

Virginia Hall

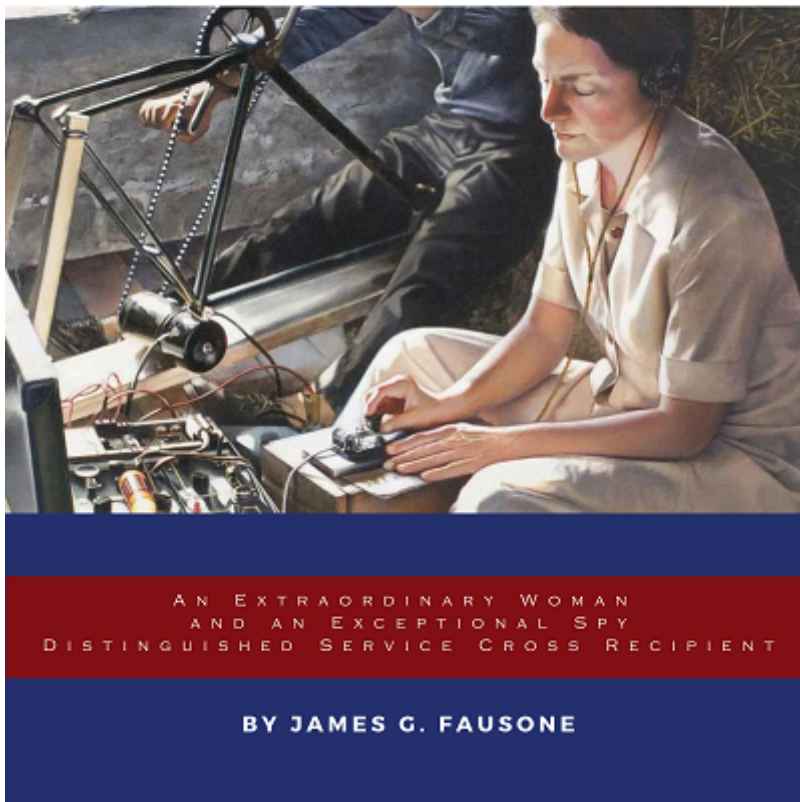
Virginia Hall

An Extraordinary Woman and Exceptional Spy

Distinguished Service Cross Recipient

BY: JAMES G. FAUSONE

VIRGINIA HALL



There is no formula to raising a hero. However, there may be a formula to raising a strong daughter. That strong daughter may turn into a remarkable woman and hero. That is the story of Virginia Hall. A woman so formidable her enemies hunted, respected, and feared her.

Klaus Barbie was a German Nazi, known as the “*Butcher of Lyon*” for having personally tortured prisoners of the Gestapo – primarily Jews and members of the French Resistance – while stationed in Lyon under the collaborationist Vichy regime. As chief of Nazi Germany’s secret police in Lyon, Barbie sent 7,500 French Jews and French Resistance partisans to concentration camps and executed some 4,000 others. In August 1944, as the Germans prepared to retreat from Lyon, he organized one last deportation train that took hundreds of people to death camps. Barbie was convicted

of his war crimes in 1987 and died in prison of cancer in 1991.

Barbie never got his hands on Virginia Hall but is reported to have said, *"I would give anything to get my hands on that limping Canadian bitch."* The Third Reich considered Virginia Hall to be "the most dangerous of all Allied spies" and hunted her down relentlessly. Notwithstanding flooding Lyon with flyers and rewards for this Allied spy, Barbie never learned her name or that she was American. She was only known as the *"Limping Lady."*

She was one strong woman as her story of helping the French Resistance and Allies around Lyon, France during World War II attests.

Virginia Hall's American Upbringing

Virginia Hall was born in Baltimore, Maryland on April 6, 1906, to Barbara Virginia Hammel and Edwin Lee Hall. Her mother Barbara has been reported to be a social climber in Baltimore society. She married banker Edwin and life was good. Virginia's father Edwin was born in 1872 and his father was Sea Captain John Wesley Hall. She had a privileged upper-class life for twenty-plus years.

