The Hello Girls of World War I

By Carolyn Prickett

Introduction

World War I brought great change to American Society. It was a dominant factor influencing the society of the early part of the 1900s. It brought new stressors on societal norms, conventions and expectations for the roles and responsibilities of men and women in all strata of the American public. In the later years of the 1800s and the beginning of the new century, women began to take on new roles outside the home and to step outside the tradition norms of society’s expectations. One place that women stepped into new roles was as members of the Armed Forces. Women joined the Navy, the Marine Corps and the Army for the first time in official positions. The Army Signal Corps is one area in particular that women were needed for the War Effort. The women who served were pioneers and paved the way for the women who serve proudly today.

Women had to face many obstacles due to societal norms and expectations. At the turn of the century, women were stepping forward into new roles and shaping society. The Progressive Movement, which began in the 1890s, brought many women into areas outside the home, as illustrated by Jane Addams and her work at Hull House in Chicago. Her work to eliminate poverty and against political corruption was a totally new role for a woman in her era.¹ It also proved to lay the foundations for the new profession of social work.

The Women’s Suffrage movement also brought women’s roles and their positions in society into question. Starting in the 1890s, women began to work together in order to bring about their right to vote. This movement continued until the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1920. As a part of and separate from the Progressive Movement, women’s suffrage was a tough fight because it would dramatically change women’s position and standing within politics. It would allow women to directly vote and be involved in the democratic process. This required a change in the view of women as well. Some of the women who were involved in women’s suffrage are well known today. Names like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Carrie Chapman Catt have are regarded historically as women of courage and conviction, ready to educate the whole nation on the idea and ideals of woman’s suffrage. The women of the Suffrage movement were leaders, mothers, professionals and housewives, from every walk of life and region. Many of them were jailed, beaten and ridiculed for their work but they continued because it was a necessary fight.\(^2\) The importance of the suffrage movement is it impacted on the women who were involved with the U.S. Armed Forces during World War I. The same social upheaval which was giving birth to women’s suffrage was also producing women who were going to war as part of the armed forces.

When Europe erupted into the flames of war, women in the U.S. activated to encourage American politicians to remain neutral. Addams, the esteemed champion of social causes from ten years earlier, mobilized many women against America becoming involved in the European conflict. She founded the Women’s Peace Party and actively campaigned for peace. She met with

President Woodrow Wilson many times to discuss concerns and was an acknowledged voice for peace.¹ Not all women were lucky to have the President’s ear or avoid missteps. The trials and imprisonment of Kate Richard O’Hare for sedition after delivering an anti-war speech² is one example of society’s reaction to outspoken women in an uncertain world.

Another woman who made history during this period was Jeannette Rankin. She was the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress. Her state allowed women to vote. She served two terms at different times as a member of the House of Representatives. Ms. Rankin was one of the 50 members of the House to vote against the war declaration vote in 1917.³ It must have taken great personal courage to stand and speak for the first time as a Representative, and as the first woman Representative, against war when words such as loyalty and patriotism were voiced by the majority. She continued to be actively engaged with women’s peace organizations such as the Women’s Peace Union and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.⁴ Rankin continued to be a voice for peace and women’s involvement in the political process for many years.

In wars past, women had served in the Armed Forces mostly when their gender was concealed. They had to hide in men’s clothing and under men’s names. When those women were

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found out they were sent home thought to be camp followers or worse. Women’s work, nursing and cooking, supported the war effort during the Civil War but women were not expected to pick up a gun and serve. “During wars, women are often called upon to perform men’s work, but they are not expected to continue to do so once the guns fall silent.” Nursing as a profession, often identified with Clara Barton, began to take shape and was the first area to see women officially associated with the Army. Dorothea Dix, a well know reformer and crusader for the mentally ill, become the first Superintendent for U.S. Army nurses in 1861. It was not always easy sailing and sometimes they had to get creative. “When they could not cajole, reason, or shame Army doctors into improving conditions for the patients, the women worked around them.”

Nursing became an acceptable profession for women in a time when working outside the home was not routine or easily accepted.

