

'Hello Girls' Kept World War I Communications Humming

Serving as civilian telephone operators for the Army, more than 200 American women leapt at the chance to serve overseas during the Great War

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By the time the U.S. declared war on Germany in 1917, the Navy had already opened its doors to women, assigning them ground jobs that freed up men for sea service. The need ashore was even greater.

As the first American forces began arriving in France that summer, they found the communications network in disarray. In three years of combat, telephone lines were shot, shelled and bombed faster than they could be repaired.

Furthermore, the French women operating telephone exchanges spoke no English and in general were very casual toward their duties, frequently forsaking their switchboards in order to go to canteens, shopping and to meet with boyfriends. The very first U.S. phone operators were men who were poorly trained and tended to hang up when combat-stressed officers shouted at them over the lines.

Pershing Calls for 'Hello Girls'

Army Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of American Expeditionary Forces in World War I, found this situation intolerable. He had, however, noted the efficiency and competence of Britain's Women's Army Auxiliary Corps as they expertly kept England-based phone lines humming.

In November, he urgently advised his War Department of the need for French-speaking American women to take over the telephone system so that Allied military operations could be effectively coordinated.

Before Pershing had boarded the ship that bore him to Europe, he stuffed its hold with the latest in communications technology. The telephone was an American invention, and he was

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determined to exploit it to its fullest potential.

The War Department placed advertisements in newspapers across the country, and more than 7,000 patriotic women eagerly responded. The vast majority had to be rejected because they had no communications experience and spoke no French.

From this pool, the Army selected 150, mostly Louisiana Creoles and the daughters and granddaughters of French and French-Canadian immigrants. Following intensive training (in some cases re-training women who had been working as telegraph operators) by AT&T and basic instruction in military protocol, the Secret Service meticulously screened these volunteers to assure they were loyal to the Allied cause. Eventually, 223 women were cleared for duty and served in war-torn France.

While the men serving in the trenches were affectionately known as “Doughboys,” these female switchboard warriors had the moniker “Hello Girls” hung on them. In general, they loved it. In a rare case (for that time) of sexual equality, chief operators were paid \$125 per month, the same as a male Signal Corps soldier. All the ladies received their monthly remuneration, down to \$50 for substitute operators.

Professionalism Welcomed in War Zone

The initial contingent of Hello Girls arrived in France in March 1918 and immediately ingratiated themselves. U.S. officers who had been stymied by French operators who spoke no English and were less than conscientious about their duties were mightily relieved to come on line and hear a crisp, clear and fluent American woman say, “Number please.”

After their long shifts ended, many of these fatigued women, rather than collapse into their bunks, would visit field hospitals and talk to wounded British, French and American soldiers. This undoubtedly raised the spirits of these hurting young men, many of whom were terribly disfigured. Sexism faded away quickly on the front lines, replaced by mutual respect and admiration as men and women embraced a camaraderie brought on by the horrors of war.

The operators working in the forward areas endured many of the same dangers and discomforts as the young men in the trenches. Shellings, aerial strafings, poison gas, freezing weather, drafty barracks and phone huts, squirrel-sized rats and the terrifying specter of the Spanish flu were all factors these women refused to be intimidated by as they flawlessly carried out their assignments.

Near the Meuse-Argonne Front Line

Following the battle of St. Mihiel in September 1918, the Hello Girls transferred to Souilly in northeastern France for the Meuse-Argonne offensive. As the armies clashed, these operators worked round-the-clock handling an endless succession of calls coordinating infantry advances, artillery placements and troop movements. An extra six operators had to

be assigned to the Allied communications center to handle the volume of wire traffic supporting this last major engagement of the war in Europe.

After German shrapnel shattered the windows of the building housing the central telephone exchange, the operators ignored the numbing cold as they kept the flow of information moving, enabling Allied victory. As always, having danger at their sides did not impress these ladies.

On Oct. 30, a wounded German POW kicked over an oil stove in the U.S. headquarters, starting a conflagration that spread to eight buildings, including the telephone exchange. As the flames crept closer, the Hello Girls continued to connect calls, ignoring repeated orders to evacuate. Not until the fire was almost upon them and exasperated officers threatened them with courts martial did the women finally forsake their switchboards.

The fire brigade made short work of the blaze, and a mere hour later, the operators rushed back into the still-smoking building to staff the remaining phone lines. This selfless, crucial heroism earned seven women Distinguished Service Medals.

Following the Nov. 11, 1918, armistice, the Army sent a contingent of Hello Girls to Paris to translate during the peace proceedings. Some went to Germany to assist with the settling in of the limited Allied occupation forces. Their vital contributions in these capacities did not go unnoticed as Pershing frequently visited the telephone exchanges and extolled the worth of the Hello Girls. As they returned home, though, they learned that the U.S. government did not share their general's high estimation.

Two Hello Girls died from the Spanish flu while in France. Others were wounded. After their return home, the Army said they had served as employees of the military, not as actual soldiers, and denied them veterans bonuses, hospitalization for disabilities or even flags on their coffins.

Granted Official Veterans Status

Decades later, a new wave of feminism spearheaded by the National Organization for Women came to the WWI phone operators' aid. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter enacted the GI Bill Improvement Act of 1977 (P.L. 95-202) that granted the Hello Girls veterans status, benefits and receipt of the WWI Victory Medal. In 1979, 31 surviving Hello Girls received their much-deserved medals.

Even before World War I ended in 1918, President Woodrow Wilson, noting the priceless contribution being made by the Hello Girls, reversed his previous stance on women's suffrage. In 1912, one of the planks in his election platform had been staunch opposition to allowing women to vote, the logic being that since women stayed home during wartime they did not participate in combat, and therefore had not earned the right to vote.

The Hello Girls showed this argument as pure fallacy. While addressing Congress on Sept. 30, 1918, Wilson spoke clearly in the opposite direction, as he urged the legislators to pass

women's suffrage.

“Are we alone to ask and take the utmost that our women can give and still say we do not see what title that gives them to stand by our sides in the guidance of the affairs of their nation and ours?” he asked.

“We have made partners of the women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and rights? This war could not have been fought if it had not been for the services of the women, services rendered in every sphere wherever men have worked and upon the very skirts and edges of the battle itself.”

The Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution — which gave women the right to vote — was ratified in 1920.

This article is featured in the March 2021 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Kelly Bell. Bell is a freelance writer based in Tyler, Texas.