She attended Roland Park Country School and then Radcliffe College and Barnard College (Columbia University), where she studied French, Italian, and German. At the time it was a women's college, with a storied history. Radcliffe College was located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, founded in 1879, and was a liberal arts college. It had a reputation for having a particularly intellectual, literary, and independent-minded female student body. It was a perfect place for Virginia to mature.

She also attended George Washington University, where she studied French and Economics. Her parents could afford this first-class education and encouraged it. Virginia was a smart and independent girl. She was bright, ambitious, adventurous, and saw herself as anyone's equal.

This was a time after the ratification of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote in late 1920. Not everyone was ready to see women as equal to men. As many women were looking for equality, just as many men were not ready to recognize equality in the workplace or in the home.

In 1926, Virginia Hall went to finish her studies in Europe and traveled the Continent to broaden her experiences. She studied in France, Germany, and Austria. Her goal was to be in the diplomatic corps but she was ahead of her time. Direct discrimination against women was still acceptable behavior.

Wall Street market forces were bringing her family's privileged lifestyle to an end. The upper-class banker's bull run abruptly ended in the fall of 1929 while Virginia

was overseas. On October 29, 1929, Black Tuesday hit Wall Street as investors traded some 16 million shares on the New York Stock Exchange in a single day. Billions of dollars were lost, wiping out thousands of investors. In the aftermath of Black Tuesday, America and the rest of the industrialized world spiraled downward in the history of the Western industrialized world up to that time. Only war would break the back of this depression.

Virginia was required to make her own way in the world, and she was ready to.

Pre-World War II and Tragedy

The end in 1918 and the aftermath of World War I seemed to call for greater diplomacy. A woman of the times, Hall's goal was to be a member of the diplomatic corps. Which was not an easy goal to achieve in the 1920s. There were very few women in the corps at that time. Based on her education, language skills, and European experiences, she would have been an easy hire; but not so for a woman of that time. Virginia did find work as a State Department clerk in the Warsaw Embassy in 1931.

She transferred to Smyrna, Turkey. This ancient port city on the Mediterranean would have been ideal for Virginia's outgoing, gregarious and adventurous spirit. The area was steeped in history dating back to Alexander the Great and had been part of the Ottoman Empire. At the time she arrived the economy was driven by cotton dying, mills spinning thread, ironworks, and soap works owned by British and French companies. Much of the area was still undeveloped and outdoor shooting sports were regular activities of the educated class. Virginia was a regular participant in the hunts for *Gallinago* – a marsh bird found on the shore of the Gediz Peninsula in Turkey. This snipe shorebird frequents wet meadows and marshes around the world in temperate and warm regions, like the marshes in Turkey.

Virginia was competitive even in hunting outings. In 1933, she was out early and hoping to bag the first snipe of the day. While going over a fence, she tripped and her shotgun went off. She accidentally shot herself in the left foot while hunting those noisy birds. Immediate medical care was necessary to save her life but it could not save her limb. After gangrene set in, Virginia lost a portion of her left leg just below the knee.

She was given a leave from the State Department and returned to the United States for care and recovery. Back at the family farm in Parkton, Maryland, Virginia learned to walk with a prosthetic limb. Prosthetic limbs date back to 300 B.C. In the 1930s these were still crude and heavy device. Hall's prosthetic leg would have been made of wood and leather, with an aluminum foot. The prosthetic weighed more than 7 pounds. It was attached by leather belts wrapped around Virginia's waist. Even if fitted properly, the leg would have caused pressure sores and chafing.

Virginia called her leg “Cuthbert.” A famous Cuthbert was an Angelo-Saxon monk, mystic, miracle worker, and saint in England in the 600s A.D. It is unclear if Virginia knew of the saint from her studies or travels. The reason for naming the prosthetic has been lost in time.

She clearly would have had to go through the normal stages of grief in losing her left leg. These include feelings of shock; denial, anger, depression, and acceptance. The recovery takes time and naming the artificial limb was likely a coping mechanism. Her options would have included staying in the United States and changing her dreams and goals. However, that was not consistent with the independent and strong woman that was Virginia Hall.



