

# Women's History Month

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HONORING WOMEN WHO FIGHT ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

March 2018

# Women's History Month

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Women's History Month honors and celebrates the struggles and achievements of American women throughout the history of the United States.

The Department of Defense (DoD) pays tribute to the women who, through their steadfast determination and inspirational contributions, have shaped America's history and continue to pave the way forward.

# Women's History Month Origin

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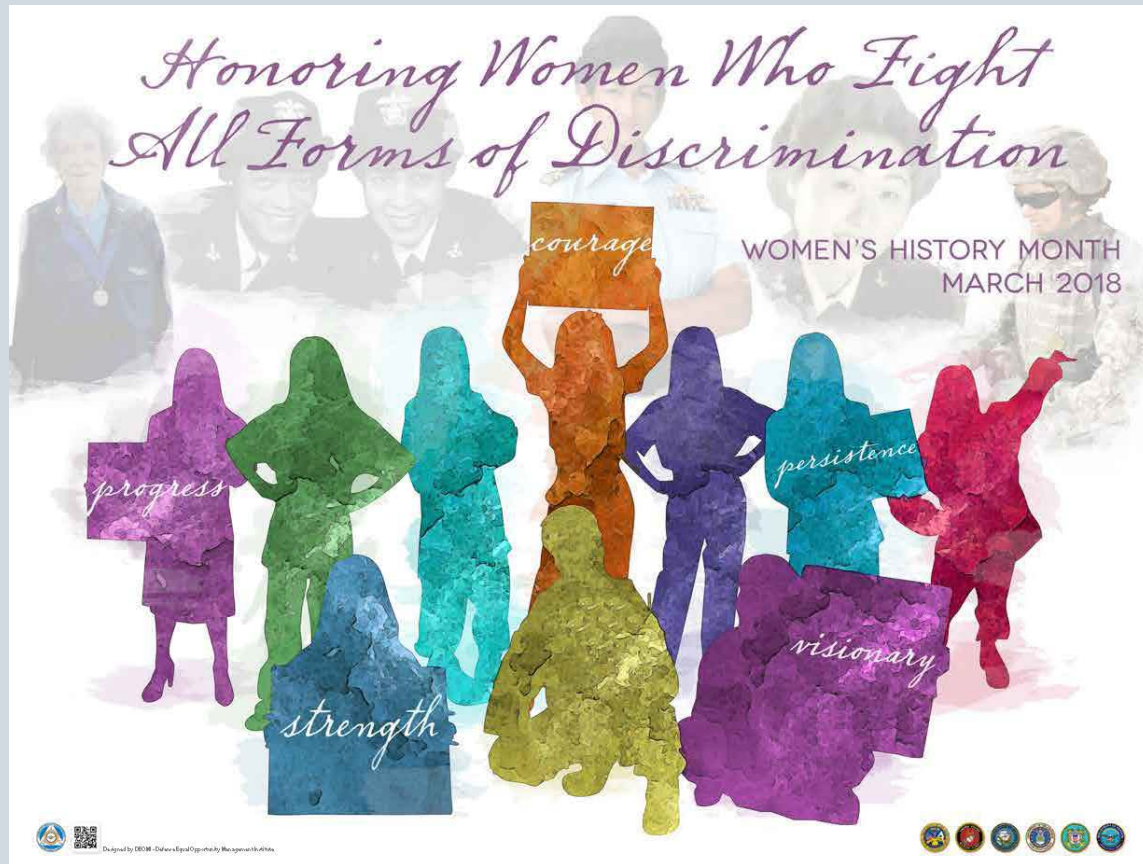
Women's History Month has its origins in 1981 when Congress passed Public Law 97-28 which authorized and requested the President to proclaim the week beginning March 7, 1982 as *"Women's History Week."*

In 1987, after being petitioned by the National Women's History Project, Congress passed Public Law 100-9 which designated the month of March, 1987 as *"Women's History Month."*

[Women's History Origin](#)

# Women's History Month

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This year's theme is: *Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms Of Discrimination.*

This presentation features nine women: Pilot Bernice Haydu, Ensigns Harriet Pickens and Frances Wills, Lt. Cmdr. Marilyn Melendez Dykman, Lt. Susan Cuddy, Col. Debra Lewis, Capt. Eleanor L'Ecuyer, Capt. Mildred H. McAfee, and Pvt. Minnie Spotted Wolf.

