

## **Switchboard Soldiers**

### **By Dana Hall**

#### **Cast**

2 Women/ 1 Man  
1 Man (voiceover)

#### **Characters**

MISS BANKER: Dressed in service uniform, young, well-educated, represents her soldiers with honor.

REPORTER 1: Male, Newspaper reporter, wants a scoop.

REPORTER 2: Female, Newspaper reporter, wants a hero.

SOLDIER: Male, 17, voiceover, scared, and homesick.

#### **Setting:**

Passaic New Jersey September 1919

No. 227 Van Houten Ave. Passaic

Home of Miss Grace D. Banker

#### **Costuming Notes:**

Miss Grace D. Banker is dressed in a service uniform of dark blue and a jaunty blue cap with crossed flags. On her coat was a long bar of bright-colored service ribbons, with two tiny stars set on them. She is a young woman, a recent Barnard graduate, medium height, blue eyes, black hair, and a smile used as a weapon.

#### **Flashback:**

If done virtually the screens can be black and white to show time has passed. SPX of gunfire in distance.

#### **Logline:**

Before women could even vote, Miss Banker leads the first corps of women that helps turn the tide of World War I.

#### **Synopsis:**

When Gen. Pershing called for the best 'wire experts' 233 women answered the call. They changed the face of American history and inspired President Wilson to reconsider his position on voting rights. This is the story of Miss Grace Banker, she served as Chief of 6 switchboard operators that made it to the front line.

**At Rise:** Miss Banker (25) is being interviewed by a newspaperman and a newspaperwoman at her home in Passaic, New Jersey regarding her service as a Signal Corp Operator in WWI.

**[Insert Opening Slide-see production notes]**

**REPORTER 1**

How did you win your decoration, Miss Banker?

**REPORTER 2**

What was your most thrilling experience at the front?

*MISS BANKER smiles.*

**REPORTER 1**

*(pressing)*

We're here today to ask you a few questions. You were personally decorated by Lieut. Gen. Hunner Liggett – is that correct?

**MISS BANKER**

Yes, I suppose I won the citation just for being where I was wanted and staying there and doing the work. Why, really, it doesn't seem to me I did anything worth telling about.

**REPORTER 2**

You were awarded the distinguished service medal, an honor given to no other American woman in France?

*MISS BANKER breaks her smile.*

**MISS BANKER**

J'ai fait mon travail. Don't try and make me a heroine.

**REPORTER 2**

Esther V. Fresnal reports that you were under shell fire. A Berthe M. Hunt tells us you were in danger from the aeroplanes during the bombing raids.

**MISS BANKER**

What's your question Madam?

**REPORTER 1**

We're trying to get at how you managed under these conditions. With bombing and shell-fire threatening.

**REPORTER 2**

Yes. Tell us, how did you manage to operate the switchboards, memorize the codes, and translate French correspondence?

**MISS BANKER**

[she quips]

I wasn't aware the weather called for bombing or shelling today.

*[She fixes her hat]*

Come now- The war is fought! Yes, bombs did drop near us sometimes but think of the girls in Paris who were menaced by the long-distance gun and who might expect a bomb any moonlight night.

**REPORTER 1**

That may be so- but it was your tireless leadership that did much to assure the success of the phone system during operations against the St. Mihiel salient /

**MISS BANKER**

*(sharp)*

I did nothing alone. Dear. *[She sips her tea and smiles]*

**REPORTER 2**

Then do tell us about the Hello Girls?

**MISS BANKER**

You mean the women of the Signal Corps Female Telephone Operators Unit.

They despise "hello-girls" as they should being that they were more than telephone operators but enlisted service members. In Paris, it took 40 to 60 seconds to complete a telephone call. My soldiers could do it in 10 seconds flat.

**REPORTER 2**

In those calls-besides exchanges about supplies is it true that your girls played a vital role in military operations?

**MISS BANKER***[coy]*

I'll kindly remind you, we took an oath just like any man, which I intend to uphold.