Women served officially with the Army as nurses during the Spanish-American War in 1898. In this War, the Daughters of the American Revolution were involved with recruiting civilian nurses to assist the military. Dr. Anita McGee was appointed as the head of the Army Nursing Service and organized and managed the 1600 nurses who served during that war.

9 John C. Fredriksen, American Military Leaders: From Colonial Times to the Present, vol. 1 A-L (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 1999), 171.
Women served and died in order to take care of the service members. In 1901 through the Army Reorganization Act the Army Nurse Corps was established. The women recruited into the ANC were appointed not commissioned and served for a period of three years. But, they were not considered a regular part of the Army. It would not be until 1947 when nurses were commissioned as regular officers of the Armed Services. The recognition of women as official service nurses made a serious impact on the place of women in the world.

One profession which impacted the Armed Services was librarians. The American Library Association set up libraries at the Army camps as part of their patriotic efforts and worked with the Commission on Training Camp Activities which was part of the War Department. There were many women librarians at this time within the U.S. although they were not “proportionately represented in positions of leadership.” ¹² The Commission on Training Camp Activities was conflicted on the role of women in the war effort. On one hand they felt women could play an active role in the war effort and help keep the men away from the more unsavory aspects of camp such as prostitution and venereal disease. On the other hand, the Commission members viewed women as a threat to men’s moral and physical health as they might tempt men into sexual promiscuity. The War Department also felt the libraries must be protected which made it difficult for a women to be in charge. In fact, women were not allowed to be paid for their work as camp librarians and could only serve as volunteers. ¹³ There were also


hospital librarians and these positions were held by women. Housing was one problem. Another was a concern voiced that “women would have difficulty in relating to military leadership.”

Despite the conditions, women still contributed to the life of the camps and made an impact on the Soldiers within them.

Miss May Wood Wigginton was the head of cataloging at the Camp Taylor Library. In order to get the library set up, she recruited volunteers and Soldiers to help process the books for the library. She was in charge of men who were typing, printing, and pasting information on the books. The hospital librarian, Minnie Miller had a Soldier detailed to be her assistant. Miller eventually became the actual camp librarian. Restrictions on women and the lack of official recognition as staff are just two illustrations of the barriers women encountered in serving the Soldiers of the Armed Forces. The women persisted in their work and one must think they had a strong impact on the Soldiers they met, served with and supported during the War.

As America mobilized for World War I it became clear that women would be need to fill the gaps left by men going to the front. Even within the Armed Forces there was a realization that women would be needed to assist where they had not worked before. There were no regulations which prohibited women from serving in the Navy and the Secretary of the Navy was quick to recognize that women could serve in the military in capacities which would free more men for active combat duty. Women enlisted, served and proved they could provide value to the

14 Daniels, 294.
Armed Service. Gertrude Murray was a supervisor of 40 women but was made a Chief but not an officer. “The military service of American women in World War 1 would change the lives of all American living then and the lives of the tens of millions who would come after them.”

Through military service, women took on responsibilities and proved their worth in the workplace and in society.

In order to understand the impact of women formally serving with the Armed Forces, it is important to understand the complex nature of the society from which those women came and the structure under which they were working. At the turn of the new century, the U.S. was poised on the brink of a new society. Many of the biggest changes were of particular concern to women. The roles and attitudes towards a women’s place in society were changing, although slowly. By 1917, the suffrage movement which began over 50 years earlier had still not succeeded in enfranchisement for women. Women were involved in many areas of progressive social change but still, for upper and middle class women, work outside the home was kept to those areas thought to be genteel or in keeping with their feminine nature. Salaries for women were always less than men’s and women were rarely in charge, unless it was their own business or in those “genteel” in nature. But this is not to say women were not involved in many areas, women had become doctors, lawyers, architects. In the late 1800, women were being educated in college and with the arrival of the new century; women would make up 40 percent of all college students in

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the U.S.\textsuperscript{18} To give a context for this figure, according to a Boston Globe article, women accounted for 55 percent of undergraduates in 2014.\textsuperscript{19} All of this helps to set the stage for American societal changes during the First World War.

