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Women in America, 1869-Present

3 May 2012

Women: Army Nurses and Nothing More

Throughout American history, women and their efforts have been essential to the country's success when it came to wartime. Wars, even when not being fought on American soil, take a huge toll on the American people, almost ceasing industry and everyday life because of the number of men and boys being deployed overseas to fight. In men's absence, women always stepped up and took over their positions as workers, breadwinners, and providers for their families. However, during the Spanish-American War, women tried to step up even further – they attempted to be more involved with the war by trying to go along with their men overseas and fighting or providing aid directly to the soldiers. Army nurse, which had been traditionally a position for men, quickly became a position for women when the military was running out of men to employ. Women flocked towards the position, which they found to be the best and most efficient way for women to support the soldiers, but not all women were interested in being a nurse. Some women wanted to fight alongside the men in the war, but those requests were, more often than not, ignored by the United States military because, according to General Sternberg and Dr. Greenleaf, “In the hospital, the women nurses rendered excellent service, but the front is no place for them” (Doc 14).

Women have always been involved in America's wars since the time of the country's revolution against Great Britain's rule. Different pro-war organizations have been created since the country's independence, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, which is still

alive and well today. Through the Daughters of the American Revolution and the other women's war organizations across the country, women had their own way of participating in the wars that benefitted from their skills as women. Having their own war organizations gave the women a sense of being a "True American," as the Boston Times of 1898 claimed that the term "include[d] the American woman as well as the man" (Doc 3C). Through the women's organizations, women were able to provide food, clothing, and hospitality to the soldiers through fundraisers and purchasing those products with their own money and sending them to the troops. Women helped the soldiers in the best way that they knew how – by following the norms and ideas that society pushed upon them.

Up until the Spanish-American war, the nurses and medical professionals in the military were all men, just like the rest of the armed forces were. But the demand for soldiers and army nurses depleted the supply of men that America had to offer. Ellen Walworth, head of the Daughters of the American Revolution, began to recruit women to the war effort before it was even decided that women would be able to participate. Walworth had called for "volunteers in sanitary, medical and other branches of military service suitable for women" (Doc 3B) and had thousands of women, from the Daughters of the American Revolution and other women's pro-war organizations, signing petitions and pledges to the cause. Not long into the war, the military became desperate for aid for its soldiers, who were falling ill from the change in climate, and the government decided that it was "no time to stand on trained service, and everybody, man or woman, of average intelligence was ready to lend a hand" (Doc 10B). What was left of the American men and a surplus of American women flocked at the chance to be a part of the war effort and be sent to work on military camps, whether they had formal training or not. Even though there was no restriction as to gender when it came to this proposition to the American

volunteers, the War Department thought “that but few women nurses would be needed and that their services would be limited to the general hospitals” (Doc 18). Despite the department’s wishes, the women volunteer’s working hands were needed in many military camps and on military ships because of the plethora of ill soldiers and the lack of proper supplies and medical professionals provided by the government for the war.

When women were finally eligible to provide direct aid to the soldiers by visiting their camps and nursing the soldiers back to health, they put the stereotypical gender roles into action. While at the military camps, women “had charge of the cooking for patients” and were “teaching large classes of newly enlisted Hospital Corps men how they should prepare water, milk, gruels, jellies, etc., and also how elements of the Army ration can be prepared so as to be suitable for the sick, when nothing else is obtainable” (Doc 18). What the women were “put in charge of” on the bases was no different than what women all over the country were doing – in Oakland, women “made sandwiches, prepared the coffee, and served [their] popular Oakland ‘army stew’” and “were busy collecting and forwarding fresh milk, eggs, butter and vegetables and raising money to buy the other necessary articles” (Doc 16D). All of the women, on camps or in their hometowns, worked tirelessly without much appreciation for the work that they did. The military, which was ran by, organized by, and consisted of men, utilized the traditional jobs of women in the late 19th century America – cooking, cleaning, and taking care of men. There was no chance of a woman moving to any job other than that of a nurse, because the “volunteer work of the Daughters of the American Revolution and of the societies which were co-operating with them, was necessarily limited to the selection of nurses for appointment” (Doc 18). There was no possibility of a woman being moved to working on with weapons or on war strategies.

