

Women's Field Army (1936-1948)

From 1936 to 1945, the Women's Field Army, hereafter the WFA, educated women in the US on the early symptoms, prevention, and treatment of reproductive cancers. The WFA was a women-led volunteer organization and a branch of, what was then called, the American Society for the Control of Cancer, or ASCC. The WFA, headquartered in New York City, New York, recruited hundreds of thousands of women volunteers across the country. They distributed pamphlets, showed movies, and participated in other grassroots efforts to foster an understanding of reproductive cancers, namely breast and cervical cancer, among other women. The Women's Field Army aided in reducing the number of cancer-related deaths by spreading cancer prevention awareness and teaching women about their reproductive health and the early detection of cancer, which was one of the first widespread educational resources about reproductive cancers for women.

During the early twentieth century, there was little knowledge about cancer among both medical and nonmedical communities. Cancer is a disease that results from uncontrollable cell division in a specific area or areas of the body and is often fatal, especially if not recognized during early stages. During that time, physicians often only prescribed surgical removal of tumors and surrounding tissue, involving the removal of a woman's breasts in cases of breast cancer or a woman's uterus in the case of cervical cancer. Also, author Ellen Leopold, in her book *A Darker Ribbon: Breast Cancer, Women, and Their Doctors in the Twentieth Century*, writes that there was a taboo associated with the discussion of cancer, because it was considered a death sentence at the time. Because of that taboo, physicians rarely discussed cancer with patients or with each other, so there was little knowledge of early diagnostics or prevention of cancer among the public. If people did receive a cancer diagnosis, then some would not share a cancer diagnosis with friends and family. However, by 1930, when the US government began to collect data on death by cancer, approximately 190 women per 100,000 women died by cancer. That statistic influenced the nonmedical public to take action to lower rates of cancer.

In 1913, ten physicians and five businesspeople formed the American Society for the Control of Cancer, or ASCC, in an effort to increase awareness about cancer and promote early detection. To raise money and support the organization's efforts, the ASCC recruited women volunteers, who helped educate other women about cancer throughout the 1920s. In 1929, those women volunteers distributed approximately 668,000 pamphlets, titled *What Every Woman Should Know About Cancer*, which included information about symptoms that may be indicative of cancer and how to seek treatment for women, throughout the US. According to researcher William B. Anderson, the success of the *What Every Woman Should Know About Cancer* campaign helped influence the ASCC to develop the Women's Field Army, or WFA, as a branch of its organization.

In 1936, Marjorie Illig proposed that the women volunteers of the ASCC become the WFA. At that time, Illig was an ASCC Field Representative and chair of a similar organization called the General Federation of Women's Clubs Committee on Public Health. The ASCC provided Illig and the women volunteers 100,000 US dollars to establish the WFA, which advertised itself with the slogan "Early Cancer Is Curable; Fight It With Knowledge." The WFA recruited members of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, called commanders, to encourage women to receive physicals that may detect early signs of cancer and ease women's fears about cancer. According to Anderson, the WFA encouraged its volunteers to act like an army and invade women's houses in an effort to save their lives.

The WFA utilized many characteristics of the US military to operate their organization. Many of the pamphlets the WFA distributed used phrases that framed their campaign as a war or battle against

cancer. The women volunteers often dressed in khaki uniforms and wore medallions that represented their rank within the organization. Specifically, women could achieve leadership positions within the WFA as captain or lieutenant. According to a pamphlet, titled Instructions for Captains of the Women's Field Army, the organization expected their captains to be women of intelligence with a humanitarian viewpoint, responsible for daily operations, and hire lieutenants. Lieutenants were women who directly contacted other women to raise awareness through education about cancer. The WFA recruited more than 100,000 volunteers by the end of 1936, requiring a registration fee of one US dollar per each volunteer. Due to inflation rates, one US dollar is equivalent to nearly nineteen US dollars, as of 2021. According to Anderson, that fee paid the salaries and expenses of the WFA's field representatives.