Virginia Hall
(Photo courtesy of
Central Intelligence
Agency)

After her leg injury, she worked again as a consular clerk in Venice, Italy, and Tallinn, Estonia. Hall made several attempts to become a diplomat with the United States Foreign Service, but women were rarely hired. In 1937, she was turned down by the Department of State because of an obscure rule against hiring people with disabilities as diplomats. The Secretary of State Cordell Hull dismissed her request writing, “Hall could become a fine career girl in the Consular Service.” She was not going to be “a fine career girl.” However, even her appeal to disabled [President Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) was unsuccessful. Six years after her accident, Virginia Hall resigned from the Department of State in March 1939, still a consular clerk.

What Now?

What is a bright, adventurous woman to do now that her dream of diplomatic service is over? This was a time when the world was clearly changing. The Nazis were mobilizing for power. In 1938, Hitler sent troops into Austria and annexed it with little to no

opposition from the rest of the world. Later that year, Hitler started to make claims on parts of Czechoslovakia and was further appeased when the Munich Agreement was signed in September. This allowed Germany to claim parts of Czechoslovakia with permission from France and the United Kingdom. In early 1939, Hitler began building up the German Navy and decided to take over the remaining parts of Czechoslovakia. Germany then signed the Pact of Steel with Italy, guaranteeing their alignment in all matters of war, shortly after Italy had invaded and taken over Albania. France and the United Kingdom agreed to support Poland and in August, German troops began to gather on the Polish border. By September 1st, Germany launched an invasion of Poland. Finally, on September 3rd, France, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada declared war on Germany.

Virginia Hall was not one to cautiously wait and sit out on the next great adventure. However, she had harshly learned the limits of the United States government. Even with her skills, Hall was not sought out to assist the war effort. America was more focused on watching new movies – *Gone With the Wind* and *Wizard of Oz* – than stopping Hitler. Hall was focused on what was happening in her beloved Europe.

Looking to help in France, Hall took on the risky job of driving a medical ambulance for the Army of France. The French ambulance corps was known as *Services Sanitaires de L'Armee*. As a private, she received training in first aid and ambulance driving. Work was around the clock from May to June 14, 1940, when Paris fell. After the defeat of France in June 1940, it became obvious it was time to leave France and contemplate her options. The safest way was to get to England via a stop in Spain.

The U.S. Embassy in London wanted her firsthand information on the status of France. Indeed, she was again hired by the U.S. Defense Attache Office but knew this was a dead-end with no career opportunities. She endured the Luftwaffe's bombings of London in the Battle of Britain. Virginia left that position as a clerk in the U.S. Defense office in February 1941 after being recruited by the British Special Operations Executive or SOE.

American in British Service

The SOE was a secret organization created in World War II to conduct espionage, sabotage, and gather information for the British. It began in July 1940 and was known as "Baker Street Irregulars", "Churchill's Secret Army" or "Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare." Its mission was to operate in occupied territories and disrupt German activities, gather information useful to the Allies, and assist the Resistance and British servicemen behind enemy lines.

The importance of this clandestine work could not be underestimated, as with the danger of such work. Virginia Hall was uniquely qualified to participate in behind

enemy line spy activity. Importantly, the British saw a role for women to play in this work. The SOE directly employed or controlled more than 13,000 people, about 25% of whom were women. SOE recruited all types of people. Men and women of various nationalities also made their way into the SOE. It was dangerous work and 40% of female SOE agents in France did not survive, either being executed or sent to die in Nazi concentration camps.

Hall, like all agents of the SOE, had to be trained for the work. They received training in such things as armed and unarmed combat, parachute jumping, radio operations, demolition techniques, tradecraft, etc. Her training would have reflected her abilities and limitations.

Hall was eventually sent to Vichy, France, in August 1941 by SOE as the second female agent in France. She ended up staying longer than her predecessor. Her initial cover was as a New York Post reporter which gave her the ability to interview people and populate stories with facts of importance to British military planners.

She created the Heckler network in Lyon. Over the next 15 months, she focused on support operations – organizing resistance movements; supplying agents with money, weapons, and supplies; helping downed airmen to escape; offering safe houses and medical assistance to wounded agents and pilots. At a time when rescue operations for downed airmen were impossible, the lives could only be saved by the Resistance and those clandestine operations like the Heckler network.

