

When the Rights of Women Truly Began

The first victories in the long march of women's rights started with the First World War.

BY THOMAS J. SHAW

With U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris nominated as a candidate for vice president of the United States, it's worth understanding where the long road to emancipation for American women began.

The springboard was that oldest of male occupations, war, which by its very nature is disruptive to the settled order. In World War I, women finally found the necessary catalyst to overcome male resistance and push across the line the changes for which they'd long fought.

In the United States and Great Britain, it was only in the mid to later 19th century that women began to organize sufficiently to demand revisions to laws affecting them. For the rest of that century and the first decade of the 20th, despite the significant efforts of many women, the needed legal modifications hadn't been enacted. This was soon to change.

In World War I, despite the dangers, women took on military and civilian work usually done by men, often in addition to their own

duties at home. The wages paid to women became a legal issue. Long-pursued goals of women's suffrage and limits on alcohol had built to a climax. Millions of soldiers died, leaving a large gender imbalance.

These forces all combined like big waves crashing together onto the unsettled shores of an ebbing war.

WOMEN'S WARTIME ROLES

The diverse work women undertook during the war included serving as nurses, doctors, ambulance drivers, aid workers, linguists, and telephone operators in the conflict areas of Europe. Those performing that work ranged from young women and society matrons to two-time Nobel laureate Marie Curie, who invented a mobile X-ray unit and then visited frontline hospitals, examined patients, and taught others to use X-rays to find shrapnel and bullets in wounded soldiers.

Serving in battle zones was hazardous even to those nominally protected; many nurses were killed or wounded. U.S. Army nurse Beatrice MacDonald was wounded in a frontline casualty clearing station, losing her right eye. Despite her injury, she refused to evacuate, continuing to serve during the war. She became the first woman to receive the Purple Heart, to be followed in this century by former pilot and current U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth.

Nurses were exposed to other dangers, such as the Spanish flu pandemic, which heavily hit the military camps, and to being captured. British nurse Edith Cavell, who treated men of all nations in Belgium, was tried and convicted for treason by the German army



"Hello Girls" provided bilingual phone exchange services. Image: The Library of Congress © Flickr Commons

for helping injured soldiers escape. Despite the Geneva Convention requiring that medical personnel be "protected and respected" and protests from the U.S. government, she was executed.

American women physicians also served near the front, setting up hospital units for soldiers injured or gassed during battle and for war refugees. An all-female hospital unit, led by Dr. Caroline Sandford Finley, was part of the Women's Oversea Hospitals U.S.A. and funded by the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Not allowed into the American military, she served under the French, where her hospital was subjected to repeated aerial bombings. She was awarded the French Croix de Guerre ("She is distinguished...for her courage and scorn of danger during the bombardment of the hospital") and a British MBE for helping British ex-POWs with influenza.

The American Expeditionary Force in Europe formed the Signal Corps Female Telephone Operators Unit, popularly nicknamed the "Hello Girls," to provide bilingual French and English telephone exchange services. Recruited under Executive Order 2617 and subject to the Code of Military Justice, the first group, led by Grace Banker, was located near the front. They had to memorize frequently changing code words while ensuring precision in communications since Army commanders and artillery