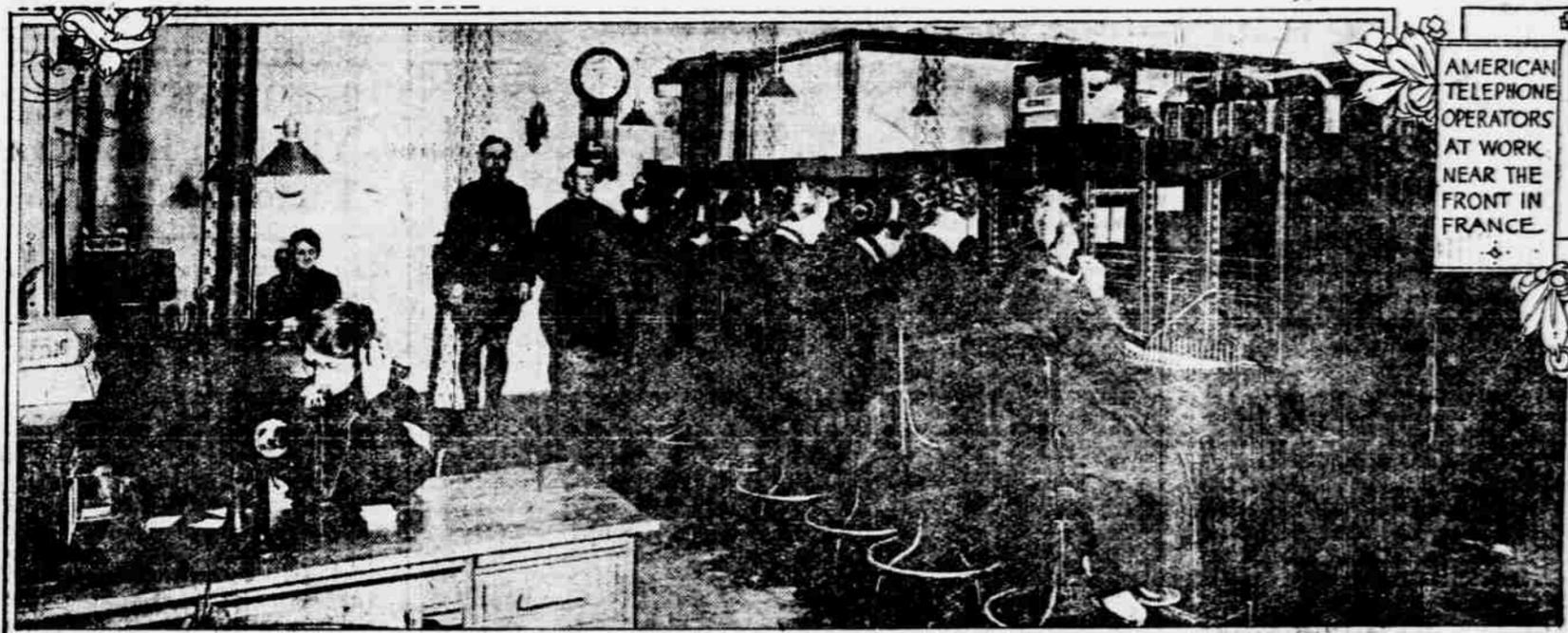


# Brave Girl Soldiers of the Switchboard



AMERICAN TELEPHONE OPERATORS AT WORK NEAR THE FRONT IN FRANCE.

By JOHN WALKER HARRINGTON.

**C**ENTRAL is helping win American victories overseas. She of the smiling voice has been aiding Gen. Pershing for months, and has been amazing all France by the work of her agile fingers and the rapid volleying of her French.

The men operators have been in front line trenches and dugouts, but the great wire exchanges are in charge of young women from the United States. They are the pick of those keen witted maids of the switchboard upon whose quickness and dexterity the business men of New York, Chicago, Boston and Philadelphia depended for carrying on transactions in the hurry of commercial life. Just as they once helped out the stock market and the wheat pit, so now they are plugging for our military success.

Long before the United States entered the war a Telephone Reserve Corps was formed in this country, under the direction of Col. John J. Carty, chief engineer of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, who is now in charge of wire communications with the American Expeditionary Forces in France. The men volunteers were drilled as infantry and then put through intensive technical training for military work. Some of them went over with Gen. Pershing on the first ship, along with his staff. As soon as they landed they started to work out a system of communication, and they have been in the thick of fighting ever since.

