

Committees:

Rules and Reference
Civil Justice Committee
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Committee

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The Ohio House of Representatives**

Chairman Perales, Vice Chair Hood, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 195, which would designate June 12th as Women Veterans' Day. Our goal is to recognize the special role women have played in the US armed forces. Today there are approximately two million female veterans in the United States with about 67,000 Ohioans. However, during the vast majority of American history, we know that women were officially excluded from military service despite their desire to serve.

The first recorded examples of women being involved during wartime occurred during the Revolutionary War when women served on the front lines along with their husbands. They worked as nurses, cooks, seamstresses and laundry aides. Some, such as Deborah Sampson and Margaret Corbin, disguised themselves as men so that they too could fight the British and secure America's independence. Sampson was discovered after she developed an illness caused by brain fever. She was treated by a doctor who kept her secret, but told her to take a letter to General Washington, who gave her a quiet discharge along with some money to travel home. Margaret Corbin, who also served in combat while disguised as a man, was taken as a prisoner of war by the British and received the first federal pension awarded to a woman wounded in battle. And of course there's Molly Pitcher. She is a composite character, representing a woman who fought in the Battle on Monmouth. As Molly was carrying water for the American troops, her husband was wounded. She began assisting the artillerymen in loading the artillery when a cannon shot from the British went right between her legs without doing any damage. George Washington observed her heroics on the battlefield by issuing a commendation.

Women also served during the War of 1812 and continued through the Mexican American War, where they followed their husbands into battle. But this time the Army also officially hired women separately for menial tasks such as laundry duty. Naturally, during our largest war, the Civil War, women served at significantly higher levels. Some women continued to conceal their gender in order too fight in combat. There are several notable examples, but I'll mention two. Sarah Edmonds enlisted under the name Frank Thompson as a male nurse and eventually a Union spy. Cathay Williams, the first African American woman known to serve in the military, joined the Buffalo Soldiers. To execute her ruse, she simply switched her name to William Cathay. However, during the Civil War, the vast majority of women served in the role of nurses, many of whom were nuns. They were especially vital at the time because they were the only source of professionally trained nurses. Because of their training they significantly advanced the field of combat medical practices. Female nurses (approximately 1,500) continued to be critical during the Spanish American War, a relatively brief war with only about 400 killed in action, but witnessed an estimated 4,600 men lost to diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, and underscored the need for advanced, quality medical care.

The twentieth century marked the first time women were officially permitted to enlist in the US armed forces during WWI. The US Navy permitted 11,274 women into its ranks, and they were known as "yeomanettes". There were 300 female Marines by the war's end. The Army, however, did not open its ranks to females at this time. World War II was a turning point for woman in the military, and we got an array of acronyms, the WAVES, the WAACS, the SPARS (Coast Guard) as a recognition for the female military units.

Women's increasing contribution to America's security led to the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, signed into law on June 12, 1948 by President Harry Truman, which enabled women to serve as permanent, regular members of the armed forces. Since the enactment of this legislation, millions of women have continued to dedicate their lives to the defense of our nation in times of peace and times of war. Women again served in both the Korean War and the Vietnam War and made considerable strides during peacetime. In 1951, Dorothy L. Matz was one of five Navy women selected to serve on General Dwight D. Eisenhower's Advanced Planning Group staff, at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Headquarters in Paris. Commander Elizabeth Barrett became the first female naval line officer to hold command in a combat zone in November 1972 in Vietnam. In 1980, the first women graduated from the service academies. In 1999, USAF Col. Eileen Collins became the first female commander of the space shuttle. And she has literally taken women to new heights in their military service.

In our current decade, we're still seeing firsts. In 2010, the Navy changed its policy to allow women on subs, and we've seen a steady trickle of women in the silent service. In 2016 the first female soldiers became infantry officers and graduated from Ranger school, and in January 2017 the first female Marines completed the Corps' infantry school. As the debate continues on gender integration and combat readiness, it is important to pause today and recognize the trailblazers who led us to this point. Women such as Deborah Sampson, Margaret Corbin, Sarah Edmonds, Cathay Williams, Dorothy Matz, Elizabeth Barrett and Eileen Collins who have inspired many of us to serve and should be recognized for their trailblazing roles in our nation's defense.

Designating June 12th as Women Veterans' Day is our show of appreciation for their work and sacrifice and for the continuing challenges women face in service to their country. Thank you for opportunity to offer House Bill 195 with my colleague Representative Casey Weinstein.