From August 1941 until November 1942, her headquarters were in the Haute Loire department between the cities of Toulouse and Lyon. her code name was Geologist-5, with a mission to provide SOE with information on Vichy, France, including reports on political developments, economic conditions, and the pulse of the resistance. Lyon, in southern France, is closer to Geneva, Switzerland, than it is to Paris.

A network would be made up of numerous spies that in turn had a chain of agents that helped the network by providing information, safe houses, food, and logistical support. But Virginia went beyond her charter and proved adept at recruiting spies. The Heckler network she established had a reported 90 agents in southern France. The group provided intelligence on ammunition, fuel depots, German troop movements, and industrial production. Virginia's encoded communications were sent via Western Union telegram to her cutout at the New York Post, who forwarded the information to SOE London.

One of her agents, a local doctor name Jean Rousset, established an asylum for the mentally ill to provide medical support and hide escapees until safe passage from France could be found. The activity level of the Heckler network made Hall a target.

Lyon's Gestapo chief, Klaus Barbie, who never knew Virginia's true name or nationality, caught wind of her activities and was reported to have said, "I would give anything to get my hands on that limping Canadian bitch." He circulated wanted posters and placed a bounty on her head.

Of the more than 400 SOE agents ultimately sent to France, 25% did not survive. Every month that Virginia Hall stayed in Vichy the risk of identification and capture increased exponentially. Every night she slept wondering if it would be her last. Every agent that was captured was tortured for information if not immediately killed. The larger the network the greater the risk of disclosure by one under torture.

In September 1942, she sent a message back to SOE in London that "my time is about up." But a safe escape was no easy task. She could not rely on London to come and get her, she had to be resourceful enough to make her way out of Nazi France and into neutral Spain.

Virginia stayed another two months after her message, changing names and safe houses frequently to avoid capture. Her final mission was to aid the escape of two jailed agents. But when the Germans flooded the unoccupied zone with troops after their defeat in North Africa in mid-November 1942, Hall knew the borders would be sealed and more men would be hunting her. With disappointment, Hall left with only hours to spare. Her agent, Dr. Rousset, was arrested the day after she left, and the rest of Heckler was rolled up soon thereafter.

A car ride south with two companions deposited Hall at a trail thru the Pyrenees Mountains which lead to Spain. The trail took days to navigate. This was not a walk in the park for a woman and one that wore a prosthetic leg. The mountainous trail rose 7500 feet before coming down in Spain. It was a 44-mile trail that normally took three to four days. The exact time for travel and the pain she endured was never discussed by Hall. The November crossing would likely have faced rain and cold weather with the possibility of slippery snowfall. Even today it is widely stated that November is not the month to visit those mountains. Unfortunately, getting to Spain was not the end of Hall's problems. She arrived at the train station at San Juan de las Abadesas hours before the Barcelona-bound train. She was spotted and jailed by Spanish authorities for illegally crossing the border. Eventually, the U.S. Embassy secured her release and she returned to the United States.

Britain's King George secretly awarded her the honor of Member of the British Empire (MBE) in 1943. The secrecy was important because of the raging war and her desire to return to France to do her part. An MBE is an Order of the British Empire award. It is the third-highest ranking Order of the British Empire award, behind Commander of the Order of the British Empire (COB) which is first and then Officer of the Order of

the British Empire (OBE). The MBE is awarded to someone for making a positive impact in their endeavors.

