



ART IN THE FIRST PERSON

A Spy to the End

A WRITER'S SEARCH FOR VIRGINIA HALL:
HER RETURN TO NAZI-OCCUPIED FRANCE, PART 4

BY CRAIG R. GRALLEY



Artist's sketch of Virginia Hall as "Diane"

I've read that World War II stories are popular because there's a clear line between good and evil. Today, our country's conflicts seem clouded in gray. But in researching the story of Virginia Hall, America's first and greatest spy of the Second World War, the line was clear but the outcome was far from certain.

After she was betrayed, Virginia was hunted by the Gestapo and made a harrowing escape over the snowy Pyrenees in the winter of 1942, only to be arrested by Spanish police for entering the country illegally. Yet even after her release from a Spanish jail a month later, and with Gestapo chief, Klaus Barbie, "The Butcher of Lyon," waiting for her, Virginia demanded to go back to help liberate France.

Her bosses in British Intelligence refused her request, calling it a suicide mission. She was too well known, they said, but now Virginia had another option. The Americans were in the fight and had their own secret espionage organization, the Office of Strategic Services, and though the OSS didn't want to send Virginia back either, they were in a bind. The organization lacked trained spies. Only three were in France at the time, and OSS needed wireless operators, as well. Virginia, highly experienced, was so determined to return that she took wireless training to make herself even more valuable. In April 1944, the Americans relented and sent her back dressed as an old peasant (Virginia refused the plastic surgery OSS



Opposite, top: "Virginia Hall Operating a Wireless," by Jeffrey Bass, courtesy CIA Museum; and a sketch of "Diane"

Above: Virginia Hall receiving the Distinguished Service Cross from Major General William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, head of the OSS after World War II
Photographs are courtesy of the author.

offered). Carrying two suitcases, her radio in one and old clothes in the other, she and her prosthetic limb, Cuthbert, were delivered by torpedo boat on a moonless night to the coast of Brittany. The documents in her pocket now bore the name "Marcelle Montagne." Her agents would know her as "Diane."

She arrived two months before the D-Day invasion with a mission to find safe houses and landing zones south of Paris. It was a surprisingly small assignment for such a seasoned spy. But Virginia wasn't one to stay idle, and after accomplishing her mission, she set off on her own through enemy territory and worked her way back to Lyon. There she found, organized and equipped several thousand French Maquis, or French Resistance fighters. When the time came she directed them to blow up bridges, sever lines of communication, and otherwise disrupt German military troops rushing forward to counter the Allied invasion underway in Normandy.

For her heroism, the British named Virginia a "Member of the British Empire," but the citation for her Distinguished Service Cross, given by the US Army, gave the best account of her service:

"...Working in a region infested with enemy troops, and constantly hunted by the Gestapo, with utter disregard for her safety and continually at risk of capture, torture and death, she directed the Resistance Forces with extraordinary success in the acts of sabotage and guerilla warfare against enemy troops, installations and communications. Miss Hall displayed rare courage, perseverance and ingenuity; her efforts contributed materially ... (to) the liberation of France."

My search for Virginia Hall was nearing an end, but there was one question that trailed me from the outset. What inspired this differently-abled woman to do heroic things? Despite the physical hardships, dangers and mental stress, Virginia continued to push forward relentlessly. A psychiatrist who specializes in trauma offered a clue that changed my thinking about those whom we consider disabled. He said, "Perhaps Virginia Hall was able to do heroic things not in spite of her disability but because of it. Virginia, as the author of her own story, had been given a second chance at a full life and she wasn't going to waste it." é