

# Mary Darnaby Henton

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Mary Darnaby Henton born around 1894. Mary Henton served in World War 1 with the United States Army. The enlistment was in 1918 and the service was completed in 1919.

## Story of Service

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Darnaby (as she preferred to be called) was born the fifth child of farmers James Henton and Bettie Hampton in Versailles, Kentucky in 1894.

She was one of 7,600 women to volunteer for 100 positions advertised by the War Department in newspapers throughout the US calling for “patriotic women” to serve as “full-fledged soldier[s]” willing to face the dangers of submarine warfare and

aerial bombardment. She followed her brother Sam, already serving as a Battalion Sergeant Major in the 326th Field Artillery Regiment, into the service, proud to be a member of America’s first unit of female soldiers outside of the Nurse Corps—the “Hello Girls”.

The first Hello Girls took the Army oath on January 15, 1918. By operating switchboards relaying orders and providing real-time translation from French to English, the women would “do as much to help win the war as the men in khaki who would go ‘over the top’” according to the War Department.

Darnaby is one of the 223 female telephone operators on wartime US Army Transport lists. She departed New York with the second group of women on March 29, 1918, aboard the armed ocean liner RMS Carmania. The Chief Operator overseeing her unit was Inez Crittenden from San Francisco.

The Hello Girls connected over 26 million calls, contributing to the American victories at the Battles of St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne. The Chief Signal Officer of the Army Signal Corps wrote two days after the 1918 Armistice that “a large part of the success of the communications of this Army is due to...a competent staff of women operators.”

Not every Hello Girl lived to read that report; two perished during their military service. One was Inez Crittenden, Darnaby’s commander, who died of disease on the day the war ended. Her brother Sam had likewise been killed shortly after his unit’s arrival in France in October 1918.

Despite these sacrifices and the war’s conclusion, Darnaby continued to serve her country. She was chosen as a telephone operator for President Wilson’s peace mission at the Versailles conference. After the peace treaty was signed in 1919, she volunteered again to serve as a telephonist at the American Embassy in Paris. Afterward, she left government service to pursue a degree at the Sorbonne.

Darnaby would never return home to Kentucky. On January 29, 1921, she accidentally fell from her window shortly after beginning her studies. She was at that point one of the last Hello Girls abroad. Reporting on her death, the New York Times referred to her as the "Prettiest U.S. Phone Girl in France".

Those women who had returned home found a nightmarish surprise waiting for them. The Army refused to acknowledge they had served as soldiers, labeling them as civilian contractors even though they wore uniforms, swore an oath, served under commissioned officers, and never once saw a contract.

It would take until 1977 for the Department of Defense to recognize these women's service as soldiers at Congress' insistence in Public Law 95-202. Also recognized in that legislation were the female WASP pilots of World War II, who received a Congressional Gold Medal in 2009 to honor their wartime service and postwar fight for recognition as veterans. In 2018, Senators Blackburn and Tester introduced legislation to likewise honor the Hello Girls with a Gold medal in the same fashion.

