

Voiceover: This program is sponsored by The United States World War One Centennial Commission.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with Elizabeth Cobbs discussing her book *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers*. I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. This event is sponsored by The United States World War One Centennial Commission. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). In 1918 America was a nation full of contradictions, having just joined a war to fight for freedom and democracy in Europe. At home the United States government passed the Espionage Act and arrested scores of pacifists, German Americans, and socialists who had been labeled a threat to the war effort. And while suffragettes picketed in front of the White House demanding the right to vote, the Army Signal Corps sent 223 women to France to aid General John Pershing's American Expeditionary Force with their vital technological expertise. These Hello Girls were responsible for managing the telephone switchboards for the American Expeditionary Force and keeping essential communications between the vast army open and at the ready during the First World War. In her book *The Hello Girls* Elizabeth Cobbs reveals how these women and their unique service reflected the great changes facing America and the world more broadly. They were experts in a new technology, the telephone. This and other new innovations, from airplanes and chemical weapons to trucks and machine guns, distinguish WWI as the first global modern war. They were also America's first women soldiers, having taken the oath as members of the Army Signal Corps. They advanced military objectives just as much as tank operators or machine gunners. A select group even traveled with General Pershing in the field, their switchboards shaking from the bombardment during the Battle of St. Mihiel. Their military service challenged common beliefs about what women could or should do. Yet as Cobbs points out, their victory in the field was partial. When they returned to the United States in 1920 the Federal government would not acknowledge their service as soldiers, denying them bonuses, victory medals, and military honors at their funerals. Yet soldiers they were, and the army recognized them as such in 1979. Cobbs expertly draws together military, political, and women's history to tell a complex story about the United States stepped out onto the world stage and into what came to be known as the American Century. By exploring the unique story of these courageous women, Elizabeth Cobbs reveals an America in flux, grappling with new technologies and new roles for women, struggling to navigate a changing world in order to become the modern nation we know today. Elizabeth Cobbs is the author of seven books and has written for the New York Times, Jerusalem Post, China Daily Forum, Los Angeles Times, San Diego Union, and Reuters. Her first documentary film *American Umpire* debuted on public television in 2016. Cobbs has served on the Historical Advisory Committee of the US State Department and the jury for the Pulitzer Prize in History. She holds the Melbern Glasscock chair in American History at Texas A&M University and is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Elizabeth Cobbs to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.

(Applause)

Cobbs: Well, thank you so much for being here tonight. I really appreciate it. And thank you so much to the Pritzker Museum for inviting me. It's just great to be in Chicago, and whenever I travel around the country telling this story, one of the things I always think about is the particular woman from that place or that town who participated in this great event of WWI. There was one here in Chicago named Minnie Goldman. She was one of the few Jewish women in the Women's Signal Corps. And I always remember Minnie because she fought--her first challenge was to get in the thing. And they thought, "Well, if she's Jewish maybe that means she's German," and so there was a whole question of loyalty. So anyway it's nice to be here. I'm honoring Minnie Goldman as well as really enjoying meeting all of you. So what this story is about was, a few years ago I thought I'd like to write a book on WWI. And I mean I teach WWI, I teach WWII, I teach American foreign relations, and yet I think in my own mind WWI was always a little vague. What were the issues? Why was it so important? What made it so epic? And I think as Americans because we're so familiar with WWII that we think, well, there's one, then there's two, and we can count so we get the relevance but we lose track of what the real signaled, the central meaning is of the conflict. And I think to sort of warm it all up, I think when we think of WWI it's important to not think that we're honoring it or commemorating it, it's more that we're remembering this thing that was so central in human history, this war that in a way gave us the twentieth century. It was a terrible war. To get a sense of this the British in WWI lost three times more men in combat in WWI than in WWII. One of the British officers at that time was a man who later went on to become a famous writer, J.R.R. Tolkien. And he was a signal corps officer in France. And when he wanted to write later about what the land of Mordor was like, he imagined--he remembered the landscapes of France, these places that were so burned over, so decimated, so chewed up, that it could only--terrible things could have only happened there. And so WWI is an event that was an awful event that at the same time, as I said, it sort of tips us into the twentieth century. And in three ways, 'cause everything comes in three. (Laughs) That's the way it is when you're a lecturer, right, everything comes in three. But in this case it's very fitting. WWI is the first time that we as humans really see the sharp side of the sword of technology. These wonderful inventions that typify the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, all the fabulous things that are invented, and suddenly it becomes clear that that technology can utterly destroy us. And that in a way is the twentieth century, right? That's the beginning of that. It's also the beginning of an epic change in the way we humans organize our governments. At the start of the twentieth century before WWI there are a few dozen countries in the world. Most of them, the really big ones, the important ones are these giant empires: the Ottoman Empire, the Austro Hungarian Empire, the British Empire, and the list goes on. And that changes. WWI not only shatters three of the biggest empires, but it sends cracks under the others like the British and the French. And so by the end of the twentieth century we have a world of 200 nation states after centuries or millennia of humans organizing themselves in empires. So part of what happens is that democracy spreads, and people begin to demand their own countries. And within countries, people who didn't have a voice begin to say, well, I don't want to say "Me too," but in a way they're saying why not us? Why not women? Why don't various have a voice? And so that's the other thing, is that not only is it a technological war, but it also changes human government. But it's also in a way the beginning of the gender revolution that we're all still a part of today that typifies the twentieth century. Because women became soldiers before they became voters. And so what I'd like to do and then start sketching out for you what I learned in writing this book. I'd like to tell you how the women's suffrage movement wrapped into the WWI, how suffrage spread all across the world, and in fact the odd curiosity of this is that the United States was one of the last to give women the vote. That demand had been made