Technical advances were many at the turn of the century and into the first 20 years of the 1900s. Gas heating and appliances, canned goods, ice boxes, mass produced clothing, commercial steam laundries, electric lighting, and some indoor plumbing,\textsuperscript{20} were focused on the home and improved efficiency. These advances helped to create a new thing for those women who could afford them–time. With time, women could look to other pursuits such as social reform or outside work. Women had been nurses for many years, as well as school teachers, sales clerks, and officer workers. The majority of these positions were in clean places and the work was sedentary. So the positions were considered genteel and continued the ideal of women’s work. The telephone also changed lives and created the need for switchboard operators. By 1917, 99 percent of all the switchboard operations in the U.S. were women.\textsuperscript{21} When the War Department went looking for bilingual telephone operators it was natural to turn to the American Telephone and Telegraph Company to see if they could find women to serve who were already knowledgeable of switchboard work.\textsuperscript{22} They found many women willing to work and serve.

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\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 360.


\textsuperscript{20} Smith, “New Paths to Power,” 371.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 385.

\textsuperscript{22} Schneider and Schneider, \textit{American Women of the First World War, 1900-1920}, 177.
Two federal agencies established branches to help with getting women in to the workforce. The Railroad Administration and the Army’s Ordnance Department established branches in order to bring women into the workforce for the railroad industry. In July of 1918, Congress funded a new division of the U.S. Department of Labor called the Women-in-Industry Service. These agencies were also charged with monitoring conditions and wages. Many of the new positions did not survive the end of the war but the Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau did and continued to foster the rights of women in the workplace.

The Army Signal Corps

Women were allowed to serve with the Army Signal Corps during World War I for the first time. The Army found it had significant problems with communication once it entered the war. The French communication systems were inadequate to handle the volume of traffic necessary to prosecute the war. The Army also did not have enough Soldiers to man the communications lines. Within the United States, women were the dominate employees of the telephone companies. General John J. Pershing requested from the War Department, telephone operators who could speak French. The Army wanted to find women who were both bilingual and already knew how to operate the telephone switchboards. They could not find many women who fit this criteria. They settled for women who could speak French and requested the operators who worked for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company teach them what they needed to know in order to work the switchboards. The women were brought into the service, swore an

oath, and wore the uniform. But they had to pay for their own uniforms and did not have rank.\textsuperscript{25} They worked the switchboards, some of them within shouting distance of the front lines. They were issued gas masks and helmets. 233 women joined the Women’s Telephone Unit of the Signal Corps and went to France.

The women of the U.S. Army Signal Corps were called “the Hello Girls or the “voice with a smile” and they made a difference.\textsuperscript{26} The adjutant general of the Army directed that the women would be given contracts of service and be considered civilians. But when the women were brought into the Army, they had been sworn in and they did not sign contracts. They thought they were members of the Army, just like any male.\textsuperscript{27}

The Hello Girls were a different demographic than some of the other organizations which sent women to France or those who worked with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). The operators were most likely to be younger, the average age 26, unmarried and educated. “The AEF wanted to hire women who were independent and would not get homesick when they were away from their families.”\textsuperscript{28} Many of the operators lived on their own at some point before getting appointed to the AEF and thus were more independent than other women of their age. Grace Banker was the chief operator for the first group of women who went to France with the Signal Corps. She worked for AT&T before the war started and joined up along with two other

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 10.
\textsuperscript{26} Schneider and Schneider, \textit{American Women of the First World War, 1900-1920}, 177.
friends. She wrote in her recollections, “I was so proud of them. I was also very conscious of my heavy responsibilities. I had been put in charge of the unit.” She was taking 33 women, ages 19 to 35 to a foreign country by sea, in austere conditions and worrying about German submarines. Grace was assigned forward in the First Army Headquarters. She remembered General John J. Pershing himself inspecting their living quarters and a time when her feet became frostbitten due to the roof leaking in the winter time. She worked alongside what she called “the Signal Battalion boys” and could hear the roar of guns, from Chaumont, to Ligny. She moved forward with the Army to Verdun. She wrote her memories in 1937 and her recollections were that the Signal Corps officers watched over them and were thoughtful. She received the Distinguished Service Medal after 20 months of service.

