

Opha May Johnson – First Woman Marine

BLUF: Opha May Johnson was the first woman to enlist into the United States Marine Corps. She joined the Marine Corps Reserve on 13 August 1918, officially becoming the first female Marine. Enlisting at age 39 in 1918, Johnson joined the Women's Marine Corps that consisted of about 300 female Marines. She was released from service with the Marine Corps in 1919 with a sergeant's rank, though Johnson remained at Headquarters Marine Corps as a civilian worker until 1943.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness, Tact, Integrity, Endurance, Bearing, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm.

SETTING THE STAGE: Opha May Jacob was born in Kokomo, Indiana, on 4 May 1878. Her parents William and Ella, moved the family to Washington, D.C., in 1885 to be closer to their German immigrant family members. Opha May attended school in Washington, D.C., including the completion of a secretarial certificate from Wood's Commercial College at age seventeen. Jacob met Victor Hugo Johnson in 1897 while attending a concert at the Lafayette Square Opera House, where Johnson was the musical director. They married in 1898 but lived with her parents at 1745 Kilbourne Place for the remainder of her parents' lives. Victor eventually took employment at the Knickerbocker Theater in Washington, D.C., where he became the lead violinist. When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, Opha May worked as a clerk with the Interstate Commerce Commission.

Victor had registered with the U.S. Selective Service Commission in September 1918 but never was drafted into the war. Opha May, while working her clerical job, noticed an advertisement by the Marine Corps stating they would be registering women for clerical work beginning on 13 August 1918. When she arrived at the War Department building on 12 August, she was the first woman in line. Opha May entered the building and was standing before Capt. C. H. McCauley, USMC. He handed her an application form that was entitled "Marine Corps Reserves." After her physical examination, Opha May was sworn in by Maj. J. H. Long. Opha May Johnson became the first woman enlisted into the U.S. Marine Corps. She was 40 years of age, 64.75 inches tall, and weighed 178 pounds.

THE STORY: As a private in the Marine Corps Reserves, Johnson's primary duty was as a clerk at Headquarters Marine Corps. She was making \$30.00 per month with a \$15.00 per month housing allotment. Johnson was responsible for managing records for all female Marine Reservists. She reached the sergeant's rank on 11 September 1918, becoming the highest-ranking female Marine at the time.

The sergeant's rank was as far as Opha May Johnson got in the Marine Corps, being discharged from service on 28 February 1919. The Marine Corps officially stated that her discharge was "*for the convenience of the government with character excellent.*" On 17 February 1919, however, Johnson sent a letter to the Commandant General requesting a discharge. She was very vocal during her stint with the Marines. There has always been speculation about her concerns and the role her frustrations played in her discharge. After leaving the Marine Corps, Johnson remained a civilian clerk in the War Department until she retired from government service in 1943.

AFTERMATH: The American Legion issued a charter to the first female Marine Corps reservists on 11 July 1919. Known as the Belleau Wood Post No. 1, the unit was established in Washington, D.C., consisting of 90 women who worked at Headquarters Marine Corps. Johnson was a charter member of the post, serving in various leadership positions during her life.

Opha May Johnson never had children, but she loved her “Marinettes.” Johnson died at the Mount Alto Veterans Hospital in Washington, D.C., on 11 August 1955. She is buried at Rock Creek Cemetery, along with her husband and parents.

QUESTIONS

1. What leadership traits did Opha May Johnson exemplify as the first female Marine?
2. In what ways is Opha May Johnson a good role model?
3. Why is it essential for all Marines to learn the story of Opha May Johnson?

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