first here in the United States, and twenty countries gave the vote to women before the US to an important extent because of WWI. So I'd like to wrap those things together and tell you how that all happened. So when we look at WWI to begin with to talk about women's suffrage, the run-up to the war was this period where there had been--for decades, people had demanded the vote for women. I mean, seventy years. This has not been a flash in the pan kind of thing. Women had advocated for the right to vote, and yet, as one of them said, and this woman was the daughter of Harriot--pardon me, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was the sidekick, the partner friend of Susan B. Anthony, and Harriot Stanton Blatch was her name. And she said--her mother was by this time gone, and she was a middle-aged woman with children, and she said, "We felt we were in a rut that just got deeper every year." And so this thing they kept asking for and could never get. This particular picture is of Emmeline Pankhurst who was the head of the British suffragist movement, one of the most flamboyant and risk-taking people in it. She was the person who really initiated the idea of civil disobedience and the cause of women's suffrage, and so she was arrested by the police, and she broke windows, and they actually like Paris put bombs in small post boxes on the street, the kind you put your letter into, to try to advocate in a more serious way for women's suffrage, which up to that point just seemed to be as I said kind of getting nowhere. Now actually the British were actually more militant than the Americans were, even though the cause had kind of started in the United States. The British really, you know, took it into the streets, and Americans came to copy them and in fact the first really major American civil disobedience took place at the inaugural of Woodrow Wilson when there was a kind of first women's march on Washington. And this took place right the day before Woodrow Wilson was to be inaugurated. And apparently by the way he got to Union Station, and the place was swarming, there are people everywhere, and he thought, "Oh my gosh, they're all here to see me inaugurated tomorrow." Oh, no no no, they're all here for the women's march. Because Woodrow Wilson had made plain that he did not support the vote for women. And so it was just this kind of private creepiness that he felt about the idea of women voting. And in fact for the longest time there had been two central arguments about why women shouldn't vote. One of which was if women had the vote they would become less womanly. There was something kind of unnatural about it. And in fact Woodrow Wilson said that when he saw a woman speaking in public, like this, that it gave him kind of a chilled, scandalized feeling about it, like something really gauche just happened. And even though he had been a faculty at Bryn Mawr College, the women's college, he felt that women really were not capable of being in government. So the idea that it was unwomanly. And then the other idea against women's suffrage was that the vote represented the ability to put the decision of your country into action, the ability to defend your country and that government in a sense is a kind of force. And if you have people in government who can't exercise physical force, well then government itself loses the ability to really create a defense for the whole country. So the idea was at the start of the twentieth century, this isn't the time to bring swooning damsels into government, right? This is a competitive nation state, and so therefore let women stay home. And so women however felt that the time had come. So the women's march on Washington was followed by American forms of civil disobedience, such as by Doris Stevens, who was a woman--one of the best, if you ever get a chance, you want to read something original on this subject, read her *Jailed for Freedom*. She wrote about her experiences going to jail, going to prison, in defense of the right for women to vote. There she is at the advanced age of fifty-six getting out of what was called the ambulance, which brought her back from the hospital after undergoing a hunger strike. So this is where the women's suffrage was sort of before the war. There was a growing militancy, and yet from the highest levels of government there was still this sense of this

