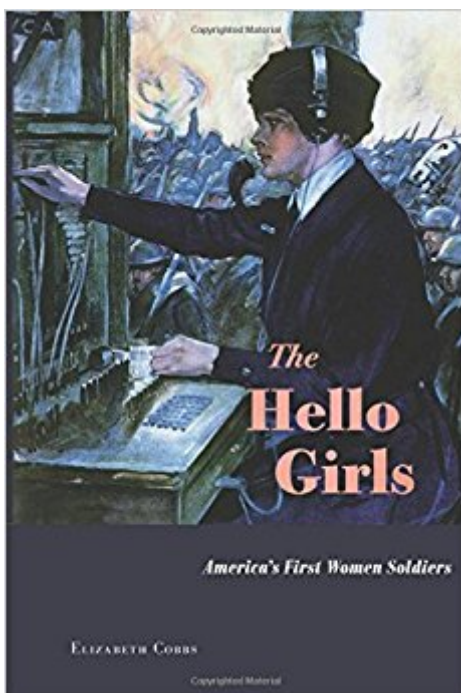


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# The Hello Girls: America's™ First Women Soldiers



## Synopsis

This is the story of how America's first women soldiers helped win World War I, earned the vote, and fought the U.S. Army. In 1918, the U.S. Army Signal Corps sent 223 women to France. They were masters of the latest technology: the telephone switchboard. General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, demanded female wire experts when he discovered that inexperienced doughboys were unable to keep him connected with troops under fire. Without communications for even an hour, the army would collapse. While suffragettes picketed the White House and President Woodrow Wilson struggled to persuade a segregationist Congress to give women of all races the vote, these competent and courageous young women swore the Army oath. Elizabeth Cobbs reveals the challenges they faced in a war zone where male soldiers welcomed, resented, wooed, mocked, saluted, and ultimately celebrated them. They received a baptism by fire when German troops pounded Paris with heavy artillery. Some followed Black Jack Pershing to battlefields where they served through shelling and bombardment. Grace Banker, their 25-year-old leader, won the Distinguished Service Medal. The army discharged the last Hello Girls in 1920, the same year Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment granting the ballot. When the operators sailed home, the army unexpectedly dismissed them without veterans' benefits. They began a sixty-year battle that a handful of survivors carried to triumph in 1979. With the help of the National Organization for Women, Senator Barry Goldwater, and a crusading Seattle attorney, they triumphed over the U.S. Army.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

What an eye-opener! *The Hello Girls* tells the lost story of the women who braved the war in Europe to provide essential communications between U.S. commanders and fighters in the field. Cobbs unearths the original letters and diaries of these forgotten heroines and weaves them into a fascinating narrative with energy and zest. (Cokie Roberts, author of *Capital Dames: The Civil War and the Women of Washington, 1848-1868*) Writing with panache and acumen, Cobbs tells the colorful story of the women who served in the Army's Signal Corps in World War I, while opening fresh perspectives on communications technology, the nature of modern warfare, the nation's treatment of veterans, and the never-ending struggle of women for their full rights as citizens. *The Hello Girls* turns a good tale into a great tool for understanding some of history's grandest themes. (David M. Kennedy, author of *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*) This splendidly written book reveals the bravery and grit of the nation's first women soldiers. During World War I, they were deployed to France, only to be denied recognition as veterans upon return. Their remarkable stories come alive in Cobbs's wonderfully absorbing narrative as does the world of contradictions in which they lived and served. (Ellen Fitzpatrick, author of *The Highest Glass Ceiling: Women's Quest for the American Presidency*) In an informative history of women's military work, Cobbs focuses on more than 200 telephone operators who supported combat soldiers in Europe soon after the United States entered the war in 1917. | A fresh, well-researched contribution to military and gender history. (Kirkus Reviews 2017-02-01) Cobbs shines a spotlight on the unique contributions of a group of remarkable American women, in the spirit of *Hidden Figures* (2016), in a book that belongs in every American-history collection. (Carolyn Mulac Booklist 2017-02-15) Cobbs shines a new light on the history of suffrage and women's rights in the United States, using as a lens the servicewomen enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps during World War I. | Cobbs weaves the trials and triumphs of America's first female soldiers (although they wouldn't win the right to claim that distinction until 1979) with the fight for women's rights and the rising waves of feminism. (Chad E. Statler Library Journal (starred review) 2017-02-15) In the crisply written *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers*, Elizabeth Cobbs details exactly what was asked of these women during the war, and reveals, with an authoritative, dispassionate, this-was-some-self-evident-nonsense lucidity, the dismaying extent to which their country failed them when it was over. | Smartly, she also walks us through the sundry and simultaneous technical demands of switchboard operating, noting that women could connect five calls in the time it took a man to complete one. Cobbs is particularly good at spotlighting how closely the service of military women like the Hello Girls was tied to the success of the suffrage movement. (Glen Weldon NPR 2017-04-06) Utterly delightful. | It's a little-known side-story of the war, but it's not a little story:

