

Historical Women Veterans

This year we celebrate the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution granting the right to vote to women in our country. The Amendment was passed in the US Congress in 1919 and following ratification by the States became law when Tennessee became the 36th state to pass the Amendment in August 1920. Much has been written about the women who made this possible.

Today, I am taking a look at women who contributed to or broke barriers in the US military. I will start with Grace Hopper who had a significant impact on the computer field. Known as 'Amazing Grace', Commodore Hopper's importance in the US naval history is apparent, she had a destroyer named after her. She joined the Naval Reserves in 1943 and was assigned to the Bureau of Ordinance Computation Project and became the third programmer on the world's first large-scale computer, the Mark I. Back then computers were huge, the Mark I was fifty-one feet long, eight feet high and five feet deep. While trying to repair the Mark I, she discovered a moth on one of the relays. She taped the moth in the log book and from that the phrase 'a bug in the computer' was born. Her contributions to the computer industry included the development of programming languages. My favorite story of Hopper is that she had a clock on her desk that turned the other way, not backward but the other way. While at MSUM, I had such a clock on my office wall. When she died in 1992, Hopper was laid to rest with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery.

General Ann E Dunwoody joined the US Army in 1974 as a second lieutenant. She became the first four-star general in the US Armed Forces. Her biggest impact was as commander of the Army Materiel Command, one of the largest commands in the Army with over 69,000 employees. At her retirement ceremony in 2012, Dunwoody said "Over the last 38 years I have had the opportunity to witness women Soldiers jump out of airplanes, hike 10 miles, lead men and women, even under the toughest circumstances, serve in Iraq and Afghanistan on battlefields where every man and woman had to be a rifleman first. Today, what was once a band of brothers has truly become a band of brothers and sisters."

Eileen Collins wanted to fly since she was a young child. The daughter of Irish immigrants, she became the first woman to command a space shuttle mission in July 1999. Colonel Collins joined the US Air Force in 1979 and served as a T-38 flight instructor, a C-141 commander and instructor pilot. Collins was assistant professor of Mathematics at the Air Force Academy and graduated from the Air Force Test Pilot School in 1990. Selected for the astronaut program, she became an astronaut in 1991. Collins completed four successful shuttle missions before she retired in 2006. These are but three of the many women who have made a difference by serving in our military.