would be wrong, and this would harm our nation, and women should stay home. So that's the eve of WWI. Now this brings us into how technology begins to change all that. And isn't it interesting even in our own lives how technology changes us, we change technology, but technology comes back and changes our behavior, too. And when the war first broke out, one of the things that was really clear when Americans first got engaged in the war, late in the war, April of 1917, the United States had very little war-making capacity. Frankly we had almost none. The United States had been largely a neutral nation for most of its history following George Washington's great rule, which was to stay out of other country's affairs. Have no permanent alliances. I know that sounds so quaint now, so different, and it is different from today. So the result of that was the United States really had no technology for making war, and as General Pershing who headed American Forces later said, we relied on French guns and British arms all the way through the war. Even vehicles and planes and such things. The only thing the Americans were actually really good at this time was mass communications. And so that was the one thing we were particularly good at. And this particular photograph, which shows a WWI recruiting poster to get people into what was known as the signal corps. The signal corps was and is that branch of the US Army, which is responsible for communications. Now you'll see in this poster, it looks like, wow, radio is the new thing, right. Radio is the big thing; it must be that's the newest technology. Actually radio at this time was not as important as the telephone. Why? Radio at that time still did not yet carry voices, so you could never hear a podcast. The radios only carried essentially Morse code, and so it required somebody to translate the Morse code and deliver the message. The other problem with radio is that it wasn't secure. It was wireless. So anybody nearby could not only intercept the messages, but if they could, even if they couldn't decode them they could tell where something was being beamed from. And they'd just go bomb that place. If it seemed like a lot of messages coming out of one place; maybe it's headquarters. So it was an insecure form of communication. And the other problem was that radio was just really awkward. It took three mules to drag a radio set into the field. Now that's utterly different from the telephone because the telephone was something that pretty much was used by all the belligerents for the reason that it was much more secure. You had to tap and find and tap an actual line to get into a telephone communication. Telephones actually could be-- the wire could be put on a spindle, and you could actually run it out across the field. So it was very quick and even a child could use it because you could communicate instantly with who's ever on the phone. I use this gesture partly, because look at the man on the far right. This is a German in a German trench. What's he doing? He's on the telephone. So we make this symbol because we know what that means. We're on the phone. The Japanese were also engaged in the war, and what is the man on the far right doing? He's on the phone, too. Because in WWI every battlefield communication was delivered, or nearly every battlefield communication, was by telephone. And this form of mass communications was the one form of mass communications at which the United States was really cracker jack. Not only had telephones been invented here, but AT&T, Bell Telephone--Alexander Graham Bell--was continuously improving upon those technologies to the point where when a British general in France used an American phone, he said, "Oh my gosh, they could recognize my voice in London." Because normally the transmissions would get so crackly and broken up over distance with the more crude telephones that voices would be unrecognizable. So this was an incredibly important form of technology because it was more secure. If you could get it right out there and you could communicate easily. And it meant that every command to advance or retreat or get out of the way of friendly fire was delivered by phone. Now when the United States did finally get in the war, late, as it had been to most every war, what they did is because we had no real standing

force they actually went out and talked with AT&T and Bell telephone companies all around the country. And starting with the headquarters in New York, and they formed what were called the Bell Battalions. And what they would do is they would come to a place like Chicago, they would come to the Bell Telephone company, they would recruit men who had worked all of these positions together in one town or another, and they would take them all together as a group to France, and they would plunk them down. This shows you a picture of Bell Battalions, Bell Telephone linemen, now American soldiers in American uniform, running lines into a trench at the Battle of the Somme. And the Somme was the worst site of the worst British fighting like Verdun was the site of the worst French fighting of WWI. And it's kind of crazy, isn't it? You see these lines running in, and it just looks like a telephone pole in some local town. But that's how these communications were delivered. Again, similar, as I said, they could repair and had to repair often lines under all kinds of conditions. So these are men repairing lines under gas attack wearing their gasmasks. And a line would blow up. Somebody would have to run out into the field to repair the line, jump into a crater hole, and wait out the barrage. So all different kinds of conditions under which people had to very bravely keep these communications going. Why? Because the general, George Squires said--who was the head of the signal corps back in Washington D.C.--he said, "In a modern war, if communications goes down for even an hour, the whole military machine collapses." 'Cause of course this is the military machine now in the Great War, in WWI, where people are spread out over hundreds of miles, how else would you communicate? So it was extremely important. Well, when General John Pershing got to France, and of course this picture shows you as if central casting had sent him. General Pershing in the middle, very handsome, rugged man. Looking up at him, literally 'cause he was a much shorter man, is Newton Baker. And Newton Baker is the civilian secretary of war. And he admired Pershing very much, and he said to General Pershing, understanding that he's a civilian that doesn't know much about fighting. He said, "I'll give you only two orders. Go and come back. The rest is up to you." So General Pershing, when he gets to France, he realizes right away that one of the problems he's got is that there is really no good communications, because he's there, he brings American doughboys, tries to train them on how to operate a telephone, and he finds that these men are not very good at it. And also as we will discuss in a minute they resist this role because it's kind of a segregated occupation. Women are telephone operators. And these men, you know, don't like that idea very much that they'll have to do this job. Plus it turns out they're just not very good at it. It took the average doughboy something like sixty seconds to connect a call. Now that sounds hard, but partly as you know you're on the headset, and you're finding the right plug, and you're doing it all in code because telephone lines can be tapped. So you have to make sure when somebody's asking for something you're not saying, "Please give me through to General Pershing. He's at this place." So everything is in code. They found that it took them sixty seconds to connect a call. It took the average woman operator ten seconds. Well, in wartime the difference between ten seconds and sixty seconds is your life. So communications to be effective must be instantaneous and accurate. The other problem is that these American doughboys, they get on the phone, and they would try to start connecting phone calls across France, and the way that phones at that time worked is to connect a call you have to talk to patch through to an operator in one place, she would patch the operator another place, and you'd have this long relay that could go hundreds of miles as you worked your way across the country with one toll station interacting with another. Now you didn't have to go very far out before you stopped talking to Americans. In fact you talked to the French 'cause this is happening in France. And so a lot of these guys, they didn't *parlez vous*. So you have this problem, the men kind of resisting the role, not being very adept at it,