In Cobbs's skillful handling, it becomes a big, multilayered tale of courage and long-delayed justice. Cobbs very adroitly weaves the story of the Signal Corps into that larger story of American women fighting for the right to vote, but it's the warm, fascinating job she does bringing her cast of The Hello Girls to life that gives this book its memorable charisma. [These women] fought for years to gain the recognition they deserved as the forerunners of all women serving in the U.S. armed forces. This terrific book pays them a long-warranted tribute. (Steve Donoghue Christian Science Monitor 2017-04-13) Elizabeth Cobbs draws on a range of official documents, as well as letters and diaries, to tell the fascinating story of the forgotten women telephone operators who were a critical part of the war effort. [The Hello Girls makes vividly visible a group of women who, until now, have been unjustly hidden. (June Purvis Times Higher Education 2017-04-20)] This engaging history crackles with admiration for the women who served in the U.S. Army Signal Corps during the First World War, becoming the country's first female soldiers. Operating switchboards in France, they juggled constantly shifting lists of codes and connections, worked fast amid artillery blasts, and mastered the "genteel diplomacy" needed to communicate with officials in French as well as English. Their technical skill was matched by what one woman called the "great, unquenchable, patriotic desire to do my bit." Cobbs intercuts front-line activities with political battles on the home front: the women returned from victory to an America that did not yet grant them the right to vote. (New Yorker 2017-07-03)

Elizabeth Cobbs is Melburn G. Glasscock Chair in American History at Texas A&M University and a Research Fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

A daringly and mindful story of how the great need for women was recognized by General Pershing and the/his persuasion of President Wilson to enlist them into the Army Signal Corps. However their contribution was not appreciatively noted until long after the war due to what was the status of women of that era. Though you can't change history, you can dictate the future with the learned past; which we have finally done herein.

Lovely and interesting read.

Very interesting book.

This book is an easy read, a good summary of story of how women came to serve in the Army's

Signal Corps during WWI. It gives a little background on the lives of some of the women who served in the Signal Corps, the challenges they faced both from family/society at large and from the army in particular as they faced gender stereotypes, political resistance, and sexism--their skills were needed, but they were the last thing politicians and the army wanted. They served willingly, many wanted to go to the front, but when they returned home, the army denied that they had served, denied them benefits, healthcare, and more. It took another 60 years, and filing lawsuits, to finally get the recognition, in many cases posthumous, they deserved. The author spent a fair amount of the book discussing the fight over enfranchising women, which came after the war ended. She also detailed the differences between how the army and the navy handled female recruits (the army not wanting them until they absolutely required them, and even then denying they were in the military, while the navy paid female yeomen the same as male yeomen, gave them the same rank, and didn't deny their service after the war). While this is not the most in depth book I've read about the war, it is a good introduction for those who want to know more about the various roles women played during it. I am a little confused by the link posted by indicating that this book is a number one seller in the category of books about women during the American Civil War. That is wrong; the Civil War and WWI are not the same war, and the telephone had not been invented when the Civil War was raging.

