

# Opha May Johnson

*Kokomo, Howard County*

May 4, 1879 – August 11, 1955

Opha May Johnson (née Jacob) became the first known woman to enlist in the US Marine Corps. She was born in Kokomo, Indiana and graduated from the shorthand and typewriting department of Wood's Commercial College in 1895. In 1898, she married Victor Johnson, who at the time was the Musical Director of the Lafayette Square Opera House in Washington, DC. Prior to serving in the Marine Corps, she was in the Civil Service, working for the Interstate Commerce Commission.

As World War I was coming to an end in 1918, the number of male Marines deployed overseas led the Marine Corps to allow women to enlist for the first time, filling the vacancies (primarily administrative) left by the deployed Marines. On August 13, 1918, approximately 300 women enlisted in the Marine Corps reserves, with Opha May being the first in line that day. Her first duties were as a clerk at the Marine Corps Headquarters, managing the records of other female reservists.

After World War I ended in late 1918, all branches of the service, including the Marine Corps, began steadily dis-enrolling women, and she ended her time in the Corps in 1919. On July 11, 1919, the American Legion granted a charter to the first post of women's Marine Corps reservists. Known as the Belleau Wood Post No. 1, its membership consisted of 90 women who worked at the headquarters. Opha May was a charter member of the post.

Opha May Johnson passed away on August 11, 1955, in Washington DC. Services were held on August 13, 1955, thirty-seven years after she first stood in line to become a US Marine. Buried near her husband and parents in Rock Creek Cemetery, her grave is currently unmarked. In 2017, the Women Marines Association began raising funds to place a marker at her burial site.



Photo Courtesy: United States Marine Corps

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*References will be published at the end of Women's History Month.*