and not speaking French. So now Newton Baker--Pershing began to realize that he needed women in France because this technology was driving a need that nobody had previously expected. Newton Baker hated the idea. He hated the idea. They had what they were called cantonments; these were the temporary military bases around the country, right. And they would bring civilians in sometimes to do laundry and answer telephones. And there were some women at home in the United States who were doing this as civilians on army bases. And at one point I was researching this in the National Archives, and I'm reading through records, and some general writes Washington and says, "You know, we need some money to build toilets because we have these civilian women here and we don't have toilets for the women." The army said no. Now I'm thinking, why would they do this? Because they don't want them to stick around long enough to need to use the toilet. 'Cause they thought--again it was this feeling like women who would do this, there's something wrong with these women. There's something not normal about these women. In fact they said make sure they're older women, at least thirty, and you know, and keep your eyes on them, make sure there's not hanky panky or whatever. Anyway, Newton Baker hated the idea of women, using women, especially in France. He was much more comfortable with the traditional roles that women always had played in war. And these are posters of that era for the Red Cross, have women knit shawls and socks and things for men abroad, or canning food at home so that things can be spared for the war effort, or nurses and that kind of thing. So these were the roles that the army especially--different from the navy and marines--the army especially was uncomfortable with women doing anything more than that. And yet women had always had other roles. And in fact I love this poster, my favorite poster from WWI, which shows Joan of Arc of course. And what that's playing on is this old knowledge, ancient knowledge, that women in times of great emergency have risen to defend their countries, literally with their bodies, literally with their hands, literally by force of arms. And of course this was particularly resonant at that time because Joan of Arc saved France, and it was France and Belgium of course that had been invaded. So there was this echo of more ancient history. And in fact what happened is that the navy had a different attitude than did the American army. And I saw this poster before I even started researching this book. I work part of the time at Hoover Institution at Stanford, and I was in a hallway nearby where Secretary of State George Schultz, who was Ronald Reagan's secretary, has this poster up. And I thought, isn't that strange? It looks so old fashioned. I didn't know women were in the marines that far back. But what the navy decided to do-- they consulted their attorneys and said, "Is there anything that prevents this? Is there any reason why we can't use women here at home? We would never put them in danger, but here at home in clerical positions so men can get on ships and can go abroad?" And the navy attorneys sort of scratched their head and said, "Well, we can't find the word man in here anywhere, so I guess you can do it." So Josephus Daniels was the secretary of the navy. Now his wife was a suffragist, and he had been raised by a single mother. Which by the way, to give you a sense of how short American history is, his father was killed in the American Civil War. And so he had been raised by a single mom, and he really respected the abilities of women. And he said I don't see why we can't use women in the service. And so he recruited them to join the navy and about six months later they joined the marines as well. In fact the first group of marine women, there were ten initial women marines, and one of them was the mother of Ginger Rogers. You may remember that that was Fred Astaire's dance partner. And as Ginger Roger famously said she did everything Fred Astaire did but backwards and in high heels. So as far as she was concerned, women could do a lot. There's no reason not to engage women in such an important cause for the sake of their country. Now the Americans were not the only ones beginning to think about that. The United States

became the first modern country to formally induct women into its military forces, meaning the navy and then followed by the marines. But the British were also beginning to rethink what their situation was. And of course they were extraordinarily desperate. As I already said the British and French and everybody who was engaged in the war suffered such atrocious casualties that they began to think how they could use women. So actually just a couple of weeks after the first women took the oath and became American sailors--yeomen, they called them--the British also began to induct women. Although it's curious. Again there was this sense of is this really okay or not? What kind of woman would do this after all? And of course these women did it for the finest, most patriotic reason. But there was this sense that if women did something like this that was kind of unwomanly about them. And so the women who were engaged in what was known as Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, they had the khakis or the British army, but they didn't have the regular British army insignia. So instead of stars and bars or whatever, they had fleur de lis and roses on their insignia. I'm thinking maybe rainbows and ponies, they could have added those too. But also the army did not allow them to salute or to be saluted. So there's a sense of, you're here but you're not quite here. By the way that attitude began to shift at least a little bit when six or seven of them were bombed and killed in France in the line of duty, and it was at that point that Queen Mary adopted this unit as her unit to try to again sort of say that these are patriotic women. These are people who are full-fledged members of our country. Because in a way that was what suffrage and things was about. Were women real citizens or not? Were they fully people in a way, full participants in the lives of their country? So the army resisted and resisted, but Newton Baker ultimately--technology was writing a different book than the playbook he was used to. And it seems like this in America at AT&T, and these long rows of women who were taking the calls of the United States and calls around the world too. At the very back of this picture you'll see one or two men standing at the back of the room, 'cause there was sort of this idea of, of course we have to have male supervisors. We can't just let a group of women take over this kind of thing. So there were always usually men in supervisory positions. But nonetheless women were kind of running this show. And so what happened is that in November of 1917 Pershing sends a cable from France. And he says, "I want a hundred women. I want them in uniform. I want them under the command of an officer, and I want them here now. Get them here as quickly as you possibly can." Because he couldn't make a phone call. He couldn't do the thing that we all want to do, which is just pick up the phone and have the dang thing work. And of course that was so critical in a time of war, and it wasn't a frivolous request at all. And so the army decides that they are going to take women on board. And this poster is actually put out by the YWCA, because the army, they had to suddenly deal with an army of four million men. We went from no standing army to an army of enormous size. 1.5 million men in France. And they didn't even know how to billet them, where to put them up. And so they asked the YWCA, "Can you like, take care of this small group of women for us?" And they were like, "Okay, we can." So they put out a poster. And this poster, I always found it very interesting because most of the women end up in France far behind the lines. They're in logistics. These are people taking phone calls for supplies, for troop movement, for all kinds of things. But for the most part they're in logistical positions and so they're far behind the lines. But there was a handful of women always who were as close to the battle as General Pershing himself got. And they saw what the woman at this telephone switching station saw, which is men behind them on their way to war, men coming back in ambulances, and marching back from the war. And so that proximity to what was known as the firing line was very much true for at least a handful of these women. Now before they could get there however they had to be recruited from all over. And I've spent a lot of time in San Francisco, so this is one of my

