

## Molly Pitcher: Then and Now

As sons and daughters of the American Revolution, we have been taught well about the heroic actions of our ancestors. Some events that initially come to mind when thinking of the American Revolution include the Boston Tea Party, the famous Paul Revere and William Dawes ride or even the Battle of Bunker Hill. All brave acts by brave men. Lesser known is the history of women during this era however, women were very much a critical component of the war effort. Those who contributed came from various economic and cultural backgrounds in the fight for independence. To help explain the many complex roles of women in the war, some historians have combined the characters and named her Molly Pitcher. <sup>6</sup> Some roles women had were small such as helping with fundraisers and boycotting British products. Larger roles included carrying water on the battlefield, pretending to be men to engage in the fight and even being spies.

One of George Washington's well-known spies during the war was Anna Strong. She was thought to have been in a group called the Culper Ring of spies where her role included signaling. Anna accomplished this by hanging a black petticoat on a clothesline visible from a boat or by adding a number of white handkerchiefs which indicated what cove another spy hid his boat. <sup>1 & 5</sup>

Another famous spy was Lydia Darragh. Lydia originally was an undertaker and later became a nurse and midwife who lived in Philadelphia near British headquarters. Lydia being a staunch Quaker gave the impression of being indifferent to the war. British officers believed her home a safe place to conduct business and ordered her to set aside a room for their meetings. Lydia took advantage of the opportunity to collect valuable military secrets and pass those on to the Continental Army. She did not allow her religion to get in the way of protecting the people and country she loved. <sup>2</sup>

Mary Ludwig Hays is someone known as Molly Pitcher. She was responsible for carrying large pitchers of water to soldiers on the battlefield. This earned her the nickname Molly Pitcher. Mary, like many wives at that time followed their husbands into battle. It was common for wives to follow their husbands as their services were needed for the many chores supporting daily activities of the army. At the Battle of Monmouth on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1778, Mary was a watercarrier when she noticed her husband fall. She took her husband's position at the cannon. Others took notice of Mary's actions and later wrote about it. Her heroic actions became a symbol for future women as a role model for empowerment. <sup>3</sup>

Margaret Corbin had a similar story. She made the tough decision to leave her home and follow her husband to avoid hardships and danger of living alone. These wives and family members who made such decisions were called "camp followers." <sup>9</sup> Margaret carried water to soldiers and on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1776, her husband was killed at his cannon position. Without hesitation, she took her husband's spot firing the cannon throughout the battle. Through adversity which included being shot in the shoulder and later being held prisoner she survived the war. Margaret received a pension for her heroism after the war. <sup>8</sup>

Women who once functioned as helpers on the battlefield have made slow and trying uphill progress to fighting as soldiers alongside male counterparts. Transitions include going from nurses to surgical technicians, pilots, and others. Roles for women really started to expand during World War II with the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) created in May 1942. The primary purpose of the auxiliary was to free up men for combat while women worked in a variety of non-combat roles. <sup>4</sup> This led women to be in leadership positions. Women proved themselves dependable which allowed them to climb the ranks. Today's army is seventeen percent female. In 2015 the Department of Defense opened all combat roles to women. <sup>7</sup>

More recent history includes notable women in the arm forces such as Ann Elizabeth Dunwoody. Ann is now a retired general of the United States Army. She achieved her four-star officer rank on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008, making her the first woman to do so. <sup>7</sup>

56-year-old Jacqueline Desiree Van Ovest currently serves as the 14<sup>th</sup> commander of the United States Transportation Command since October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Prior to that she served as commander of the Air Mobility Command from August 2020 to October 2021. <sup>10</sup>

Laura J. Richardson has been the commander of the United States Southern Command since October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021. She received her fourth star from Army chief of staff General James C. McConville in a ceremony held on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <sup>10</sup>

Since the Revolutionary War through current day, Molly Pitcher lives on in the women who served and are serving now. The same courage and inspiring patriotism are evident in their actions. Their loyalty, courage and heroism laid the foundation for future generations. Their actions helped knock now barriers for the women of today. These women represent the fighting spirit of America, the backbone of American heritage.

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