

116TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 206

To award a Congressional Gold Medal to the female telephone operators of the Army Signal Corps, known as the “Hello Girls”.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

JANUARY 24, 2019

Mr. TESTER (for himself and Mrs. BLACKBURN) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

A BILL

To award a Congressional Gold Medal to the female telephone operators of the Army Signal Corps, known as the “Hello Girls”.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Hello Girls Congres-
5 sional Gold Medal Act of 2019”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress finds the following:

8 (1) On April 6, 1917, the United States de-
9 clared war against Germany. As a historically neu-

1 tral nation, the United States was unprepared to
2 fight a technologically modern conflict overseas. The
3 United States called upon American Telephone and
4 Telegraph (referred to in this section as “AT&T”)
5 to provide equipment and trained personnel for the
6 Army Signal Corps in France. AT&T executives in
7 Army uniform served at home under the provisions
8 of the Act entitled “An Act for making further and
9 more effectual provision for the national defense,
10 and for other purposes.”, approved June 3, 1916
11 (referred to in this section as the “National Defense
12 Act of 1916”), which allowed for the induction of in-
13 dividuals with specialized skills into a reserve force.

14 (2) When General John Pershing sailed for Eu-
15 rope in May of 1917 as head of the American Expe-
16 ditionary Forces (referred to in this section as the
17 “AEF”), he took telephone operating equipment
18 with him in recognition of the inadequacy of Euro-
19 pean circuitry and with the understanding that tele-
20 phones would play a key role in battlefield commu-
21 nications for the first time in the history of war.

22 (3) From May to November of 1917, the AEF
23 struggled to develop the telephone service necessary
24 for the Army to function under battlefield condi-
25 tions. Monolingual infantrymen from the United

1 States were unable to connect calls rapidly or com-
2 municate effectively with their French counterparts
3 to put calls through over toll lines that linked one
4 region of the country with another. The Army found
5 that the average male operator required 60 seconds
6 to make a connection. That rate was unacceptably
7 slow, especially for operational calls between com-
8 mand outposts and the front lines.

9 (4) During this time, in the United States, tele-
10 phone operating was largely sex-segregated. Hired
11 for their speed in connecting calls, women filled 85
12 percent of the telephone operating positions in the
13 United States. It took the average female operator
14 10 seconds to make a connection.

15 (5) On November 8, 1917, General Pershing
16 cabled the War Department and wrote, “On account
17 of the great difficulty of obtaining properly qualified
18 men, request organization and dispatch to France a
19 force of women telephone operators all speaking
20 French and English equally well.”. To begin, Gen-
21 eral Pershing requested 100 women under the com-
22 mand of a commissioned captain, writing that “All
23 should have allowances of Army nurses and should
24 be uniformed.”.

1 (6) The War Department sent press releases to
2 newspapers across the United States to recruit
3 women willing to serve for the duration of the war
4 and face the hazards of submarine warfare and aer-
5 ial bombardment. These articles emphasized that pa-
6 triotic women would be “full-fledged soldier[s] under
7 the articles of war” and would “do as much to help
8 win the war as the men in khaki who go ‘over the
9 top.’”. All women selected would take the Army
10 oath.

11 (7) More than 7,600 women volunteered for the
12 100 positions described in paragraph (5) and the
13 first recruits took the Army oath on January 15,
14 1918.

15 (8) Like nurses and doctors at the time, female
16 Signal Corps members had relative rather than tra-
17 ditional ranks and were ranked as Operator, Super-
18 visor, or Chief Operator. When promoted, the
19 women were required to swear the Army oath again.

20 (9) Telephone operators were the first women
21 to serve as soldiers in non-medical classifications
22 and the job of the operators was to help win the
23 war, not to mitigate the harms of the war. In pop-
24 ular parlance, they were known as the “Hello Girls”.

1 (10) Signal Corps Operators wore Army uni-
2 forms and Army insignia always, as well as stand-
3 ard-issue identity disks in case of death, and were
4 subject to court martial for infractions of the mili-
5 tary code.

6 (11) Unbeknownst to the women operators and
7 their immediate officers, the legal counsel of the
8 Army ruled internally on March 20, 1918, that the
9 women were not actually soldiers but contract em-
10 ployees, even though the women had not seen or
11 signed any contracts. Military code allowed only for
12 the induction of men and the code remained un-
13 changed despite the orders of General Pershing.
14 Nevertheless, legal counsel also recognized that the
15 National Defense Act of 1916, which allowed for the
16 induction of members of the telephone industry of
17 the United States into the Armed Forces, imposed
18 no gender restrictions.

