hardie to speak to Lincoln regarding her rank in the army. Walker claims that she had allowed herself to be captured and as a result was able to pass on false intelligence to the enemy. Although Walker is frequently referred to as "Major," there's no evidence she ever received an official military rank.

Although she continued to serve as a doctor in the army until the end of the war, the conditions at Castle Thunder left her with partial muscular atrophy that would never completely heal and that ended her career as a surgeon. In November 1865, Walker became the first and only woman to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service. In 1917, the US government tightened the criteria for the Medal of Honor and struck the names of more than 900 people, including Mary Walker, from the honor roll. President Jimmy Carter posthumously restored her Medal of Honor in 1977.

Excerpt

I told the President of the risks I encountered in being taken prisoner on purpose and preventing their attacking our army when we were hardly able to act "on the defensive"—that I found them on general review and learned the fact of such an immediate intention & that I so fully followed my instructions what to say about our western army, that success crowned our efforts when we were ready, and recently my statements to Gen. Grant in relation to their moves if he continued operations around Petersburg—to say nothing about the thousand other matters.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and study the text and image of the letter. Then use your knowledge of American history and evidence from the letter to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the tone of the letter.
2. Why did Mary Walker underscore certain words and phrases? Please provide examples of these from the text, and explain their significance.
3. What are the two requests Walker makes of James Hardie in the opening sentence of her letter?
4. Why does Walker take credit for some of Grant's military success?

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Transcript

Lewisville Ky. Sept. 23rd '64

Col. Hardie:

Dear Sir—

I am sure you will not refuse the favor I am about to ask—ie, that you take this in person to the President, without delay and get the confirmation of my rank of Major.

I told the President of the risks I encountered in being taken prisoner on purpose and preventing their attacking our army when we were hardly able to act “on the defensive”—that I found them on general review and learned the fact of such an immediate intention & that I so fully followed my instructions what to say about our western army, that success crowned our efforts when we were ready, and recently my statements to Gen. Grant in relation to their moves if he continued operations around Petersburg—to say nothing about the thousand other matters.

Think of Sheridans success & remember that I suffered so willingly for months, & do not hesitate to grant the favor & after getting the Presidents confirmation, Please send it to me at Oswego N.Y.

I have been working vigorously for the Administration ever since I left W. & am now waiting for a leave to go Oneida Co. & the Copperhead regions of Oswego & work until after election.

Most respectfully

Yours in haste

Mary E. Walker, M.D.

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Images

see letters to
Miss Walker
Oct 7th 1864

Union Mill N.Y., Sept. 23rd '64

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Mary Walker to James Hardie, September 23, 1864, p. 1 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06882)

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Mary E. Walker, M.D.

Mary Walker to James Hardie, September 23, 1864, p. 2 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06882)