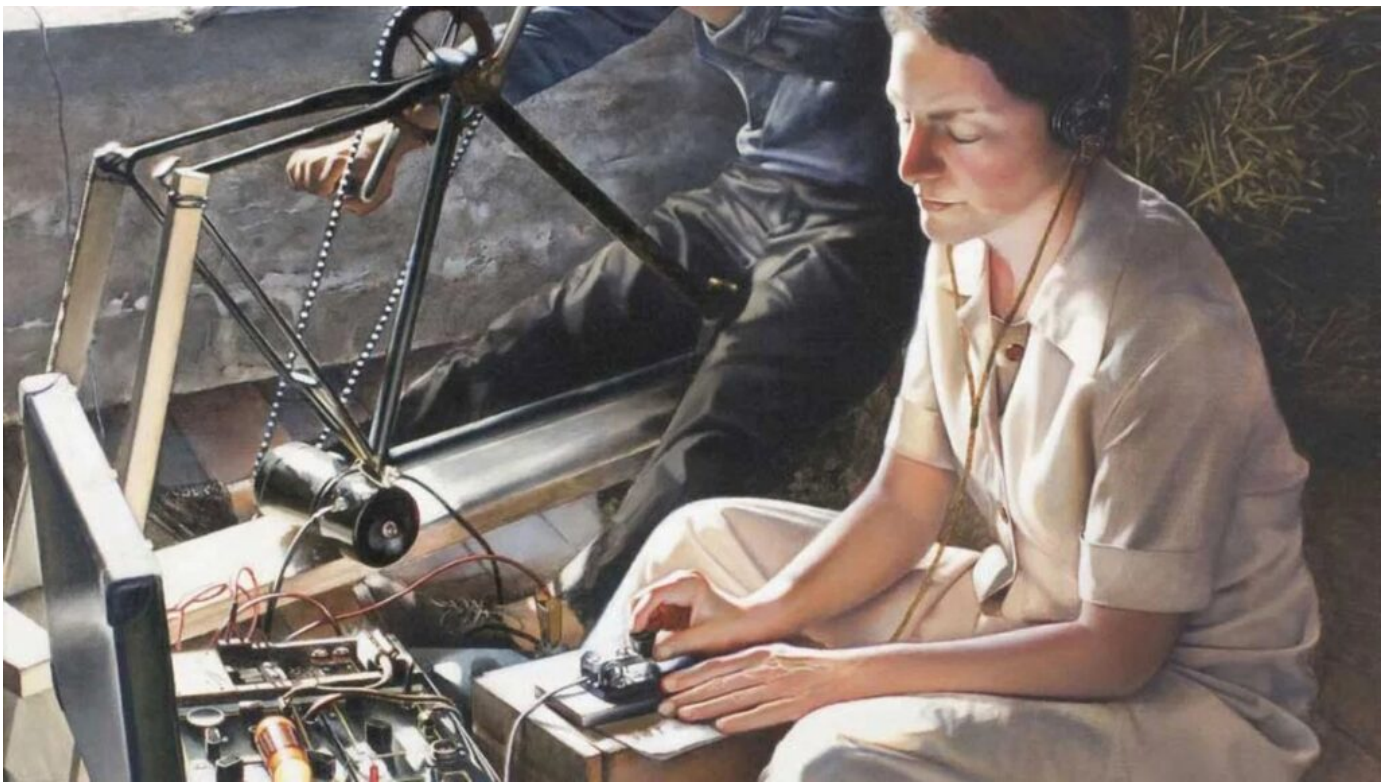
In-Service to America

Virginia Hall wanted to return to France but SOE knew it was too dangerous. The Nazis were looking for her and her network had been rolled up.

Finally, her homeland now realized her value and its need for her covert skills. It took about 18 months, but Hall was recruited by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in the spring of 1944. The Allied invasion at Normandy was not until June 6, 1944, but preparing for the invasion forced OSS to go in new directions. Hall worked her way back to the Haute Loire, where she organized several thousand Maquis resistance fighters, blew up bridges, and conducted other sabotage operations to support the Allies' D-Day invasion.

This was a time of tremendous activity by the OSS and SOE. Airdrops of 10,000 tons of supplies were delivered to the Resistance known as the Maquis. Six months before the June 1944 invasion, the OSS and the resistance were responsible for the sabotage of more than 100 factories and the destruction of more than 1,000 locomotives, which brought German industry to a halt.

