

Honoring the ‘Hello Girls’

A VFW Life member from Montana helped more than 200 World War I female veterans receive the Congressional Gold Medal

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It started with a private conversation in the halls of Montana State University in 2017. Then-Senator Jon Tester (D-Mont.) was in Bozeman, Montana, for a town hall meeting when he heard of Ed Saunders’ research on “The Treasure State’s” World War I women veterans for a book.

“He pulled me aside and asked if there was anything he could do to help,” said Saunders, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and VFW Life member of Post 4725 in Red Lodge, Montana. “I told him these women deserved recognition, and so he asked me to draft a Congressional Record citation on their behalf, which he read into the official U.S. Senate record.”

Saunders, who published “Knapsacks and Roses: Montana’s Women Veterans of World War I” in 2018, sought to follow the exemplary work of Merle Egan Anderson, a member of the Women’s Telephone Unit of the American Signal Corps in WWI, known as the ‘Hello Girls.’ Anderson spent more than 60 years advocating for veteran status and benefits, which she and her sisters received in 1977.

“She was from Helena, Montana, so we are awfully proud of her out here,” Saunders said of Anderson. “She serves as an inspiration for what she was able to accomplish, and we wanted to build on that.”

Anderson was one of five women from Montana who joined the more than 200 women with bilingual proficiency to serve in the war zones of France. In the process, they became the first organized unit of women in American history to contribute to wartime combat operations.

To honor their memory, Saunders not only wrote the citation on behalf of the Hello Girls from Montana but was later summoned by the WWI Centennial Commission upon the recommendation of one of Tester’s aides.

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“That started the process,” Saunders said. “I got a call from Chris Christopher with the board of directors at the Centennial Commission, and he told me he was putting together a team of researchers to try and get all the Hello Girls the Congressional Gold Medal.”

The effort to recognize the Hello Girls went national, according to Saunders, who added the team sprouted from a committee of three to more than 50 researchers and advocates, which included some Canadian officials, as some Hello Girls were from Canada.

“The challenge we had was getting awareness for this, and so we all went nationally for support because the House and Senate had to vote and approve this,” Saunders said. “The problem was that only five Congressional Gold Medals could be given at a time, and if you were not part of that five, you were basically out of luck, so we had to lobby VFW and Congress and other organizations for letters of support.”

After seven years of lobbying and creating a stir in the national populace, Saunders and his fellow committee members received their answer on Dec. 18, 2024. Then-President Joe Biden signed the National Defense Appropriation Act of 2024, which included the Congressional Gold Medal for the Hello Girls.

Their efforts culminated on March 19, during Women’s History Month, when the Military Women’s Memorial in Washington, D.C., held a national ceremony to celebrate all 223 Hello Girls receiving the Congressional Gold Medal.

The Congressional Gold Medal, which represents the 223 Hello Girls, is under design and will be kept by the Smithsonian Institute in the nation’s capital.

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