Women enlisted in the WFA provided education to women and their families on how to detect early signs of cancer, including abnormal breast lumps and irregular menstrual bleeding. In 1937, the WFA launched their first public education campaign. The volunteers distributed pamphlets that directed women to receive regular physical exams and semiannual breast and pelvic exams, for women over the age of thirty-five. Also, the WFA's pamphlets focused on eradicating fear of cancer, directly targeting the taboo of cancer through their educational efforts. Following the first campaign, public education became an annual event, and the volunteers distributed millions of pamphlets by leafleting and setting up booths and tables at events, subways, train stations, and schools.

Also in 1937, the WFA expanded its political influence. According to researcher Melissa Lundquist, during the early twentieth century, the US government did not prioritize minimizing rates of cancer, arguing that because cancer is not infectious, the threat of the disease was not great. The WFA encouraged its volunteers to write letters to their state's congresspeople, encouraging them to support policies that would address cancer in the US. Lundquist attributes the WFA's political advocacy to the eventual formation of the National Cancer Institute in 1937 after unanimous support in the US Senate. Also, in 1937, Edith Rogers, who served as volunteer for the WFA and US representative from Massachusetts, introduced a bill to the US House of Representatives that would establish April as Cancer Control Month, which then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt first acknowledged in 1943.

The WFA continued utilizing different means of public outreach to further explain the importance of early detection and awareness of reproductive cancers. By 1939, volunteers often held informal parties, where they invited wealthy, elite women to attend and learn about the WFA. Similarly, volunteers invited women to clubs to view a film, named The Call to Arms, which helped spread awareness about cancer. Additionally, at the 1939 New York World's Fair in New York City, New York, the WFA ran a booth, where they displayed a life-sized translucent model that they called Cancer Woman. The model electronically demonstrated, using light, how quickly cancer can spread from a small spot in the breast and progress into the entire body.

By the early 1940s, the WFA took on a challenge to maintain their popularity as the US entered World War II in 1941. According to Anderson, the volunteers devoted more of their efforts to promoting the WFA, as they worried that the war would shift focus from the fight against cancer. Despite the country's focus shifting to war efforts, the WFA continued to surpass its annual revenue and enlistment goals. By the end of 1941, the WFA raised nearly 243,000 US dollars, which was a 116 percent increase from 1936. Due to inflation rates, that amount of money is equivalent to nearly 4.5 million US dollars, as of 2021.

Also, during the 1940s, the WFA shifted its focus from public education to research as socialite Mary Lasker influenced the ASCC's overall mission. The ASCC sought a cure to cancer and thus invested most of their funds in science and technology, and the WFA followed the ASCC's lead. According to Lundquist, when Lasker became prominent within the ASCC, the organization changed its name to the American Cancer Society, and the WFA changed its name to Field Army, in 1945. Lundquist writes that the name change reflected Lasker's attempt to broaden the WFA's influence to include men. According to Lundquist, during the 1940s, society associated women with advocacy and men with science and technology. However, by 1948, the work of the Field Army had dissolved into that of the ASC, and the Field Army's volunteers began to volunteer for the ASC.

Many historians and other researchers approached the WFA with criticism in the decades after it dissolved. According to Lundquist, many larger organizations and institutions did not recognize the effort that the WFA made to raise awareness about cancer, writing that some people referred to the organization as a Ladies' Garden Club that fundraised. Further, Anderson writes that male physicians worried that the WFA's volunteers would overstep the medical boundary and intervene in their practice of medicine. He states that male physicians only accepted the WFA after being assured its volunteers would be under constant supervision. In her book, titled *Early Detection: Women, Cancer, and Awareness Campaigns in the Twentieth-Century United States*, author Kristen Gardner states that the WFA allowed women to be involved in conversations about their reproductive health during a time that men dominated the medical field. She suggests that women participated in the WFA not out of respect for the work being done but rather out of desire to be involved in the discussion.

Still, the WFA was one of the largest organizations of women who were committed to reproductive cancer awareness and education in the US during a time when people had little knowledge about cancer. The WFA helped bring conversations about cancer into the social and political realms, which eased some fears that people had during the early twentieth century about cancer. The WFA's efforts influenced the American Cancer Society to become one of the largest volunteer organizations in the US, as of 2021.

Sources

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