most amusing photographs. They brought women--they recruited them in all different parts of the US using American newspapers to say, "Hey, we need women for over there." And these women will do just like the men. They will be true soldiers. They will do as much to help win the war. This is your chance, women, to prove your patriotism. And so they trained them in these different areas. This is a group being trained in San Francisco. They're going down Market Street in San Francisco, one of the major streets. Of course you see Joan of Arc right next to them, right, because she would be there to escort them. Now once these were trained in different parts of the country, they were then shipped to New York. But by the way, event to get to this stage meant you had to be extremely good at what you did. 7600 women applied for the first one hundred positions. 7,600 women applied. Of course obviously most of them did not meet the highest standards of language proficiency. They had to be able to take orders, they had to be able to talk in French, because the other thing that they would be doing is simultaneous translation. So they would not only be making phone calls and making notes--how long the call was, where the call went to, doing it all in code, fielding dozens of calls at the same time, but also translating back and forth for French and American officers who needed to tell each other things under extraordinary pressure with extraordinary high stakes. So many of these women didn't actually make it, but the few that did were very proud. They had such a responsibility on their shoulders to not only serve their country but in a way show that women could do this job. They were also very strenuously vetted by army intelligence. As I mentioned Minnie Goldman of Chicago, they interviewed her neighbors, they interviewed her mother who said, "You should hear what the neighbors say. My Minnie, she's great." So it was this interesting thing, because, why? Because these women were handling national secrets, literally in their hands. Every call that was made, every word that was spoken was something they could hear in their headset. So the army double and triple and quadruple checked. One woman was taken off the troop transport at the very last minute because they had some inkling maybe she was a spy. She wasn't a spy, but they were very, very cautious because the position of trust that these women were in was quite remarkable. So after they got their one hundred people, they shipped them to New York, and it was there at Hoboken that they were eventually shipped off to France, but before that they were taken to the rooftop of AT&T. I feel like I'm doing a commercial here. I'm not. This is just true. That's the way history works, right. So AT&T at that time had one of the tallest buildings in New York. And this is March now, March of 1918. And by the way you might think this is kind of late in the war, but it took the United States almost a year and more to ramp up, as this country which had no real fighting force, not technology for fighting. It took a while, and General Pershing didn't want to get the United States army in in dribs and drabs 'cause that would be totally unimpressive to the enemy. You wanted to make sure you were really one hundred percent ready. So these women were actually quite early. The women came before most of the men. They left after most of the men. And this is the way it always is with logistics, right? The people who set up this room tonight, they were here before we got here, and they will be here after we leave, because these women were making the calls to get everything in place. So when they got to New York City and then were shipped off to Hoboken, they learned how to drill, learned how to salute on the top floor of the rooftop of AT&T. there's snow on the ground, so think of how cold that must have been. They're there in their army uniforms, their army-grade coats. Since you have women soldiers you therefore need women officers. Who knew, right? So what would happen is, some of these women, I ground their letters, their diaries, the things they sent home to their mothers and fathers. And one young woman from Seattle, Washington said, "Mom and Dad, I have to—I'm now in charge of a group of ten girls." And of course all the same age; she's like twenty-one or twenty. And she

