

# How an Attorney Connected the Hello Girls to Overdue Justice

Chief Judge Ann Bailey Smith

It is estimated that approximately 25,000 American women assisted in the war effort in Europe during World War I. Many of these women served as nurses, but some drove ambulances, did clerical work, served as entertainers, worked in the canteens; but the women that I want to focus on are the ones who served as telephone operators in France.

The telephone was a useful, necessary tool for World War I military operations. It allowed communication over a large battlefield and with allied units throughout France. The French telephone system, however, was in ruins after three years of war, so it was virtually useless to the American military. As a result, the United States Army, alongside employees of the Bell Telephone Company, constructed its own telephone system in France. Initially, the Army was reluctant for women to travel to France to serve as telephone operators and believed that men could handle this job; the Army soon came to the realization that it was wrong. In the United States, 99% of the telephone switchboard operators were women.

American soldiers stationed in France did not want to be assigned as a telephone operator; those who were turned out to not be proficient at connecting calls and most did not speak French, which was necessary to communicate with the French military. So, the Army relented and General John Pershing sent an official request to Washington, D.C., on November 8, 1917 for women telephone operators who were fluent in both English and French. Advertisements were published and thousands of women applied, eager to assist in the war effort. Out of these thousands, 223 women were chosen and the first group arrived in France in March 1918. The improvement in telephone communication was seen immediately. With French telephone operators who struggled with the English language, a single call took 40-60 seconds to connect. The American women operators were trained to handle 300 calls per hour.

Before the American telephone operators shipped out for France, they swore an oath to the Constitution, received some basic training, were fitted for their uniforms and assembled

their kits which included iodine, sewing tools, gloves and bloomers. The Army required that they wear uniforms, but the women had to pay for them, unlike the men who served. The cost was approximately \$300, which was an astronomical amount in 1918. Since most women could not possibly pay this, the cost of the uniform was deducted in increments from their paychecks.

The initial group of women who arrived in Paris had already been put to the test when, during their train trip across Paris, they had to repeatedly stop to avoid German air raids. And their first night in Paris ended with them sleeping on cots in the basement of the hotel where they were staying due to bombings nearby. During the summer of 1918 the telephone operators found themselves not only connecting calls but also translating sensitive information regarding the location of troops, the location of supplies and even logistics between commanders. In other words, their contributions were invaluable to the war effort. They were known as the "Hello Girls." They remained in France until the war ended in November 1918.

While you may find this information interesting (I certainly did), you may also be wondering what, if any, relevance this has to us in the legal community. The Hello Girls were told that they were part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) and, as such, would be able to receive military benefits, including a pension. However, at the end of their service, they were informed that they were contract employees and thus not eligible for military benefits. The Hello Girls had never signed a contract with the United States or with the Army yet they were denied over and over again those benefits to which they believed they were entitled for their service to their country. Then, finally, in 1978 one of the Hello Girls with the assistance of an attorney, Mark Hough, convinced Congress to recognize the

service of the Hello Girls, almost 50 years after their return from France. It took 53 attempts in 49 years for the Hello Girls to attain veteran status. Mr. Hough persuasively argued that the Army had treated these women

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as members of the military while they served in Europe and the Army required the Hello Girls to wear military uniforms and insignia which it would have been illegal for them to do in this context if they weren't, in

fact, service members. The few surviving members of the Hello Girls received their official army discharges in 1979.

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Now, in local news, from October 20-23, the Circuit Judges attended their judicial college in Bowling Green, Kentucky. We enjoyed our time away from the courthouse and spending time with each other. There were a number of informative sessions presented by circuit judges throughout the state and our own

Judge Annie O'Connell gave a presentation on issuing search warrants; I appreciate her willingness to share her expertise with judges around Kentucky.

I had the opportunity on October 30 to attend the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Jefferson County Public Law Library's Moot Court Courtroom which is equipped with the JAVS system found in our trial courts. The law library is located at 514 W. Liberty Street (where the Commonwealth Attorney's Office is located) on the second floor. This moot courtroom is available for attorneys to use to practice for trials or oral arguments and is a real asset to our legal community. The librarian and her staff are very welcoming and look forward to attorneys stopping by to see the newest improvement to the law library.

Also, Judge Tracy Davis who presides in Circuit 5 was honored at the November 1, 2024 Women Lawyers Association of Jefferson County annual luncheon. Congratulations, Judge Davis.

Chief Judge Ann Bailey Smith presides in Division 13 of Jefferson Circuit Court. ■



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