



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

Hero Worship

THE LIFE OF A SPY BEHIND THE LINES IN WORLD WAR II FRANCE: PART 2

BY CRAIG R. GRALLEY

“My address has been given to Vichy... I may be watched... my time is up.”

—Virginia Hall's message to London, 1942

I began my search for Virginia Hall, America's first and greatest spy of the Second World War, at the beginning, with her childhood. I had to know: was this spy's daring character shaped early in life? Perhaps Virginia's niece, Lorna Catling, had the answer.

Lorna, who lives outside of Baltimore, was ready for me: photo albums, documents and yearbooks were neatly stacked on her kitchen table. She opened the yearbook from Roland Park School, which showed young Virginia, a good but not exceptional student, had a passion for leading. She was class president, editor of the school newspaper and captain of the field hockey team.

But another fact caught my attention: Virginia loved to act in school plays. Assuming a role as someone else was perfect training for an espionage agent. But Virginia wasn't satisfied with just any part. “She always played the pirate chief,” Lorna said.

Even at an early age Virginia had a streak of boldness, independence and self-confidence. According to her yearbook, she was “the most original,” unconventional



and with no apologies. As a prank, Virginia brought a snake to school wrapped around her wrist like a bracelet. She was a rebellious young woman, quitting Barnard and then Radcliffe colleges after refusing to take required classes. Lorna said nothing daunted her, and she was comfortable in any situation. Lorna admitted that her Aunt Virginia “was a little scary.”

It was the spring of 1941. London was in flames from German bombs, and even US diplomats thought the



Opposite top: Virginia Hall's yearbook page from Roland Park School; and a photo identification card

Above: The trail that would lead her to make the arduous trek in winter over the snow-capped Pyrenees to freedom in Spain.

All photographs are courtesy of the author.

British cause was lost. The British Special Operations Executive (SOE) was recruiting undercover agents, needing bold risk-takers who broke the rules. Virginia, a good match, was quickly recruited. Her assignment: to become the Allies' first spy to live behind enemy lines in France.

Virginia's American passport helped her act the part of an undercover journalist for the New York Post. For most of 1941, the United States wasn't in the war and still had diplomatic relations with the German-controlled French government. So Virginia, using the false names Marie Monin, Brigitte Lecontre and others, could travel throughout Vichy France to observe and to ask probing questions of French and German officials.

Her mission in August 1941, code-named "Geologist-Five," was to provide information on political developments, economic conditions and the French will to resist the German occupation. But Virginia proved most adept at recruiting spies. One, code-named Suzanne-25, had a stable of 90 agents who reported on ammunition depots, German troop movements, industrial production and even a German submarine base in Marseilles, which was later destroyed by allied bombs.

When the British started parachuting men and equipment into France for sabotage operations across the country, Virginia was first on the ground. She organized resistance movements, supplied agents

with money, weapons and supplies, offered medical assistance and safe houses and helped downed airmen to escape. Soon, wanted posters with her likeness and offering a reward appeared around Lyon, calling her "The most valuable Allied agent."

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In late 1942, Virginia was betrayed by a Catholic priest. The Gestapo's Klaus Barbie, "The Butcher of Lyon," vowed, "I'd give anything to get my hands on that limping bitch."

Virginia sent an urgent message to London: "My address has been given to Vichy...I may be watched...my time is up."

But her escape wouldn't be easy. The Germans, just defeated in North Africa, were flooding into southern France, where they began to seal the borders. Only one avenue remained: Virginia and her a prosthetic limb, "Cuthbert," would have to make the arduous trek in winter over the snow-capped Pyrenees to freedom in Spain.

Next Month: *My Search for Virginia Hall: Her Mountain Trek to Freedom*

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