19 (12) Four days later, on March 24, 1918, the
20 first contingent of operators began their official du-
21 ties in France. The operators arrived before most in-
22 fantrymen of the Armed Forces in order to facilitate
23 logistics and deployment and spent their first night
24 in Paris under German bombardment.

1 (13) After the arrival of the operators, tele-
2 phone service in France improved immediately, as
3 calls tripled from 13,000 to 36,000 per day.

4 (14) The Army quickly recruited, trained, and
5 deployed 5 additional contingents of female Signal
6 Corps operators. With these personnel, calls in-
7 creased to 150,000 per day.

8 (15) In addition to standard telephone oper-
9 ating, bilingual Signal Corps members provided si-
10 multaneous translation between officers from France
11 and officers from the United States, who were com-
12 municating by telephone.

13 (16) The AEF fought their first major battles
14 in the last 2 months of the war. By that point, the
15 Signal Corps considered the contributions of women
16 to be so essential that, in telephone exchanges clos-
17 est to the front line, the Army exclusively used
18 women, in rotating 12-hour shifts. In the rear, the
19 Army established rotating 8-hour shifts and gave
20 male soldiers the overnight shift when telephone
21 traffic was slower.

22 (17) Seven bilingual operators—

23 (A) served at the Battles of St. Mihiel and
24 Meuse-Argonne under the immediate command
25 of General Pershing;

1 (B) staffed the Operations Boards through
2 which orders to advance, fire, and retreat were
3 delivered to soldiers in the trenches, to artillery
4 units on alert, and to pilots awaiting orders at
5 French airfields; and

6 (C) were awarded a “Defensive Sector
7 Clasp” for the Meuse-Argonne operation.

8 (18) The Chief Operator supervising the Hello
9 Girls, Grace Banker of Passaic, New Jersey, was
10 awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. Out of
11 16,000 eligible Signal Corps officers, Banker was
12 one of only 18 individuals so honored.

13 (19) Thirty additional operators received special
14 commendations, many signed by General Pershing
15 himself, for “exceptionally meritorious and con-
16 spicuous services” in “Advance Sections” of the con-
17 flict.

18 (20) The war ended on November 11, 1918. As
19 of that date, 223 female operators served in France
20 and had connected 26,000,000 calls for the AEF.

21 (21) The Chief Signal Officer of the Army Sig-
22 nal Corps wrote in his official report 2 days after
23 the date on which the war ended that “a large part
24 of the success of the communications of this Army

1 is due to . . . a competent staff of women opera-
2 tors.”.

3 (22) After the war ended, some women were or-
4 dered to Coblenz in Germany for the occupation of
5 that country and to Paris for the Paris Peace Trea-
6 ty of 1919 to continue telephone operations, some-
7 times in direct support of President Woodrow Wil-
8 son.

9 (23) Two operators, Corah Bartlett and Inez
10 Crittenden, died in France in the service of the
11 United States and were buried there in military
12 cemeteries with military ceremonies. Those operators
13 died of the same influenza pandemic that killed more
14 soldiers of the Armed Forces than combat oper-
15 ations.

16 (24) Women of the Army Signal Corps were in-
17 eligible for discharge until formal release. Because of
18 their role in logistics, those women were among the
19 last soldiers to come home to the United States. The
20 last Signal Corps operators returned from France in
21 January of 1920.

22 (25) Upon arrival in the United States, the
23 Army informed female veterans that they had per-
24 formed as civilians, not soldiers, even though opera-

1 tors had served in Army uniform in a theatre of war
2 surrounded by men who were similarly engaged.

3 (26) Despite the objections of General George
4 Squier, the top-ranking officer in the Signal Corps,
5 the Army denied Signal Corps women the veterans'
6 benefits granted to male soldiers and female nurses,
7 such as—

8 (A) hospitalization for disabilities incurred
9 in the line of duty;

10 (B) cash bonuses;

11 (C) soldiers' pensions;

12 (D) flags on their coffins; and

13 (E) the Victory Medals promised them in
14 France.