The only way that a woman would be able to “move up in the ranks” was to be named Chief Nurse by the Surgeon-General of the camp. Being Chief Nurse, which would be the equivalent of a Superintendent Nurse in a regular hospital, meant that that woman was one of the expert nurses (not one of the many untrained nurses that were sent to the camps purely because of their immunity to the typhoid fever) and her new duties included reporting to the Surgeon-General on the efficiency of the nurses and the health and conduct of the patients. In most cases, women chosen as the Chief Nurse receive slightly higher wages “in proportion to their responsibilities,” but not all Chief Nurses were lucky – “At small hospitals, where there are not over four nurses, the Chief Nurse is expected to do her share of ward duty, and receives no increase in salary” (Doc 18). Because the increase in pay is almost a game of chance, it is another way that the men of the military are limiting women’s ability to be a productive member of the military – they can be promoted to the highest position that a woman could reach at the time and do extra work as a result of it, but be paid the same as the untrained nurses that are distributing ice cubes to fever patients.

Even though women were ecstatic for the opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and help the American soldiers in any way that they could, they were aware of the limitations that were placed on them and did almost nothing to fight against them. If it was not widely known by all of the volunteers, it was definitely known amongst the organization leaders, the ones who rallied the forces of women for the cause. Ellen Walworth, for example, was bold enough to publicly recruit women for the war effort as only as nurses, sanitary workers, and auxiliary workers. However, neither she nor any other organization leaders reached for anything more than that, making the women who were members of those organizations “limited” to being nurses. The women in these organizations settled with filling the gender roles society set out for them by

becoming nurses, a stereotypically feminized or “Pink Collar” job. Walworth’s address to recruit women began with the line “She Calls For Nurses” (Doc 3A), rather than “She Calls For Women Volunteers” or any other variation that would not limit women to just becoming nurses for the army.

But not all of the women that were addressed by such announcements wanted to become nurses. Not all women were the typical feminine housewife who did not work and cooked all day. Annie Oakley, for instance, was raised differently than most girls at the time; she was experienced with a gun, having hunted to feed her family during her youth and becoming a travelling performer for her shooting skills. Around the same time that Walworth was recruiting women nurses and offering their willingness to the military, Oakley wrote to President McKinley himself and offered “a company of fifty lady sharpshooters at [his] disposal,” claiming that the female shooters will “furnish their own arms and ammunition” and “be little if any expense to the government” (Doc 4). This proposal was ignored by the President and the military, and the lady sharpshooters were never given the opportunity to help the male soldiers and demonstrate their abilities. Oakley’s proposal being ignored exemplifies the American man’s stubbornness to allow women to break away from societal gender roles, since women were allowed to cook and clean for the military but were prohibited from using their other skills just because they crossed the line declaring what is “feminine” and what is not.

The worst part about the restrictions on the services that women could offered to the American military was that the men in charge were entirely aware to the fact that they were discriminating against the women by setting extra rules based on their gender. Mentioned earlier, there was a common belief that “the front is no place for them [women]” (Doc 14), which is a

discriminatory without any sensible and factual argument to support it. There is no biological or physical reason that women could not be on the front lines or even in the armed forces as a soldier at all. The argument that the military used, as quoted from the words of Dr. Greenleaf, was that “there was no means of taking proper care of women in the field” (Doc 14). He stated that the above statement was their reasoning for rejected any non-medical or non-sanitary services from women. It is blatant discrimination against women as a gender, implying that they are harder to care from than men and too much work to have fighting in the field.