I was fortunate to meet Ms. Cobbs and be introduced to her book at an author event near where I live. I had never heard of the Hello Girls and found the subject matter very intriguing. Ms. Cobbs does an excellent job of explaining her incredibly thorough research into this topic. This should be required reading for anyone interested in women's studies and/or World War I history (I don't know why has it as the number one book for the U.S. Civil War since this is really a World War I story). An important story that needed to be told. Highly recommended.

With **THE HELLO GIRLS: AMERICA'S FIRST WOMEN SOLDIERS**, Elizabeth Cobbs has made a vital and valuable addition to the history of women's suffrage. But more particularly she has given us an intimate look at a little-known band of pioneers in the feminist movement: the brave women who manned the switchboards for the AEF in Europe during the First World War. When the call went out in 1917 for bilingual (English-French) telephone operators to be mobilized, trained and shipped overseas, women responded in the thousands, a testament to their willingness to "do their bit" in the war. Only a few hundred were ultimately chosen and sent to France, to work under the leadership of General John "Black Jack" Pershing, and they performed admirably under difficult and often

primitive conditions. And all of this was taking place against a backdrop of women marching in protest back home, lobbying for women's voting rights, a controversial issue, which President Wilson finally came around to support. Cobbs puts the suffrage issue front and center, effectively using her narrative of the service and sacrifices of the "Hello Girls" to do this - "Women used the conflict to achieve their long-standing demand for full citizenship. Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, Sweden and ten other countries enfranchised females before America. The nation accustomed to congratulating itself as the vanguard of liberal democracy brought up the rear." But even without this "full citizenship," women volunteered for service overseas, some as young as 16 (lying about their age), others in their 30s, mostly single, but a few married. They came from all over the country to New York City, where they were "kitted up" (at their own expense), and given some rudimentary training in military customs, drilling "atop the AT&T building at 195 Broadway." But there was much confusion and disagreement about women's actual status within the military. Eventually they were equated to "cadets" - not quite officers, but a bit higher than draftees and enlisted men. On their voyage across the Atlantic (and, later, the English Channel), their convoys braved prowling German submarines, and their numbers - and those of the dough boys also on board these troop ships - were thinned by outbreaks of influenza, for which sometimes the ships were quarantined for weeks once they reached port. And, once "in-country," they had to walk a fine line as representatives of their sex in a world full of men. Usually appreciated, but often resented, these women persevered and held their heads up, doing their jobs. They also managed to bond with each other and have some fun in their off-duty time. Merle Egan's friends sent one another into paroxysms of laughter whenever they recalled a YWCA hostess admonishing them to 'be sure you wear your brassiere' at army dances in France. 'After that,' Egan later wrote, 'whenever we had a date someone would say, 'Are you wearing your brassiere?'' Painstakingly researched and assiduously annotated, Cobbs used diaries and letters, as well as old newspaper articles, and government records and archives to bring to life the stories of these scores of women. A few - Grace Banker, Inez Crittenden, Berthe Hunt and the LeBreton sisters - came to the fore. But it was Merle Egan (Anderson), from Helena, Montana, who saw their story through to the very end, fighting for decades after the war to have these women fully recognized for their valiant efforts. Although the narrative may be occasionally a bit dry and slow-moving - all those notes - THE HELLO GIRLS will do much for the story of women's equal rights. In fact, it deserves to be included in supplemental reading lists for Women's Studies courses. Highly recommended. - Tim Bazzett, author of the memoir, BOOKLOVER

A lucid, well-documented history of an early attempt at utilizing woman for critical roles in the military. Their personal stories are embedded nicely into the larger struggle for woman's suffrage. Success in that arena did not result in any serious recognition of the role of the "Hello Girls" during WW I. Subsequent efforts after the war produced similar paltry results. A century later, recognition for the female side of our race as equals continues to be a strong need in our society.

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