**MISS BANKER fans herself casually.**

**REPORTER 1**

It's been reported French troops had set out to take back the salient, a strategic outpost occupied by the Germans. And for days you, and those under your supervision, commanded the switchboards connecting calls around the clock/

**MISS BANKER**

Yes, my girls worked like animals- with their gas masks and helmets slung over their chairs- and we never enjoyed anything more.

**REPORTER 1**

Many of the corps members did not see the front line but you did?

**MISS BANKER**

I learned to shoot a pistol- not half bad if I may say so.

**REPORTER 1**

Did you have to use it?

**MISS BANKER***[playful]*

Don't tempt a demonstration now- watch yourself, Monsieur.

**REPORTER 2**

You must've been well-trained as one of 6 women to serve alongside Gen. Pershing in Chaumont- surely you have some recollections- some tales of the front lines?

**MISS BANKER**

I'm not here to sell newspapers. I had a brother in the fourth division and when I think about what those men in the trenches went through, I hardly feel worthy of mention.

## REPORTER 2

What were your conditions?

## MISS BANKER

*[hesitant, smiles, speaks as though she would have to her soldiers]*

Our conditions? Well, the six soldiers with me lived in primitive fashion while up at the front. In Chaumont we were quartered together in a small loft with the army- part of the time we slept in a barn, the French barracks had no comforts but a washbasin.

I tried to give the girls an eight-hour day but it was near impossible- instructions were going on in every direction from headquarters.

We worked twice as long sometimes 12 hours straight or more always on call-using these old-fashioned French apparatus- we sat on packing boxes -if lucky.

When there was the word of air raids men removed our boards from the barracks to bomb-proof shelters where we plugged in by candlelight.

## REPORTER 2

It sounds like the men worked side by side with the Corps.

## MISS BANKER

They respected our nerve and patience we got the job done.

Once a German prisoner of war kicked over an oil stove it set our barrack on fire – it went up fast with dark smoke- the soldiers ran in to save what they could- I remember one trying to pull me from my station- but we stayed on- we were still connecting as they dumped water on the roof the smoke was something awful -

## REPORTER 1

You didn't evacuate?

## MISS BANKER

*[Formal]*

Listen – if communication goes down the army collapses. We were there to do a job. We did heed high commands for fear of court-martial -but did not lose but a 30 minutes connection to headquarters.

There were lives out there – lives like my brothers- and I wasn't about to let them down.

## REPORTER 1

It sounds like the tension was high.

### MISS BANKER

At times yes. *(beat)*

But on the nights when the lines were calm we'd get calls from the trenches. You see, most switchboards back home in the states were run by women. When you wanted to make a call to your mother or your girl – you'd hear the voice of an operator, "Hello, number please." The soldiers in the trenches were worried about the flu, raids, surviving no man's land – how the mind wanders when you're stuck between boredom and terror so they'd call in – just to remind themselves of home- what they were fighting for. I remember this one call...

**We are transported back to WWI  
MISS BANKER is at her  
switchboard in the middle of the  
night. A SOLDIER (17) has picked  
up the phone. He is homesick and  
afraid. SPX We can hear gunshots in  
the background of the call these shots  
are growing closer.**

### SOLDIER

Hello-

### MISS BANKER

You're connected-

### SOLDIER

*[Nervous]*

Yes... Um Can you talk?

### MISS BANKER

The line is open where shall I direct this call-

### SOLDIER

Can I just talk a bit instead –

### MISS BANKER

Sure-soldier who am I speaking with-

### SOLDIER

I'd rather not say- Ya see I lied. I lied about my age I'm 17 years old from Newark.

**MISS BANKER**

New Jersey?

**SOLDIER**

Yes ma'am.

**MISS BANKER**

I'm from up the road in Passaic!