## Prove Themselves Brave Near Front.

For plates which were not directly exposed to gunfire, or at least were not supposed to be, the girl operators were sent by hundreds! Many of them have heard the roar of artillery and the whir of the Hun air bombers, but what does an American hello girl care for that! Hardly a day passes, even in piping times of peace, but that we read of the telephone heroines. They stay at their posts in burning buildings, they spread the news to countryside villages and farms when dams burst and they serve like good soldiers in perils that would daunt the stoutest hearts.

While the girl soldiers of the switchboard are waiting for their call on this side of the Atlantic they are drilled in all the technique which they will need in emergency work. Then they are sent to the cantonments to work in central offices under military conditions which are much the same as those which they will find in France. Up to the time they step aboard the transports they are going from one large central office to another, operating wherever there are extraordinary difficulties.

They are soldiers just as much as the men in khaki on the firing line, and they wear a uniform. Perhaps you have seen some of them in the streets just before they sailed from here. Their skirts and blouses are of a dark navy blue, their hats, which are wide brimmed and worn exactly straight, have the orange and white cord of the Signal Corps, to which they belong, and their brass buttons are duly marked for the U. S. A.

On the right sleeve of the operators of the first class is a white brassard on which is the blue outline design of a telephone mouthpiece. The supervisor, who has the rating of a platoon sergeant, wears the same emblem with a wreath around it. "Top," that is, the chief operator, has a wreath, a transmitter and flashes of blue lightning shooting around above it. "Top"

is always in charge of a unit, which may consist of from thirty to fifty operators.

As messages from the front are transmitted in both English and French, no operator left here who was not familiar with both languages. It is required that they pass from one tongue to the other "unconsciously," and some of them can also put in a little Portuguese for good measure. The official organ of our forces "over there," the *Stars and Stripes*, says of the first unit which arrived on the soil of France that the girls were equally at home with "Voulez-vous me donner le Capitaine Blanc" and "Lemme speaka Cap'n Blank, please." They can answer "Oui, mon Commandant, attendez un moment," or "Yes, Major, just wait a minute, please."

Miss Georgette Sehar of Unit No. 3 wrote in a recent letter that although there are plenty of bombardments a person gets used to them, and it's the best thing in anticipation to practise hard on saying your numbers in French and to learn to talk rapidly so as not to be outdone by the barrage.

Life has its compensations for the daughters of the hello over there, because they are well cared for and excellently chaperoned. The Government pays salaries of \$60, \$72 and \$120 a month, according to whether or not the switchboard soldier is operator, supervisor or chief operator. In addition there is a monthly allowance or commutation of \$4 a day for the first thirty days in service or until the recruit leaves the United States, if before that limit.

After thirty days the monthly allowances in addition to pay are \$30 for lodging, \$24 for food and \$6 for light and heat. If the living expenses are met by the Government these allowances are not granted. All the necessary expenses are refunded. It is the intention of the Government that the pay shall be free and clear above all costs.

## All Are 100 Per Cent. American.

Doing their bit and their all is the aim which is uppermost in the minds of the young women of the white brassard. They are 100 per cent. American, and those whose parents were foreign born are as eager as the native stock to do their utmost for the cause of democracy. All of them have given a ringing response to the question which is put to them, "Why do you want to go to France?"

One young woman, timid, unassuming in manner, when she was asked that question rose quickly to her feet and brought both fists down on the table in front of the astonished official.

"You ask me that?" she demanded. "You ask me why I want to go to France after what I have told you the Germans have done to my home and family? I would go a thousand times, even though I knew the day I landed in France would be my last!"

She was an Alsatian, and in the history of her people there is a story of wrongs dating back half a century.

"To fight and win the war," some of the fair switchboard soldiers say when the question, "Why are you here?" is asked of them.

In the first unit was a girl of English birth who had reached here from Australia by way of San Francisco. When some one asked her if she was not afraid of being so near the front she laughed. She had been through eleven Zeppelin raids in England and had been a passenger twice through submarine danger zones. What did she care! She had worked for a while

in an American munitions plant and had helped recruit for the United States Navy as a yeowoman, but she wanted more active service, and therefore she was glad of the chance to get back to the switchboard.

What the girls of the Signal Corps are undergoing on the other side is shown in many a letter received at their home offices.

"Sometimes," writes Miss Laurene Peebin, lately of San Francisco and now of Paris, "we hear the cannon roar, for the dear enemy likes to bombard us with big Bertha by day and give us air raids at night. Neither of these does any good in the war game. They succeed sometimes in killing women and children and old men, but that is all.