said, "They have to salute me, and I have to salute them back." And they're trying to figure out how to do these things. There's one army officer telling them, this is how you salute and this is how you turn around, etcetera, etcetera. But they're making it up as they go because the need is so pressing. They're needed as soon as they can possibly get to France. By the way I love this particular photograph. This shows you a group I came to be quite familiar with. In front is Esther "Tootsie" Fresnel. The one with her arms crossed on the far left is a woman known as Suzanne Prevot, otherwise known as the Wildcat in France by her officers. There's some others, but on the far--not quite to the far right, second from the right is a woman named Grace Banker, and she was the woman who became the head person taking woman over. She was twenty-five years old. She was a graduate of Barnard College, and I think that's why they selected her. They said, "Okay, well you have a college degree. You must be officer material. Okay, you're an officer today." So one week she didn't know if she was going to France; the next week she was told, "Not only are you going, not only will be fingerprinted today, but you will be in charge of the first contingent of women soldiers ever to leave the shores of the United States." And she said, "I felt such a responsibility." They crossed over the sea, of course thousands of men on these troop transports--7,000, 9,000, and a few hundred women--couple hundred women. Although actually they went over in smaller contingents than that. The first contingent was thirty-three women, and this shows that. Grace Banker's in the very center of the center row. Now, when I first saw this photograph in the National Archives of the US, you know, it's kind of small--that will be a good one for the book. But then when I blew it up on a big screen one day and I was giving a talk, I realized a third of the women are actually kind of looking up. They're supposed to be looking at the camera, but they're actually kind of looking up. And why that is, is because they'd been bombed the night before. They spent most of the night in a bomb shelter in Paris. At this time Paris was under siege. German guns were within twenty miles of Paris. They were shelling the city. Bombs were being dropped overhead as well. And so the women knew that it was an urgent need for them to get going. In fact they said, "We want to start today." And their officer said, "Okay, hold it, hold it, you can start tomorrow." But they were really ready to go. And part of this was that some of the men were like, "Why are these women here? How can they possibly be good?" And so they knew they just had to be quiet and do their jobs. And as soon as they started doing their jobs, it was immediately evident how essential they were. One of them, the diary of one of these women I found who was from Berkeley, California, the day she starts, the concussions are so close that her switchboard is shaking while she's trying to connect the calls. And so she knows she's needed. The women were billeted across France. This shows you two women also from California. There were quite a number from California. California actually had the highest what they called tele-density in the nation, and the United States had the greatest tele-density in the world. In other words more phones were used here than anywhere else in the world by a long shot. And California, the west especially--in fact any place where people didn't live close by each other, you actually tended to have more phones because otherwise people can't communicate with each other, so they'd run telephone wires through sagebrush and over trees and along barbed wire fences 'cause it was a way that you could communicate over long distances. These two women were the LeBreton sisters, and their story I always thought was kind of fun I thought. On the right is Louise--pardon me, Raymonde LeBreton. She was sixteen. She lied to the army. She told them she was eighteen because she was afraid that otherwise they would let her go. Her sister was eighteen years old, Louise, and she told the army she was twenty-one. And I later went back and read their personnel records, which I got from St. Louis, from the National Archives records, personnel archives center there. And the army intelligence is writing, "They seem very mature for their ages, these young

women." So the army thought they were even older than the age that they were actually lying about. You might notice by the way above their heads on the right is the picture of Joan of Arc. So that picture of a woman warrior was obviously something that inspired them, and they had it with them in their barracks. As the United States finally got involved in active fighting in WWI--the United States was only actively engaged in and led two major offensives: the Battle of St. Mihiel, which was in September of 1918 and then the Battle of Meuse Argonne, which was September or October and up into the Armistice. And it was at that point that women had been used mostly in these sort of headquarters or rear operations. And the man who was in charge of signal operations in the fields, an man named Colonel Parker Hitt, he said to Pershing, "We have to have these women wherever we go. If the front moves, we have to have women moving with the front." Because all of these commands, all of this instantaneous communication to men to advance, to fire or whatever, these operations boards as they were called--and they were special telephone switchboards that were labeled operations, because those were the actual military rather than simply logistical kinds of support. So wherever women were working in the war, they put them on shifts of three eight-hour shifts. The daytime shifts, the first two eight-hour shifts would be staffed by women. The overnight shift would be staffed by men because there weren't that many phone calls at night. So the men who were not as quick or as adept at it, they said it doesn't matter as much. But whenever the army got close to the front they said, "Okay, now we have to have women twenty-four hours a day." So they had six women on two-twelve hour shifts every day of the week during these battles. And the Battle of Meuse Argonne was one of the longest battles in all of American history. I think forty-two days. On the far right you see Grace Banker, Tootsie Fresnel is in the middle, and Berthe Hunt of Berkeley is on the far left. So there New York, New Jersey, and California is represented in this particular photograph. You might also note their trench helmets on the back, and also they have gasmasks. They were also trained in how to defend themselves with pistols, those women who were closest to the front as a temporary expedient. By the way they sometimes got into trouble. One time Grace Banker actually went out, a shell fell down very near her. Her commander just chewed her out because she had gone outside without her trench helmet. So she said, "You have to be always ready." And of course the uniforms were also an important part of in a way their defense because a uniform is what keeps you from being tried as a spy. If you are captured as a prisoner of war, it's your uniform that saves you that proves that you're a member of the armed forces and not someone who can simply be drawn and quartered so to speak. So this is what's happening in France. Meanwhile back in the United States, Woodrow Wilson is coming under fair heat from these women suffragists who are saying a variety of things, and as this particular poster says, "President Wilson is deceiving the world when he appears as a profit of democracy." Because of course the president will not endorse the enfranchisement of half the adult population. And so Wilson begins to come under greater and greater pressure. An interesting thing happens. Wilson begins to change his mind, certainly for political reasons, but I also think, it is men who have to enfranchise women. It is men who have to decide that women are full partners with them in this country in America. And Woodrow Wilson begins to see that all kinds of things are happening and he needs to get on board. And in fact the day after, the very day after, he announces what is called the Fourteen Points. And these Fourteen Points, go back and read them. They set up the structure of the modern world. The day after that he contacts his allies in Congress and says, "Were' gonna go for a federal suffrage amendment. I've changed my mind." And from that point forward he begins to advocate very strongly for a women's suffrage amendment. And in fact he goes to the senate in October of 1918. After Congress, the House of Representatives has finally passed this vote for women.

