

Opha May Johnson 2018 Hall of Legends Biography

Known to her Indiana friends and relatives as Opha May Jacob, born in Kokomo on May 4, 1878, she would wait almost 40 years to make her permanent mark in history. Little is known of her childhood, but her desire to serve was evident, since she started a career in Civil Service at the Interstate Commerce Commission shortly after graduating from the shorthand and typewriting department of Wood's Commercial College in 1895.

Moving to Washington D.C., she met and married the musical director of the Lafayette Square Opera House, Victor Hugo Johnson, on December 20, 1898. They would spend many decades together but children would not be a part of their lives. On August 13, 1918, Opha May Johnson made a fateful decision. WWI had been going on for over four years and although originally reluctant, our country was now fully involved. Early in the morning, Opha was first in line at the Washington D.C. Marine Reserve recruiting station and by fate or providence was the first woman to join the United States Marine Corps Women's Reserve. Before the end of the day, 304 other women would also join the ranks, but of course, none of them were first. Opha May Johnson and hundreds of others like her paved the way for women in the military. Today the Marine Corps is proud to have more than 12,000 enlisted women and 1,300 female officers in their ranks.

Perhaps as no surprise, Opha's first duty was to manage the records of the women recruits. Not quite 90 days after her enlistment, on November 11, 1918, The Great War came to an end. Like the other services, the Marine Corps started the steady disenrollment of women from the service to include Sergeant Opha May Johnson. Although short lived, her contributions to the history of the Marine Corps were significant. On February 28, 1919, Opha returned to Civil Service as a clerk in the War Department.

Today the Marine Corps, has an authorized end strength of 202,100 active duty and 39,600 reserve Marines, and is the smallest of the United States armed forces in the Department of Defense. Since Opha left the service there have been several other milestones achieved by her sisters in arms. Captain Anne Lentz, first female commissioned officer in 1943; Master Gunnery Sergeant Geraldine M. Moran, first female Marine promoted to the top enlisted rank in 1960; Brigadier General Margaret A Brewer, first female Marine general in 1978 and Lieutenant General Carol Mutter, not only the first woman to obtain the three-star rank of LtGen in the Marine Corps, but also the first woman to hold a three-star rank in the U.S. Armed Forces, achieving that rank in 1996. She retired in 1999, having served since 1967.

Opha May Johnson died on August 11, 1955 at the Mount Alto Veterans Hospital in Washington, D.C. Her services at the Warner E. Pumphrey Funeral Home were deliberately delayed two days until August 13, 1955 which was 37 years to the day from when she stood first in line of women answering the call to become a U.S. Marine. Amazingly, her grave near her husband and parents in Rock Creek Cemetery was unmarked. In 2017, the Women Marine Association began raising funds to place a marker at her burial site.