"We object to the night attacks because they disturb our slumbers. The only reason they do it is to weaken our morale. The French and the Americans are too much alike for that and become determined to see the thing through to the end. As our French friends say, 'On les aura,' and we will have them.

"Our men are wonders, filling the breaches everywhere and preferring death to retreat. We feel sad when we see the ambulances filled with wounded, but also we are mighty proud of our boys.

## Filled Ambulances With Refugees.

"Every one is just fine, and I wish that you could hear the stories that we hear. A French woman told me with tears in eyes how the 'chers Americains' had filled the ambulances and the autos with women and children in order to save them from the hands of the Germans who had invaded the city. Isn't that enough to make you proud of the boys?"

"What do you think?" to quote from a letter Miss Grace D. Banker of New York, chief operator. "I am the proud possessor of a Boche helmet!"

"Of course if I could have had a hand in the owner's capture I would be prouder. It was given to me by an Australian Captain who had carried it around ever since Vimy Ridge.

"Do you know that I sometimes think that the many lands and peoples of this world will not seem half so far removed from one another after this war! Constant contact with the soldiers of the Allies and their colonies makes one realize that, after all, there isn't such a great difference between us."

"You have no idea," another sends word, "how proud I am of being over here. When I think how little I knew about people or work I am surprised that I am here. My work before all!"

"First of all, wonder of wonders, our commander in chief came to pay us an informal visit last Saturday. He stayed twenty or twenty-five minutes and during most of that time I was pinching myself to see whether I was really awake or not.

"He is the most wonderful man in every respect. He wasn't a bit distant or formal, but shook hands with all of us, and asked us individually what part of the States we came from and how we liked it, &c. He went all over the house, into every room, escorted by his staff, and it was a veritable procession, for we girls escorted them through.

"When they left we all rushed to the windows. Then all at once everybody began to talk and all through dinner and way into the evening our house was truly as the Tower of Babel must have been."

And here is another glimpse of the way a switchboard soldier may find recreation while off duty. It is from Miss Suzanne

Prevot of New York, who says that France is very much like the tales one reads of it in the old story books, with its chateaux, centuries-old.

How life fares in the neighborhood of American headquarters in France is conveyed by the following letter from one of the young persons who say "Number, please."

"Beginning next week we shall have to work all day and every day, but for the present some of us have either the afternoon or the morning off. We take long walks, as any exercise must be snatched at, seeing that we sit all day.

"If you were only here to see the beauty of it all with me! But you know this mountainous country and can appreciate it, too, for you are here in spirit I know.

"The air is just as pure as it can be, and the sky on a clear day is the bluest of blues. This section is so beautiful! I do hope that I will be able to stay here.

"This is the General Headquarters of the American Army, and every day, going to and from work, I pass the chateau where Gen. Pershing resides. The house is ever guarded and no one stands straighter or salutes with more snap than that sentinel.

"In fact, our boys are just as fine as they can be. I tell you one must come over here to appreciate them. Our very bosom swells with pride, I can tell you. They are mighty glad to see us, too, and cannot do enough for us. We feel like one tremendous family. There is nothing finer, I think, than this feeling of the companionship of comrades. I am awfully glad I came because I never knew before how many nice people there were in the world."

## Peek at Great Personages.

"We are very excited," to slip out a bit from another letter from Miss Fresnel, "occasionally because some great personage or other telephones, and the girl who puts the call through is very, very proud and excites the envy of the other operators. Sometimes some great man comes into our office and we sit up just as straight as can be and look strictly business, but it's awfully hard not to turn around and get just a little peep at him.

"Occasionally we see men coming from the front. Then, too, we are right next to a base hospital, and the general nature of the traffic accordingly brings home to us what is going on.

"But the thing that impresses me most at times is the horses. If you could see those wretched beasts! They are evidently here to recuperate—just strings and strings of them led by French soldiers. Once they must have been fine animals. They all seem to be young, but they are wrecks—absolute wrecks.

"That and occasional wounded being rushed to and from the hospital are the only things we see which bring home poignantly that a war is going on. Some days, too, when we have a day off and happen to pass a railroad and see a troop train, we remember, but otherwise we do our work and eat and sleep in a normal way.

"I hardly imagine though that we are going to stay here always. I know that some of us are going to be moved to other places in this section. Of course we know not when nor where."

These are just a few words along the way from some of the young women who are at the switchboards at Gen. Pershing's headquarters on lines of communication or in Paris.