**SOLDIER**

I thought I heard Jersey in your voice. I hear you telephone girls all speak French-

**MISS BANKER**

Oiu oiu-

**SOLDIER**

Nice.*[he gives his French a try it is horrible]* Le Poilu- did I say that right? I think they're called that because the French are a hairy lot.

**MISS BANKER**

*[Giggles]*

Pretty good and I was a French major so I should know.

**SOLDIER**

Oh- my parents wanted me to apply to university-schools not for me. So I enlisted.-

**MISS BANKER**

What did your parents say-

**SOLDIER**

My parents wrote letters when they found out what I had done. But the Army says I'm fit for service so they ain't sending me back.

**MISS BANKER**

You're brave soldier – the tide is turning hang in there.

**SOLDIER**

I've seen pictures from back home some of these guys got families- Johnny got a kid on the way. I gotta tell ya night is the worse- your brain gets to thinking – I woke up and thought I smelled my mama's biscuits- I'll be damned if it's not rotting sandbag and gun powered- mama wasn't much of cook but lord what I'd give for a homecooked meal. Can you hear me? There's some shots making it hard to hear.

**MISS BANKER**

I hear you soldier – I'm right here.

**SOLDIER**

I'm sorry I picked up the phone.

**MISS BANKER**

Don't be we're here to connect [*correcting a bit*] the lines- we're always here.

**SOLDIER**

I don't think I'm going home. Can I ask your name?

**MISS BANKER**

Grace-

**SOLDIER**

That's mighty fitting- I'll call you Amazing Grace-

**MISS BANKER**

You're gonna make it home soldier-

**SOLDIER**

It's not like they said-There ain't no cushy trenches.

**MISS BANKER**

Pardon?



## SOLDIER

The battalion we relieved had several casualties, these trenches are booby-trapped they found a full rum jar when they uncorked it- it exploded. They say the Germans are attacking now at night taking over trenches- I can't sleep. I close my eyes but all I see the Hun with bayonets fixed to their rifles with my name on it. I cant do this- *[Begins to whimper]* I want to go home-

## MISS BANKER

Soldier stay with me. Look up at that sky- it's the same one I see- it's the same sky hanging over Newark. You just look up there and remember home- we're going home.

## SOLDIER

I wanted to remember what home felt like –thank you.

**MISS BANKER checks the line. The soldier has hung up. The light shifts MISS BANKER adjusts her uniform. She is present again.**

## REPORTER 2

What a sacrifice you've made.

## MISS BANKER

Every night they thought it could be their last. The sacrifice wasn't ours and if you were to ask every girl in my party about her hardships, I know each would answer that she had nothing worth mentioning-

## REPORTER 1

Still the same the peace treaty must've been a relief.

## MISS BANKER

I remember it well the Armistice was signed Nov 11th- the eleventh day, the eleventh hour. All fighting was ordered to cease at that time. Our Corps lines were in bad condition and poor Capt. Beaumont of the telegraph office was having a terrible time.

## REPORTER 1

*[disbelief]*

Suppose the message didn't get through all right-

**MISS BANKER**

It must get through if not by telegraphs then by telephone. So we put him through on our lines and he used my telephone. He yelled the message out. It had to get through- and it did.

**REPORTER 2**

Can we see your well-earned medal?

**MISS BANKER**

*[holds medal up]*

May 22 1912 standing with my fellow officers and enlisted men in Coblenz We were given this honor, not I- put this down in your paper correctly – this medal belongs to the devoted group of First Army Girls - Suzanne Prevot, Berthe Hunt, Adele Hoppock, Esther Fresnel, Helen Hill, and Marie Lange. Now if you'll excuse, feel free to show yourselves out- civilian life calls.

**MISS BANKER exits.**

**REPORTER 1**

She hung up on us in her own house. (disbelief) What an interview.

**REPORTER 2**

Indeed. Remarkable-

**REPORTER 1**

I dare say if she'd been captured, I don't believe there was any form of German frightfulness which would have made her tell what she chose not to tell.