Independent spies like Virginia Hall were inserted into France as critical to the softening up of France and making the Germans fight or defend on many fronts. Hall was inserted by a British motor gunboat at Began-Fry east of Roscoff in Brittany since her artificial leg prevented her from parachuting in. She returned as a trained wireless operator for the OSS in March 1944 and as a member of the Saint network. Working in territory still occupied by the German army and mostly without the assistance of other OSS agents, she supplied arms, training, and direction to French resistance groups. Hall was fearless and aggressive in her work to defeat the Germans.



A painting of Virginia Hall as a wireless operator during her second mission to France. (Jeffrey W. Bass, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

The woman who could not be taken seriously by the U.S. State Department years earlier was hired by the OSS but at the rank of second lieutenant and pay well beneath her ability. The OSS provided her with a forged French identification card in the name of Marcelle Montagne. Her codename was Diane. The objective of the OSS teams was to arm and train the resistance groups.



The OSS of World War II forged a French identification certificate

for "Marcelle Montagne," an alias of spy Virginia Hall
(Photo by Rudi Williams, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)



Virginia Hall's driver's license, 1930s.

(Lorna Catling Collection)

Landing with her was Henri Lassot, 62 years old. Lassot was the organizer and leader of the new Saint network, it being too radical a thought that a woman could lead an OSS network of agents. She was Lassot's wireless operator. They were the fourth and fifth OSS agents to arrive in France. Lassot carried with him one million francs, equivalent to 5,000 British pounds; and Hall had 500,000 francs with her. Hall quickly separated herself from Lassot whom she characterized as too talkative and a security risk, instructing her contacts not to tell him where she was. Aware that her accent would reveal that she was not French, she engaged a French woman, Madame Rabut, to accompany and speak for her.

Hall was disguised as an older woman, with gray hair and her teeth filed down to resemble that of a peasant woman. She disguised her limp with the shuffle of an old woman.

From March to July 1944, Hall roamed around France just south of Paris, posing sometimes as an elderly milkmaid (and on one occasion selling cheese she had made to a group of German soldiers). She found and organized drop zones, established several

safe houses, and made/renewed contacts, notably with Philippe de Vomécourt, in the Resistance. She organized and supplied several resistance groups of a hundred men each with arms in the Cher and Cosne. She unsuccessfully attempted to organize a jailbreak to gain freedom for three men she called her nephews, captives of the Germans in Paris. Her resistance groups undertook many successful small-scale attacks on infrastructure and German soldiers.

From July to September 1944, Hall operated in Haute-Loire Department. Hall was next given the job of helping the Maquis in southern France harass the Germans in support of the Allied invasion of the south, Operation Dragoon, which would take place on August 15, 1944. As a woman with the rank of second lieutenant, she had problems asserting her authority over the Maquis groups and the self-proclaimed colonels heading them. She complained to OSS headquarters, "you send people out ostensibly to work with me and for me, but you do not give me the necessary authority."

She told the Maquis leaders that she would finance them and give them arms on the condition that they would be advised by her, but the prickly Maquis leaders continued to be a problem. The three planeloads of supplies she received in late July and the money she distributed for expenses gained their grudging acquiescence.

The three battalions of Maquis (about 1,500 men) in her area undertook a number of successful sabotage operations. Now part of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), they forced the German occupiers to withdraw from Le Puy-en-Velay and head north with the rest of the retreating German forces.

By late August 1944, the liberation of France was complete; Paris was liberated. Citizens celebrated in the streets as American troops rumbled through the avenues on August 26th. With the collapse of the Nazis, Hall and fellow spy, Paul Golliot, returned to Paris in April 1945. She wrote reports and identified people who had helped her and were deserving of commendations and then resigned from OSS. The need for and journey of independent spies like Virginia Hall was coming to an end. But her efforts were not forgotten.

In May 1945, Gen. William Donovan, the legendary head of the OSS, presented her with the [Distinguished Service Cross](#). President Truman wanted to give Hall the award himself in a public ceremony, but she declined such a public event. Hall declined the ritual of awarding by the President, worried the fanfare would make her non-operational in the future and reveal too much to the enemy.

It was the only Distinguished Service Cross awarded to a civilian woman in World War II.

The Distinguished Service Cross is the United States Army's second-highest military

decoration for soldiers who display extraordinary heroism in enemy force. Actions that merit the DSC must be of such a high above those required for all other U.S. combat decorations.