And in the congressional testimony there's all this stuff about women are serving in all these various ways in the war. And Woodrow Wilson basically says to the senate, and by this time by the way twenty other countries have enfranchised women. And he says, "Are we the last to learn the lesson? How can we go forward, how can we ask for and take all that women can give, put them in harm's way? Some of them have served upon the very skirts of the battle," he says, "and still say we don't see what this entitles them to in the ways of the rights of citizens." So he makes his passionate, beautiful speech to the American senate, which votes him down. So October of 1918, and by the way he has also another motive for this. There are some states as states that have begun to enfranchise women, including most importantly one of the last holdouts but very importantly New York, which has a large group--has a very large population. And he knows that the suffragists are saying, "Do not vote for that man. Do not vote for anybody who will not support women's suffrage." So he hopes that the democrats, his party, will carry Congress, the Senate, the House in November of 1918 and that the vote of women in the few states where women can now vote, that this will help his party. It doesn't. It doesn't because congress refuses to give women the right to vote, and in fact the democrats do lose the midterm election, which will have profound consequences for the end of the war and the Treaty of Versailles. So even though Wilson said now's the time to support women's suffrage, in fact it doesn't help him in the midterm elections. Now I include this—I don't intend for you to read this, it just gives you a sense of the informality. This is the letter. The letter that ironically I found after the book was published, so I'm showing it to you because I couldn't put it in the book. But it says, "To Miss Banker, Miss Fresnel, Miss Prevot, basically it says, "You are gonna be coming with us. The front is moving ahead, and American women are gonna be with American soldiers doing this very important job. At the end of the letter he says, "So say goodbye to your happy home and get ready for the roving life." And that's Colonel Parker Hitt. So the women are in the thick of this battle in Meuse Argonne. This particular picture I include partly because these were just grueling circumstances. As we know from WWI the weather was terrible, the mud was up to your knees. It was just constant twelve-hour shifts under horrendous circumstances. Seeing men come back torn apart. Their barracks and their working quarters were basically, they were the same buildings that the French had used during the Battle of Verdun, so these just ramshackle buildings that they're working in. But they're also learning about how women and men can work together. So I like this photograph because there was an occasion where there was a birthday. In fact there were four birthdays. And one of the women said, "You know what, tonight we're gonna take a break from the war. We're gonna have a birthday party." And so she was apparently very good at organizing this kind of thing. And she got some cooks who would help them do things. One of the officers whose birthday it was sent back to Paris. They have bottles of champagne on the table. And part of what you're seeing here is part of what happens when men and women realize that actually they can work together. This isn't weird. There isn't something scandalous about the idea of men and women together serving their country and working together nonstop twenty-four hours a day in battlefield conditions to do the right thing. Towards the end of the war, this is very shortly after the birthday party, in fact a couple of days later. This again is at the Battle of Meuse Argonne. It gives you a sense of what their quarters and their working conditions look like. There was a German prisoner of war camp next door. A German prisoner of war knocked over an oil stove. The women's barracks went up in flames. All of their belongings--many were lost, some of them they were able to pull out. Fortunately just the night before they had taken out the telephone switchboards just randomly 'cause they were gonna move them to a bigger facility. And so they were able to--the equipment did not get destroyed. 'Cause if it had gotten destroyed, there's only one place you can