**REPORTER 2**

Loyal to the core, and for what, for a country that gives her no say- no vote. She has to know what her service has done for us- how it could mean President Wilson having a change of heart-

**REPORTER 1**

Careful now - we were to report on Miss Banker nothing else. You'll get both of us fired.

**REPORTER 2**

Of course. *[Clearly, lying]* Just give me a moment to freshen up will ya?

**REPORTER 1**

Sure. I'll be in the car. *[Turns around]* Oh, and when you talk to her *[warns]*-off the record- just remember she represents the army and not any cause. *[As he leaves he quips.]* For your sake I hope she holstered that pistol.

**They share a knowing smile. REPORTER 1  
leaves towards the door. REPORTER 2 goes  
in towards where Miss Banker left.**

**(Insert Closing Slide-see production notes)**

**-END-**

## Production Notes

### Photo References

Medal:

<https://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/communicate/press-media/wwi-centennial-news/6250-100-years-ago-hello-girl-grace-banker-receives-distinguished-service-medal.html>

Miss Banker:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hello\\_Girls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hello_Girls)

### Opening Remarks:

In 1918 the US Army Signal Corps sent 223 women to France during WWI. They were bi-lingual and experts in the latest technology the switchboard. They had access to privileged coordinates and military assignments. These brave women chose to serve their country despite the fact that women were not considered full citizens. Back in the states, they could not vote, own property, but a group of six women led by Miss. Banker served alongside Gen Pershing on the front line as they operated the switchboards. They were responsible for over 26 million calls during their service.

### Closing Remarks:

The army discharged all 'Hello Girls' by 1920. After their service, they came to find out they were dismissed without veteran honors. They began a 60-year battle for recognition and benefits. It was finally granted in November 1977 (Title IV) by President Jimmy Carter despite opposition from the Veterans Administration and the American Legion. By then, only 18 of the women survived. Banker was not among them.

### Historical facts:

During the battle of St. Mihiel. Their building had caught fire and the operators were ordered to evacuate. The 'Hello Girls' felt the order was given because they were females so they chose to continue to stay and continue to operate the switchboards despite the fire. Finally, the fire became so intense that GHQ threatened the women with Court Martial if they did not abandon their posts. An hour after the fire was extinguished, they returned to their switchboards.

### Suffrage:

In 1912 President Woodrow Wilson cited women's lack of combat participation as a reason why they had not earned the right to vote. The Signal Corps Female Telephone Operators Unit shattered this argument. While addressing Congress on Sept. 30, 1918, Wilson spoke clearly in the opposite direction, as he urged the legislators to pass women's suffrage.

*"We have made partners of the women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and rights? This war could not have been fought if it had not been for the services of the women, services rendered in every sphere wherever men have worked and upon the very skirts and edges of the battle itself."*

The last “Hello Girl” was discharged in 1920 the same year, The Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution — which gave women the right to vote — was ratified in 1920.

### **Glossary**

#### **Cushy**

Cushy came from the Hindi word khush meaning “pleasure.” There were cushy billets, cushy jobs, even cushy trenches, where shelling and attacks were sporadic.

#### **Le Poilu** [*pwah-looz; French pwa-ly*]

Le Poilu translates literally as “the hairy one” and was a collective identity assumed by French infantry during the First World War.

#### **J'ai fait mon travail**

Translates to “I’ve done my job.” Miss. Banker studied French and History at Bernard. Only 4% of women went to college at the time.

### **Research**

The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers. By Elizabeth Cobbs. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017.

In the Washington Post, read Elizabeth Cobbs on the forgotten racist past of the women’s suffrage movement—the argument that granting, specifically, black women the right to vote could risk restarting the Civil War [Link](#)

Via C-SPAN, watch Cobbs discuss the history of women in the military on a panel at the 2018 Tucson Festival of Books [Link](#)

Watch a C-SPAN recording of Cobbs’s presentation of The Hello Girls at the National Archives. [Link](#)

