

ESSAY WRITTEN FOR THE DOUGHBOY FOUNDATION IN SUPPORT OF THE WORLD WAR MEMORIAL

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN – THE “HELLO GIRLS.”

Daniel J. Basta

Every woman who has been in uniform, gave out coffee and donuts at the front, flown an airplane, or served in some capacity in the American Military owes a debt to a small number of courageous and clever women who came forward to serve their country in the Great War to end all wars. Every American movement and action on the battle fields of France felt their presence. They were the first women to serve in the U.S. Army and were little known except as a voice – “Hello” – at the end of a wire. These women filled the gap in the little known and evolving science of communications from the Headquarters of “Blackjack” Pershing, commanding the American Army to the trenches and dugouts on the Western Front. They had to not only be smart, but also fluent in French and sometimes German, stand duty 24 hours a day and risk all if necessary. Some of them died and some were wounded. There were only 217 of these women in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. When the war ended, and millions of Americans came home or left the Service these women may have been veterans but were overlooked. They had no individual battle honors to be celebrated, made no headlines, and were imbedded in many units and not a recognized unit of their own. In the end they were so relatively few that they were easily forgotten, as was their contribution to victory.

It was not anyone's fault they were overlooked, as the War was quickly put behind us and faded into the past. The next decade brought the Great Depression. The decade after that World War II, and the decade after that Korea, and after that Vietnam, and so on. The "Hello Girls" were indeed forgotten among the tens of millions of American Veterans. So forgotten were they, that they did not receive the veterans benefits they had earned in France until 1978 – many had passed by then – and then only by an act of Congress.

Today as we look back over our history and see it in a different light there are moments in time and individuals which were either turning points or influencers that could not be perceived at the time. As we seek to understand how America has evolved it is important that we especially shine a bright light on those moments in time and individuals. The Great War was a defining moment of the American Nation that still affects us today, in many ways that we are still struggling to better understand. The 217 young women who went to France in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, helped to set the stage for how women would eventually be integrated into the American Military. It is also fair to say that they were part of the great American Suffragette movement at a time which changed forever the role of women in American Society.

Probably more than at any time since the Hello Girls returned from France it is important that we recognize them, thereby showing how small numbers of committed individuals in our military or elsewhere can play a profound role in the continuing experience of American Democracy. It is time to fully recognize and celebrate the service

of these intrepid woman and to demonstrate our commitment to everyone like them who's contributions in their own way move us forward. They are as important today as the Hello Girls were more than 100 years ago.