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ART IN THE FIRST PERSON: A WRITER'S SEARCH FOR VIRGINIA HALL

# Hero Worship

AMERICA'S FIRST AND GREATEST WORLD WAR II SPY: PART 1

BY GRAIG R. GRALLEY



Top: Virginia Hall's passport photo, 1928

Above: A young Virginia Hall

Opposite: Box Horn Farm  
All photographs are courtesy of the author.

I love a good story, and the one I'm working on for a forthcoming book is not well-known outside the halls of the CIA. It's about our country's first and greatest spy of the Second World War: a middle-aged woman from Baltimore with a wooden leg. Her name was Virginia Hall.

Virginia Hall shatters our myths of what a spy is or should be. She wasn't a media creation like *Homeland's* Carrie Mathison or Ian Fleming's James Bond. Virginia Hall was a true-life hero with an amazing story.

Recruited by British Intelligence to become the first agent to live behind enemy lines in occupied France during WWII, Virginia became, according to the Gestapo, "The Allies' most valuable agent." But she was discovered and forced to escape the Gestapo by cross-

ing the snow-capped Pyrenees, dragging her prosthetic limb behind her. Despite the dangers and being advised not to take the risk, Virginia returned to France to organize several thousand resistance fighters for sabotage operations on the eve of the D-Day invasion.

It was difficult to unmask this unlikely hero. Virginia was an "old school" spy who survived by staying silent. "Too many of my friends were killed," she said, "because they talked too much." True to form, Virginia gave no interviews, wrote no memoir, and said little about her life overseas, even decades after her career in espionage had ended. She died in 1982.

I began my search for this spy with a wooden leg four years ago. Since then, I scoured the US and British archives, recording hours of interviews with the



only person who remembered Virginia: her niece. I reviewed World War II literature for reflections of Virginia and even spoke with a psychiatrist specializing in trauma to better understand her world view. It's been an amazing journey, and along the way I discovered that Virginia Hall had fought discrimination based on her gender and disability just as fiercely as she fought the Nazis.

Growing up, Virginia led a charmed life. She spent summers in Europe and on the family's 110-acre Box Horn Farm on the outskirts of Baltimore. She went to the exclusive Roland Park School, then to Radcliffe and Barnard. After graduating from the Consular Academy in Vienna, Austria, she became a clerk for the U. S. State Department, a typical gender-based assignment reserved for young women. But Virginia was ambitious. She planned to take the Foreign Service examination, even though at the time only six of 2,000 Foreign Service officers were women and none were ambassadors. Highly talented and educated, Virginia spoke five languages and had a deep understanding of peoples and cultures. If anyone could make it, she decided, she could.

Then, on December 8, 1933, everything changed. Virginia was wounded while hunting shore birds on the Turkish coast and lost her left leg below the knee

when gangrene set in. The State Department prohibited differently-abled applicants from joining the Foreign Service and rejected her application. She was furious, fought the decision, but her appeal was denied. Disheartened, Virginia returned home to Box Horn Farm where she was fitted with "Cuthbert," a heavy wooden prosthesis with an aluminum foot. A year later she returned to the State Department and had tours in Venice and Estonia, but her heart wasn't in it. She resigned in May 1939.

Virginia was driving an ambulance outside of Paris when the Nazis invaded France in June 1940. She escaped to London, which was in flames from the German blitz. Winston Churchill had just established the secret Special Operations Executive to "Set Europe Ablaze" with spies and saboteurs, but SOE knew little about German plans and intentions. Virginia, who spoke French and German, impressed British intelligence and was promptly recruited. Of 39 woman spies slipped into wartime France between 1941 and 1944, thirteen would not return.

Next month, part 2: *My Search for Virginia Hall: The Life of a Spy behind the Lines in World War II France.*

For more about Virginia Hall's life and career, visit [www.craiggralley.com](http://www.craiggralley.com).

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