

Number, Please

by Timothy Tocher



Smoke seeped under

the door of a wooden building in France. Chief Grace Banker's team of telephone operators, known as Hello Girls, stayed at their switchboards. The last great battle of World War I was underway. An operator's job was critical. She had to connect General Pershing and his officers to American soldiers fighting the German army just a few miles away.

A bucket brigade scrambled to pour water on the scorching rooftop, hoping to prevent Communications Headquarters from joining the surrounding buildings in flames. Grace's team kept working until they were ordered to leave.

Who were the Hello Girls? How did their jobs come about? By the early twentieth century, the telephone had changed military communication. The Army no longer had to rely on hand-carried messages and battle

signals sent by flags. Telephones allowed a general to communicate by voice with his officers in the heat of battle.

The telephones of 1918 were not easy to use. A caller picked up the phone and spoke to an operator. The operator held a wire with a plug at each end. To complete the call, she would plug one end of the wire into the caller's circuit on the switchboard.

She would ask, "Number, please?" Then, she would plug the other end into the connection for the party the caller was attempting to reach.

When the United States entered World War I in the spring of 1917, General John J. Pershing was chosen to lead America's forces. Pershing insisted on setting up a telephone network between headquarters and the front lines. He needed a highly skilled group of bilingual switchboard operators able to complete calls in both English and French. They would have to handle multiple calls at a time.

But a switchboard operator was considered a woman's job. Who could take these positions? There were no experienced men available. General Pershing asked that women be recruited.

The U.S. Army contacted American Telephone and Telegraph. This company had the greatest number of experienced personnel. AT&T was eager to help with the war effort. They asked for volunteers. More than 1,700 women stepped forward, and 223 women were chosen.

The U.S. Army was strictly a male organization. But the Hello Girls would need much of the same gear as soldiers. The women had to buy their own uniforms and equipment. The cost would be deducted a little at a time from their monthly salary.

The new recruits were sworn in. They promised to serve with courage and loyalty. They completed basic training, which was identical to training given to male members of the Army Signal Corps. Once in Europe, they slept in crowded tents or wooden barracks.

In the months of fighting that followed, many of the Hello Girls moved forward with the advancing army. They worked in buildings where the windows rattled from explosions. Operators were closely supervised. They could never say anything that might reveal their position. If the Germans learned where a switchboard was hidden, they would bomb it.

Each Hello Girl was responsible for fifty lines communicating hundreds of orders. By war's end, the Hello Girls were completing more than 150,000 calls a day. Calls from General Pershing were put through within half a second. One general remarked that if the telephone lines went down for even an hour, "the whole military machine would collapse."

After Germany surrendered on November 11, 1918, soldiers returned to the United States. But many of the Hello Girls remained in France to assist the American Peace Commission. Merle Egan was one of those women. She had so impressed army officials that she was sent to Paris as chief operator. She supervised the women who completed telephone calls between President Wilson and the prime ministers of England, France, and Italy. These duties kept her in Paris until May of 1919. Merle received a citation signed by General Pershing thanking her for her valuable service.

When Merle returned home, she wrote to the army requesting the Victory Medal.

This medal was given to all soldiers who had served in the war. But she was told that none of the Hello Girls had ever been in the service. They were considered civilian employees. There would be no medals, discharge papers, or veterans' benefits. The Hello Girls would not receive the wartime bonuses awarded by Congress to people serving in the military. They would not be given the honor of flag-draped coffins and military funerals.

Chief Operator Grace Banker, who had kept her crew working through fire and fatigue, was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. This honor was given to only eighteen out of 16,000 Signal Corps officers. Still, the army claimed she had never been a soldier!

But the sacrifices made by the Hello Girls and other women during the war did not go unnoticed. For years, American women had been campaigning for the right to vote in elections. One of the arguments used against them was that women did not risk their lives to defend their country and therefore were not full citizens.

When President Wilson finally realized the valuable contribution women had made, he encouraged Congress to amend the Constitution. On August 26, 1920, the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution became law. For the first time, more than eight million women would cast a ballot in a presidential election that November.

It took longer for Congress to recognize the Hello Girls as veterans. Merle Egan made it her life's work to fight for their rights. The bill did not become law until 1977. Only eighteen of the 223 Hello Girls were still alive, including Merle Egan. She lived long enough to receive an honorable discharge and her Victory Medal.