The one thing that the military and the doctor did not take into account when forming that argument was the amount of work they were already doing to have the women on base, which was almost none. Women nurses were a part of the masses that had to survive off of the army rations of food and supply. The nurses had to eat, had to have a place to sleep, and they also needed medical attention if they got sick while nursing the sick soldiers back to health. Although some of the surgeons claimed that “the ration was not suitable diet for the nurses,” (Doc 20A) the women were able to do so easily with the rations available to them and the rations were the same size as those of the men on the camps. When Dr. Anita Newcomb McGee was interviewed by the War Investigating Commission about the conditions on the camps, the interviewer asked her whether “such provision was made for their comfort and privacy (the personal care of nurses” as compared to regular civil hospitals, McGee answered, “No, sir; that was not possible or expected in camps. Everything that was possible was done for them” (Doc 20A). The women volunteers that were sent to the military camps did not expect nor want special treatment because of their gender; all they wanted was to act their patriotism and assist the American military in the war in the best way that they could. They did not leave their homes to

work on unsanitary and under supplied military camps to be discriminated against because of their biological sex and the assumptions that come with the territory of being a woman.

In this aspect, women were not successful in becoming a part of the military because the army nurses were not considered to be under the War Department. According to the War Investigating Commission's decisions on the Medical Department of the military that "A reserve corps of selected trained women nurses, ready to serve when necessity shall arise, but under ordinary circumstances owing no duty to the War Department" (Doc 17). Under that condition, the women who work as nurses for the army are not a part of the army – the only duty that the nurses have are to "report residence at determined intervals" (Doc 17). But other than that singular duty, which basically just requires the women nurses to show up whenever the military men decide that they need them, the women are not members of the military; they are an extra service of people who will only work when urgency hits and the military calls for their help. Women are still not able to branch out into other areas of the military, like the lady sharpshooters that Oakley had tried to get into the American armed forces.

It is shocking how stubborn the American government and military were to allowing women into their ranks. American, one of the youngest nations, always had (and still has) a tendency to follow the lead of other super nations across the globe, primarily Great Britain, with whom the country broke away from. And at this time, other countries were allowing women into their military with some restrictions, but still more than America was at the time, which was banning women almost entirely. In the battles between the Spaniards and the Cubans, from which the Spanish-American war had started, the Cuban rebels, or amazons, had women fighting and leading other fighters against the Spaniards. Many of the women fighting were daughters

and wives of men who were leaders in the Cuban fighting forces and sometimes had lost those family members at the hands of the Spaniards. At one of the make-shift Cuban hospitals, there was “a company of Cuban amazons numbering about seventy, under command of Senorita Inez Alvarez,” a Cuban woman who started to fight back against the Spaniards as revenge for them killing her father and brother (Doc 1). Other Cuban Amazon women (women fighters) made the American newspapers for getting captured or killed during fights (skirmishes) with the Spanish forces, including Senorita Isabel Rubio who “joined the insurgents at the invitation of the late Antonio Maceo,” demonstrating to the American public that people of all genders and classes (since Senorita Rubio was said to be from a prominent Cuban family) were fighting together and the women were not expecting or receiving any kind of special treatment – they were fighters right alongside the men (Doc 2). The stories about Senoritas Rubio and Alvarez are examples of women fighting on the front lines of battle, something that, even though these stories were published in American newspapers, the American military refused to allow.

Overall, women’s attempt to enter the military and reach the level of formal military service was a failure at this point in time. The furthest they reached was to be able to help out on the military camps when all of the soldiers were falling ill from the drastic change in weather, which was causing them to develop fevers that would not go away. While they working, the women nurses were not considered part of the military, and they did not become part of the military even when the War Investigating Commission was created new regulations for the Medical Department of the military, which included women nurses under part of the protocol (Doc 17). It is said that the women who rallied for this, like Ellen Walworth and Anita Newcomb McGee, paved the road for women reaching formal military service when, in actuality, their efforts produced a miniscule baby step in the direction on women being in the army. If there

were more women like Annie Oakley, who tried to rally for women to assist the soldiers without giving into the societal gender roles, and they were radical and persistent enough, then a major step towards gender equality in the American military could have been reached. Walworth and McGee worked hard and did achieve something – getting women onto military bases, even if only to continue their feminine role in the home within the camp – but it was not enough to really make a significant difference in the way that the military viewed women and the idea of them enlisting for formal military service. All Americans should have the opportunity to serve and defend their country and, as the Boston Times of 1898 states, “in saying ‘true American,’ I include the American woman as well as man” (Doc 3C), women should be offered the opportunity as well.