# Pilot Bernice “Bee” Haydu

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Women have been graduating from the Air Force Academy since 1980 and flying in combat missions since Operation Desert Storm. Prior to this however, women served as Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) during World War II. Bernice “Bee” Haydu not only served as a WASP, but fought for them to be recognized as veterans.

When the WASP program was disbanded in 1944, it left the women veterans no rank and no benefits for their service.

It wasn't until 1975 that the WASPs, led by Haydu, made the first concerted effort to gain recognition as veterans from Congress. The bill passed the Senate but was denied in the House of Representatives.

[Bernice Haydu](#)

# WASPs Veteran Status

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Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense

Haydu wrote on behalf of the WASPs, *“These women served in a military capacity, wore uniforms, were subject to military discipline and courtesy, flew every military airplane manufactured for World War II and served their country replacing men pilots for active duty overseas. They also risked their lives daily, and 38 of these women died in the service of their country.”*

In 1977 a reintroduced bill passed, giving the WASPs veteran status.



# Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES)

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James Forrestal, who became the new Secretary of the Navy in April, 1944, concluded that having a segregated Navy was not cost effective and the Navy announced its decision to welcome blacks into the WAVES on Oct. 19, 1944.



Photo courtesy the U.S. Navy

Harriet Pickens and Frances Wills accepted the Navy's invitation. Pickens' father, William Pickens, a founder of the National Association for Colored People, urged her to join. Wills decided to volunteer because she had no brothers to serve.

[Harriet Pickens and Frances Wills](#)

# Ensigns Harriet Pickens and Frances Wills

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In December 1944, Pickens and Wills received commissions in the WAVES, becoming the first female African-American officers in the U.S. Navy.

Out of 86,000 WAVES that served during World War II, there were only 72 African-American WAVES and just two officers. At a time when all military branches were segregated, this small group of African-American women created a lasting legacy for all women in the military.



# Lieutenant Commander Marilyn Melendez Dykman

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In 1991, Lt. Cmdr. Marilyn Melendez Dykman transferred from the U.S. Army to become the first Hispanic-American female aviator in the U.S. Coast Guard.

Her achievement helped pave the way for opportunities for female cadets of all races and ethnicities at the USCG.

Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard

[Marilyn Melendez Dykman](#)

# Lieutenant Susan Ahn Cuddy

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Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy

Trailblazer Susan Ahn Cuddy joined the U.S. Navy in 1942 after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. She was the first Asian-American woman to join the Navy and became the first female to operate flexible-mount or turret-mounted machine guns on an aircraft. She left the Navy in 1946 at the rank of Lieutenant.

After the war, she became an intelligence officer breaking codes for the Navy. She later joined the National Security Agency, where she ran a think tank of 300 linguists and other experts gathering intelligence.

[Susan A. Cuddy Naval Service](#)

# Lieutenant Susan Ahn Cuddy

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In a 2012 *Time* interview, her son shared that her travels took her to the segregated South, where she would sit in the back of the bus with black people. Cuddy's gesture was one of solidarity—by using “colored” bathrooms and complying with racial segregation laws, she was making a statement about her race and supporting those who did not have a choice.

She died at her home June 24, 2015 at age 100.

[Susan Cuddy TIME interview](#)

# Colonel Debra Lewis

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Colonel Debra Lewis was a member of the first class of female cadets to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, changing 178 years of tradition at the once all-male academy.

Reflecting on her 30-year-Army career she said, *“My choice to attend West Point was the first time I was exposed to extremely harsh negative words or disrespectful responses from people who did not know me personally, reacting simply because they could see I was a woman in a cadet uniform. Initially, every negative response hit me hard. In response, I developed a talent for finding productive ways to deal with such situations.”*

[Colonel Debra Lewis](#)

# Colonel Debra Lewis

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Lewis also holds the distinction of being the first female Soldier to command the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers districts in Philadelphia and Seattle.