15 (27) For the next 60 years, female veterans, led
16 by Merle Egan from Montana, petitioned Congress
17 more than 50 times for their recognition. In 1977,
18 under the sponsorship of Senator Barry Goldwater,
19 Congress passed legislation to retroactively acknowl-
20 edge the military service of the Women's Airforce
21 Service Pilots (referred to in this section as
22 “WASPs”) of World War II and “the service of any
23 person in any other similarly situated group the
24 members of which rendered service to the Armed
25 Forces of the United States in a capacity considered

1 civilian employment or contractual service at the
2 time such service was rendered”.

3 (28) On November 23, 1977, President Jimmy
4 Carter signed the legislation described in paragraph
5 (27) into law as the GI Bill Improvement Act of
6 1977 (Public Law 95–202; 91 Stat. 1433).

7 (29) The Signal Corps telephone operators ap-
8 plied for, and were granted, status as veterans in
9 1979.

10 (30) Only 33 of the operators who had returned
11 home after the war were still alive to receive their
12 Victory Medals and official discharge papers, which
13 were finally awarded in 1979.

14 (31) One of the women, Olive Shaw from Mas-
15 sachusetts, returned to the United States after the
16 war, where she worked on the professional staff of
17 Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers. Shaw lived to
18 receive her honorable discharge and was the first
19 burial when the Massachusetts National Cemetery
20 opened on October 11, 1980. Shaw’s uniform is on
21 display at the National World War I Museum and
22 Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri.

23 (32) Upon receipt of her honorable discharge at
24 a ceremony in her home in Marine City, Michigan,
25 “Hello Girl” Oleda Joure Christides raised the paper

1 to her lips and kissed it. The only thing Christides
2 ever wanted from the Federal Government was a
3 flag on her coffin.

4 (33) On July 1, 2009, President Barack Obama
5 signed into law Public Law 111–40 (123 Stat.
6 1958), which awarded the WASPs the Congressional
7 Gold Medal for their service to the United States.

8 (34) For their role as pioneers who paved the
9 way for all women in uniform, and for service that
10 was essential to victory in World War I, the “Hello
11 Girls” merit similar recognition.

12 **SEC. 3. CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL.**

13 (a) AWARD AUTHORIZED.—The Speaker of the
14 House of Representatives and the President pro tempore
15 of the Senate shall make appropriate arrangements for the
16 award, on behalf of Congress, of a single gold medal of
17 appropriate design in honor of the female telephone opera-
18 tors of the Army Signal Corps (commonly known as the
19 “Hello Girls”), in recognition of those operators’—

20 (1) pioneering military service;

21 (2) devotion to duty; and

22 (3) 60-year struggle for—

23 (A) recognition as soldiers; and

24 (B) veterans’ benefits.

1 (b) DESIGN AND STRIKING.—For the purposes of the
2 award described in subsection (a), the Secretary of the
3 Treasury (referred to in this Act as the “Secretary”) shall
4 strike the gold medal with suitable emblems, devices, and
5 inscriptions, to be determined by the Secretary.

6 (c) SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—After the award of the gold
8 medal under subsection (a), the medal shall be given
9 to the Smithsonian Institution, where the medal
10 shall be available for display, as appropriate, and
11 made available for research.

12 (2) SENSE OF CONGRESS.—It is the sense of
13 Congress that the Smithsonian Institution should
14 make the gold medal received under paragraph (1)
15 available elsewhere, particularly at—

16 (A) appropriate locations associated with—

17 (i) the Army Signal Corps;

18 (ii) the Women in Military Service for
19 America Memorial;

20 (iii) the U.S. Army Women’s Museum;

21 and

22 (iv) the National World War I Mu-
23 seum and Memorial; and

24 (B) any other location determined appro-
25 priate by the Smithsonian Institution.

1 **SEC. 4. DUPLICATE MEDALS.**

2 Under such regulations as the Secretary may pre-
3 scribe, the Secretary may strike and sell duplicates in
4 bronze of the gold medal struck under section 3 at a price
5 sufficient to cover the costs of the medals, including labor,
6 materials, dies, use of machinery, and overhead expenses.

7 **SEC. 5. NATIONAL MEDALS.**

8 (a) NATIONAL MEDALS.—Medals struck under this
9 Act are national medals for purposes of chapter 51 of title
10 31, United States Code.

11 (b) NUMISMATIC ITEMS.—For purposes of section
12 5134 of title 31, United States Code, all medals struck
13 under this Act shall be considered to be numismatic items.

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