

"Hello Girls"

During WWI, General "Black Jack" Pershing advertised in all the major newspapers in America the need for female telephone operators. These telephone operators must meet certain criteria. They needed to speak French, have a college degree and be single. Over 7,000 women applied and 450 were selected. The women were recruited from the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T). The women received military and Signal Corps training. They trained in basic military radio procedures at Camp Franklin Maryland (now Fort Meade). After training, the women purchased their Army regulation uniform complete with "U.S." crests, Signal Corps crests, and "dog tags." Arm patches designating positions were issued. In the spring of 1918, the first thirty-three operators were on their way to Europe. They were issued gas masks and steel helmets. The operators voices were a welcome sound to the men who used the Signal Corps telephone system.

After the Armistice, and upon their return to the United States, the operators realized all Army regulations were worded in the "male" gender, so the women were denied veterans status. They were considered civilians working for the Army. This perplexed the women because they were required to wear regulation uniforms, they were sworn into service and had to follow all Army regulations. The Chief Telephone Operator, Grace Banker, even received the Distinguished Service Medal from Congress. For years legislation had been introduced into Congress but the bills were always buried in committee. It took one of the operators, Mearle Eagan Anderson, over fifty years of persistence to secure legislation to award the operators veteran's status. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed the bill giving the women their deserved recognition. The "Hello Girl" uniform on display was owned by Louise Ruffe, a Signal Corps telephone operator.