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS CITATION:



Virginia Hall of Special Operations Branch receiving the Distinguished Service Cross from General Donovan, September 1945.

(CIA People, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

Distinguished Service Cross from General Donovan, September 1945. (CIA People, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

"The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Miss Virginia Hall, a United States Civilian,

for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving as an American Civilian Intelligence Officer in the employ of the Special Operations Branch, Office of Strategic Services, who entered voluntarily and served in enemy-occupied France from March to September 1944. Despite the fact that she was well known to the Gestapo because of previous activities, Miss Hall established and maintained radio communications with London headquarters, supplying valuable operational and intelligence information. With the help of a Jedburgh team, she organized, armed, and trained three battalions of French resistance forces in the Department of the Haute Loire. Working in a region infested with enemy troops and continually at the risk of capture, torture, and death, she directed the resistance forces with extraordinary success in acts of sabotage and guerrilla warfare against enemy troops, installations, and communications. Miss Hall displayed rare courage, perseverance, and ingenuity. Her efforts contributed materially to the successful operations of the resistance forces in support of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in the liberation of France." Miss Hall displayed rare courage, perseverance, and

ingenuity. Her efforts contributed materially to the successful operations of the resistance forces in support of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in the liberation of France."

The French government awarded her the Croix de Guerre avec Palme in 1988 as part of the inaugural class of the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame. The Croix de Guerre is a French military decoration, created on September 26, 1939, to honor people who fought with the Allies against the Axis forces at any time during World War II.

In 2006, the French and British ambassadors honored Hall, who died in 1982, with a ceremony at the French ambassador's home in Washington. The British ambassador to the United States presented a certificate signed by King George IV to Ms. Hall's niece. Hall should have received the document in 1943 when she was made a member of the Order of the British Empire. However, it had remained in a British government vault for over 50 years.

Life After World War II

Life back in the United States had to be slow-paced and dull for Hall. She did not have a "normal" life to return to after exploring the world. But adjust she must. She did return to Lyon to see how her friends and comrades had fared after the war. Heartbreak and happiness would be in store for her.

Her closest associates, brothel owner Germaine Guérin and Dr. Jean Rousset, had both been captured by the Germans and sent to concentration camps, but they survived. She arranged 80,000 francs (400 British pounds) compensation from the United Kingdom for Guérin, but most of her network received nothing other than freedom. Unfortunately, all too many of her network did not survive – some were executed at Buchenwald concentration camp. The German agent, Robert Alesch, who had betrayed her network in Lyon was captured after the war and executed in Paris.

In 1947, Hall joined the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – the successor to the OSS – and was one of the first women hired by the new agency. Her desk-bound job as an intelligence analyst was to gather information about Soviet penetration of European countries. She resigned in 1948 and then was rehired in 1950 for another desk job.



Virginia Hall and Paul Golliot
(Lorna Catling Collection)

In 1951, she worked alongside fellow former spy, Paul Golliot, supporting undercover activities to prevent the spread of communism in Europe. She simply was not cut out to sit at a desk and be subservient to men that had less knowledge and experience. In 1966, she retired, at the mandatory retirement age of 60. Those who did not know her background would have viewed her as just another federal bureaucrat buying time to retire.

Her personal life took a positive turn in 1957 when she married Golliot after living together off and on for years. They retired to a farm in Barnesville, Maryland, where she lives until her death on July 8, 1982. She packed a lot of living into her 76 years. Her husband survived her by five years. She is buried in the Druid Ridge Cemetery in Pikesville, Maryland.

Virginia Hall left no memoir, granted no interviews, and spoke little about her overseas life – even with relatives. She left behind no daughters, but she changed perceptions about what everyone’s daughters could accomplish. Her life is a road map of how to raise a strong and independent woman.

About the Author

Jim Fausone is a partner with Legal Help For Veterans, PLLC, with over twenty years of experience helping veterans apply for service-connected disability benefits and starting their claims, appealing VA decisions, and filing claims for an increased disability rating so veterans can receive a higher level of benefits.

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