The women were anxious to serve and excited to get into areas where they would see heavy activity. In a letter home to her mom, Adele Hoppock wrote that she was not afraid of the work but, being stationed somewhere in France where it was not busy. She wrote “There is not a girl among us who would not give anything she could to the U.S. We are so proud to be in the service and we feel as though it is our privilege, nay our duty, to do our utmost.” Adele articulates the very foundations of service and Army values.

Merle Anderson was another member of the Army Signal Corps. Ms. Anderson was from Montana and had 11 years of experience working with the telephone company. She had more

29 Ibid., 292.


31 Paddock, 113.

32 Martin M. Evans, ed. *American Voice of World War I* 66.
experience than most on the technology used in France, which was similar to that in Montana and so they asked her to be an instructor. She was teaching the Soldiers how to be operators and sometimes ran into problems with them. In her recollections she wrote about an incident where a Soldier did not want to learn from a woman. His alternative was kitchen patrol, ie cleanup. The Soldier was quick to decide that reporting to her was better than mopping floors and washing dishes. She reminded them that anyone could carry a weapon but “the safety of a whole division might depend on the switchboard one of them was operating.”

Through force of personality she seemed to get these young Soldiers to cooperate and learn. Merle Anderson also received a citation for Meritorious Service from General Pershing in 1919 when she left Paris.

The Hello Girls served well in France and returned home to the U.S. to pick up their lives. When they returned home, they found out the Army did not view their service in the same manner which they did and they were not awarded veteran’s status. The Army said they were contract civilians and not enlisted members of the service. This was despite the oaths that were sworn, the pay that was equivalent to the Soldiers and their service in front line Headquarters. Merle Anderson took on a campaign to gain recognition for the women who served. It took until 1979 for Congress to pass a bill to recognize these women as veterans. Only 18 of the original 223 women were alive to receive their official discharge certificates, veteran’s benefits and Victory Medals.

Their service was essential but the Army at this time was not ready to have women who were Soldiers.

Conclusion

33 Gavin, Lettie. *American Women in World War I: They also Served*. 85.
35 Gavin, 93.
This paper examined the experiences of women who made a difference in World War I, especially the “Hello Girls” as they made their way through a new world. As women leaders continue to expand their professionalism it is good to look back into history to see what others have done and how that relates to today.

There is ample evidence that the lives of women changed after World War I and the women who served made a difference. National American Women Suffrage Association used women’s wartime service for the campaign for women’s suffrage within the U.S. In September of 1918, Woodrow Wilson made a speech concerning the suffrage issue. “We have made partners of the women in this war, shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toll and not to a partnership of privilege and right.” The eventual passage of the Suffrage amendment in 1920 supported that others saw the sacrifice and service of the women in France and agreed with President Wilson.

Women’s service was acknowledged but not always officially recognized. The women who served with the Army Signal Corps were not recognized with the official AEF service medals, veterans’ benefits or other rights for service with the Army upon their return. Even with congressional recognition, in the 579 pages of the Signal Corp’s official history published by the Army Lineage Series, Center of Military History—there is no mention of the women who served in World War I.


These women served close to the front lines and suffered hardships including weather, food and fire. The set the example for women to follow and follow they did. The American public would change as the roles of women changed and societal views of true women’s work. Within the Armed Forces, the women serving in World War I set the stage for the establishment of women’s units in World War II and beyond.

The service of the Hello Girls of World War I should be known and taught to every person because they exemplified the concepts of service to one’s country and the abilities of women to serve in the Armed Forces. Women of today can look back with pride and honor at the examples of Grace Banker and Merle Anderson to find true heroes of World War I. Their example and others like them shows dedication, true grit and selfless service.


Paddock, Grace B. “I was a “Hello Girl”” in The World Wars Remembered, ed by Timothy Clark, Dublin, New Hampshire: Yankee, Inc. 1979