In 2006, she became the first woman to command an engineer brigade in Iraq. Her tour began shortly after the Samarra Mosque bombing and coincided with the height of insurgent attacks and increase in number of U.S. troops. It was in Iraq that she applied all that she had learned. *“I actually felt blessed for the many hardships along the way that helped to prepare me.”*



Photo courtesy U.S. Army

# Captain Eleanor L'Ecuyer

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In 1944, frustrated by her clerical work, Eleanor C. L'Ecuyer volunteered to join the U.S. Coast Guard Women's Reserve, better known as the SPARs—a contraction of the Coast Guard motto, “Semper Paratus – Always Ready.” L'Ecuyer said, *“I went for a walk at the suggestion of my boss and came back a member of the Coast Guard.”* Her choice would forever impact policies and increase opportunities for women serving in the Coast Guard.

After her discharge in 1946, she activated her G.I. Bill benefits and earned a law degree. However, job openings for a female attorney in 1950 were far and few. In 1951, she rejoined the Coast Guard and became the first female attorney hired, although because of her sex, she was not allowed to serve in that role.

[Captain Eleanor L'Ecuyer](#)



# Captain Eleanor L'Ecuyer

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*CDR Eleanor L'Ecuyer and LCDR Vivian Reese, both of Washington, D.C., visited Palm Beach recently to make preparations for a 25th SPAR anniversary reunion. They are shown reading a 1943 press clipping describing the training being conducted at the Palm Beach-Biltmore Hotel. The reunion will be held at the hotel 20-24 November 1967.*

*Photo by Ursula Seeman,  
Palm Beach Post Times*

L'Ecuyer put her law degree to use. She wrote successful challenges to several policies that would increase career potential for women in the Coast Guard. She argued that being pregnant was not a disabling condition and therefore, should not be grounds for discharging women. Additionally, she challenged policy limiting women to serving only 20 years.

She served until 1971, rising to the rank of captain, the highest rank a woman could achieve at the time. She holds the distinction of being the longest serving SPAR.

# Captain Mildred H. McAfee

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Photo courtesy the U.S. Navy

[Mildred McAfee/WAVES](#)  
[Mildred McAfee](#)

As Director of the WAVES, Captain Mildred H. McAfee (the first woman commissioned in the U.S. Naval Reserve and the first woman to receive the Navy Distinguished Service Medal) welcomed all qualified candidates. As its first Director, McAfee guided the growth of the WAVES to a force of more than 80,000 Navy women in a variety of occupational specialties.

She was also appointed the first female line officer in the Navy on Aug. 3, 1942, at a time when the Navy wasn't sure it needed women.

# Private Minnie Spotted Wolf

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In 1943, Minnie Spotted Wolf, a Blackfoot Indian, broke the barriers of both race and gender when she became the first American Indian to enlist in the Marine Corps Women's Reserve.

Gerardetta England, Spotted Wolf's daughter, said her mother started thinking about joining the military after the U.S. entered World War II when she was 18, but was discouraged by a recruiter who told her *"the war was really not for women. But Mom really wanted to go into the military to serve her country. Her brother had died, and she knew nobody else in the family would be able to serve."*

[Minnie Spotted Wolf](#)

# Minnie Spotted Wolf

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When Spotted Wolf was finally ready to enlist, her father died. Her mother urged her to pursue her dream. According to England, her mother told her, *“Your country needs you more.”*

Spotted Wolf’s ranch living and hard work served her well as a heavy-equipment operator for the Marines, and her unique background drew significant attention during the war.

England said, *“Mom was proud of who she was. She wasn’t in the military just for herself, but for the Indian people. She wanted others to know who she was and where she came from.”*

[Minnie Spotted Wolf](#)



Photo courtesy of  
The National Archives

# Conclusion

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Throughout America's history, women have struggled to gain rights not simply for themselves, but for many other under-represented and disenfranchised groups in America.

Generations of women have courageously broken down barriers, shattered stereotypes, and changed our society.

During Women's History Month, we honor the women who have diligently worked toward ensuring dignity, equality, and human rights for all.

# End

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Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute,  
Patrick Air Force Base, Florida

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