get more of it, and that's in the United States, thousands of miles away. There's no other place where this equipment is as good as this new American technology. And so the women, the smoke begins to fill up the particular building in which they are still working. They're still connecting calls, they're connecting calls, the smoke is coming in, there are men on the roof pouring water on top trying to keep the whole thing from going up. Finally their officers come in and say, "You have to get out. You have to get out now." So the women get out, they pull the equipment. And this by the way is reminiscent of an earlier event in Paris where Paris was under bombardment, and the concussions took out the windows, and the officers came in and said to them, "You have to get out. You have to evacuate Paris." And they said, "We will, as soon as you do." So here at the Battle of Meuse Argonne, the women do go out. They take the equipment out in the field. Somehow miraculously they get that particular fire out. And the women go back in, and they start connecting calls again. The army is down for half an hour. So it's not the dreaded one hour and all communications go down, the army's goose is cooked. And so Pershing's orders continue to go through. As the war winds to an end we're--the women are very fortunate. Most made it home. Of the 223 who went over to France, 221 came home. One who did not was Inez Crittenden of San Francisco. She died on November 11<sup>th</sup> of 1918, the day of the Armistice. She died of the same thing that killed the majority actually of American combat soldiers, which was the influenza pandemic that swept army camps at that time. But Inez Crittenden is still buried in the American military cemetery in Paris. When Grace Banker came back--and of course the war does end on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month--she's awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. And when I went to the US Congress actually to read the congressional records about this, it lists the eighteen officers out of 16,000 signal corps officers by this point. Eighteen out of 16,000 were awarded the DSM. And the list reads General so-and-so and Brigadier General so-and-so and Colonel so-and-so, and Miss--Miss Grace Banker. 'Cause the only rank for a woman was Miss or Mrs. But the army was very, very grateful for her service, and Pershing in particular. The war didn't end quite as well for Woodrow Wilson. The vote for women did go through. Six months later republicans took the congress, and it was the Republican Party with democrats who had always supported it, who finally got women's suffrage through. The reason why the democrats by the way had always been so slow and had been loathed to pass this is because it was a federal suffrage amendment, and that would mean it would enfranchise black women as well as white women. And at this time in the American South the idea of enfranchising any additional number of African Americans was anathema. And so it's so chilling to me to sit there and read those records and realize again and again that that what the argument came down to, is we cannot enfranchise black women, too. But Woodrow Wilson, people oft like to point out he was racist as he was, but Woodrow Wilson took up the call for women's suffrage knowing full well that it would enfranchise black women as well as white women. When the women came back Bell Telephone acknowledged them. They were feted as being the groups behind the sort of victory being handed to the American doughboys. These were the women who made it possible and helped in their own way amongst others. And in fact they always say Grace Banker said, "Don't look at us. Don't look at me. Look at the boys who were out there in the field. Those are the real heroes." But they did find a curious thing. They got home, and they found that after a time even though they were recognized by Bell Telephone, they were not recognized by the US Army. And this is a picture of Merle Egan Anderson, who became one of my great heroines, heroes. She was a woman who, she just couldn't take it laying down. The army got back and said, "Oh, guess what? No, you weren't real soldiers." And the women found this out partly because the men and women who had been nurses and women who had been in the navy and the marines, they stared getting

bonuses, and they got victory medals. Now those women had all served at home, and they got victory medals, and they got disability pay, and they got hospitalization. And a number of these women had developed tuberculosis and other illnesses, incurable illnesses at that time. And they got no hospitalization because the army said you weren't actually really soldiers. So Newton Baker had his revenge. Remember he didn't really want that to happen. And so Merle Egan Anderson took up a crusade that lasted sixty years. She had at her side ultimately at the end a very wonderful young man who read about her story one day in a Seattle newspaper and said, "Do you need help?" And she said, "Well yes, young man, that would be very helpful." Now, she was eighty-nine, and he was twenty-nine. But they became fast friends, and he discovered something. As an attorney he was putting together the case, and they had pleaded with Congress and with presidents not just Wilson obviously but from Roosevelt and Eisenhower and Kennedy and Johnson and Nixon all the way up to Jimmy Carter, and they kept getting people telling them "No, no, no." But Mark Hough, this man, said, "You know, it's against the law to impersonate a soldier of the US Army. It's against the law to put on that uniform. And if your government gives you that uniform, your government is making you a soldier, or the government is breaking its own law." And so Congress with the support of people like Lindy Boggs who was a congresswoman, a democrat from Louisiana, mother of Cokie Roberts by the way, and Barry Goldwater, a conservative senator from Arizona, and the National Organization for Women--and those don't usually go together in the same sentence, so I always like to put them there--they got together this bill that not only acknowledged the women of WWI but the WASPs of WWII, pilots who had also been similarly treated at the end of WWII. And Merle Egan Anderson, along with two of the thirty-three women who were still living by that time, received her discharge papers at the age of ninety-one. She said, "People sometimes say to me, why do I keep fighting this battle that's gone on for decades." And she says, "It's because I love my country, and I want my country to be worth loving." So she knew she had kept her word, and she felt the country needed to keep its word too. And at the end she gives this wonderful speech at the US Army base in Seattle, and she says, "I'm so delighted to receive my victory medal not only for serving in France all those years ago, but for fighting the US Army for six decades and winning." So it was my great pleasure to write *The Hello Girls*, and thank you so much for letting me tell their story to you.

(Applause)

Williams: Thank you to Elizabeth Cobbs for an outstanding discussion and to the United States World War One Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers*, and it is published by Harvard University Press. To learn more about the World War One Centennial Commission, visit [WorldWar1Centennial.org](http://WorldWar1Centennial.org). To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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(Theme music)

Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.