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ART IN THE FIRST PERSON

Flight Across the Pyrenees

A WRITER'S SEARCH FOR VIRGINIA HALL: HER MOUNTAIN TREK TO FREEDOM, PART 3
BY CRAIG R. GRALLEY

“Crossing the [Pyrenees] mountains was the hardest thing I’d ever do.”

—Virginia Hall

Winter 1942. German soldiers, just defeated in North Africa, were flooding into southern France and arresting allied agents. The allies’ spy networks were collapsing all around. Virginia Hall, America’s first and greatest spy of the Second World War, had been betrayed by a Catholic priest, and Gestapo Chief Klaus Barbie, “The Butcher of Lyon,” was hunting her. Wanted posters called her “the most valuable allied agent,” and proclaimed, “We must find and destroy her.” Sensing the danger, Virginia sent a coded message to London: “My time is up.” She fled Lyon in the middle of the night, just hours before the first of her agents was captured. The snow-capped Pyrenees offered the only avenue of escape to freedom in Spain.

What would’ve been an arduous trek for any person was especially difficult for a woman and her heavy prosthetic left leg, which she named “Cuthbert.” Traveling at night to evade the enemy, Virginia struggled for three days through the winter ice and snow, up and down the rocky peaks, dragging Cuthbert behind her. But if enemy border patrols, the terrain and elements weren’t enough, Virginia also battled her Spanish guide, who was opposed to taking Virginia or any women over the mountains. Virginia later told her niece, Lorna Catling, “The guide would have left me behind had he known I had a wooden leg. Crossing the mountains was the hardest thing I’d ever do.” Her trek through the Pyrenees was a defining event of her life.



Opposite: In the city square in the village of Py was a map pressed behind glass that showed a single trail over a mountain pass, the Col de Mantet, that continued to Spain.

Above: A view of de la Dona & Trail viewed from Col de Mantet
Both photographs are courtesy of the author.

It's been said that a person's character is shaped by the challenges they face, and after three years of searching for Virginia in dusty documents and through second-hand accounts, my own path was now clear. I'd find Virginia by walking in her footsteps through the mountains.

It would be a difficult search. There were no documents, no maps and, I soon learned, no trail markers showing Virginia's route. Only a cryptic passage in a book told of the trail, and it was written in a language I couldn't read. But I was fortunate. Janet, my wife and very able navigator, translated the critical section from the French book, which said Virginia started her trek from the walled medieval city of Villefranche-de-Conflent.

We were greeted with blank stares in the tourist information office, but one woman's interest was piqued when I mentioned the freedom trail in town. She spoke with colleagues, made a phone call, held more discussions, then more calls. Finally, she announced, "I know nothing of a freedom trail, but there is a path, an old one, up the road. But be warned," she said. "It is very steep."

We started by the river Rotja, as the book said, but the once smooth river path had become overgrown, spiraled higher and turned rocky. Eventually, we passed through the village of Py where, in the city square, a map was pressed behind glass. It showed a single trail over a mountain pass, the Col de Mantet,

that continued to Spain; all were markers in the book. Just then, we knew we'd discovered Virginia's trail.

As we continued up the narrow path where only scrub brush grew, my thoughts turned to Virginia. I imagined her inching her way up the steep trail with "Cuthbert," slipping in the snow, and picking herself up. And I saw her other challenges, too: the guide who was willing to leave her in the snow; the Gestapo chasing her from behind; the uncertainty of what lay ahead. Then I sensed her immense mental strength, determination and perseverance. I saw Virginia as she was: a remarkable differently-abled woman.

Two days and more than 20 miles later, Virginia crossed the border into Spain. But her ordeal wasn't over. She arrived far too early at the train station, 4:30 a.m. for the 5:15 to Barcelona, and the police were waiting.

Without an entrance stamp in her passport, Virginia was arrested for crossing the border illegally. She spent a month in a Spanish prison, enough time to think about her next move. She'd risk it all again by returning to Nazi-occupied France.

Next Month: My Search for Virginia Hall: Her Return to Nazi-Occupied France

For more about Virginia Hall's life and career, visit www.craiggralley.com.