

## Not Bad for a Girl from Baltimore: the Story of Virginia Hall



*Virginia Hall is awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by Bill Donovan, chief of Office of Strategic Services on September 23, 1945. (Photo courtesy: CIA Museum)*

Before she ended up at the top of the Gestapo's most wanted list in Nazi-occupied France, Virginia Hall spent seven years in the U.S. Foreign Service working as a consular clerk in Poland, Turkey, Italy, and Estonia. After she failed to pass the difficult U.S. Foreign Service exam on her first and second tries in December 1929 and July 1930, Virginia decided to get some practical on-the-job experience by working at U.S. missions overseas. As a result, she joined the staff of the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw in July 1931 as a consular clerk. She worked there until April 1933 when she transferred to the U.S. Consulate in the Turkish port city of Smyrna (present day Izmir).

Virginia always had a keen sense of adventure. A great lover of the outdoors, she enjoyed hiking, hunting, and horseback riding. But while serving in Turkey, Virginia suffered an

unfortunate hunting accident. On December 8, 1933, her shotgun misfired as she was climbing over a fence, leaving her left foot in tatters. While her colleagues managed to get her to a local hospital in time to save her life, gangrene had already set in. The American doctor who treated her was forced to amputate her left leg below the knee. After her condition stabilized, she transferred to the American Hospital in Istanbul in January 1934. By February, she was able to travel back to the United States to continue treatment. In her home town of Baltimore, Virginia was fitted with a custom prosthetic and started learning how to walk all over again. She named her new leg "Cuthbert."

### **A Quiet Year in Tallinn**

By September 1934, Virginia was ready to get back to work. She wrote the U.S. Department of State asking to be reinstated and listed, Spain, Estonia, and Peru as her top three choices for her next assignment. How the small U.S. Legation in Tallinn made it to the top of her bid list is not quite clear. But by the late 1920s, Estonia already had a reputation in U.S. Foreign Service circles as being a very nice place to work. As there were no positions available for consular clerks where she wanted to go, Virginia was offered a position at the U.S. Consulate in Venice instead. By December 1934, she was back at work.

In Venice, Virginia tried once again to pursue her dream of joining the U.S. Foreign Service. But the odds were against her. At that time, only six out of the 1,500 or commissioned U.S. Foreign Service officers were women. And those six women had to be single. If they got married, regulations required that they resign their commissions. In 1937, Virginia asked to complete the U.S. Foreign Service exam a third time, a process she had begun while stationed in Warsaw. To her great dismay, she received a rejection letter from the U.S. Department of State explaining that regulations required that all applicants be "able-bodied." Virginia's amputation, the letter went on to explain, "is a cause for rejection, and it would not be possible for Miss Hall to qualify for entry into the Service under these regulations."

Stunned, Virginia tried to appeal the decision. Hoping that a change of location might do her some good, Virginia accepted an opening at the U.S. Legation in Tallinn where she arrived in June 1938. Under the supervision of U.S. Consul Walter A. Leonard and Vice Consul Montgomery H. Colladay, Virginia worked once again as a consular clerk. She was in Tallinn on November 24, 1938 when U.S. Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary John C. Wiley presented his credentials to State Elder Konstantin Päts – although Virginia would not have been allowed to attend the ceremony as a simple Foreign Service clerk.

From Tallinn, Virginia launched her final appeal to Assistant Secretary of State G. Howland Shaw requesting a waiver to take the Foreign Service exam. When her appeal was turned down, Virginia decided that it time to leave the U.S. Foreign Service. The routine life of a consular clerk in a nice, quite post like Tallinn simply did not offer enough of a challenge. Virginia resigned from the U.S. Foreign Service and left Estonia for Paris in May 1939 in search of something greater. In France, Virginia would find her true calling, where her twin "handicaps" of being both a woman and an amputee would not matter.

## **The Girl from Baltimore**

Virginia Hall was born in Baltimore, Maryland on April 6, 1906. She was the youngest child of Edwin Lee Hall and Barbara Virginia Hammel. Nicknamed “Dindy” by family and friends, Virginia graduated from Roland Park Country Day School in Baltimore. From 1924 to 1926, she attended Radcliffe (Harvard University's college for women) before going on to Barnard (Columbia University's college for women). She attended graduate school at the American University in Washington, D.C. A self-confident and outgoing young person, Virginia participated in high school drama productions and was the editor of her college paper and president of her class. She may well have inherited her love of adventure from her father who stowed away on her grandfather's clipper ship when he was nine. Virginia's parents took her to Europe for the first time in 1909 and she would go back as often as she could. As a college student, Virginia studied at the *Ecole des Sciences Politiques* in Paris, the *Konsularakademie* in Vienna, and completed brief stints at universities in Strasbourg, Grenoble, and Toulouse. While studying in Europe, Virginia mastered both French and German, although she could never quite rid herself of a slight American accent.

## **Serving an Ambulance Driver in France**

After her dreams of joining the U.S. Foreign Service were crushed, Virginia spent the summer of 1939 in Paris trying to figure out what to do with her life. Hitler's September 1, 1939 invasion of Poland provided the answer for her. Right after France declared war on Germany on September 3, Virginia decided to follow in Ernest Hemingway's Great War footsteps by enlisting in the French ambulance corps known as the *Services Sanitaires de l'Armee* as a private. During the so-called “Phony War” which lasted from September 1939 to May 1940 when the French and Germans fought only minor skirmishes, Virginia received first aid training and began her work as an ambulance driver. The job evacuating casualties from the front lines was not easy, especially as Virginia had to drive an ambulance with her wooden leg. But all hell finally broke loose on May 10 when the Germans turned their full military might on France. From that day until the fall of Paris on June 14, Virginia worked almost around the clock evacuating the wounded to relative safety.

After France surrendered to Nazi Germany on June 22, Virginia found herself stuck in occupied France. Disgusted by the Nazi regime and their policies directed against European Jews, Virginia decided that the best way for her to continue fighting the good fight would be to go to England. Thanks for her U.S. passport, she made her way to London via neutral Spain in August 1940. When she checked in at the U.S. Embassy, Virginia was immediately asked to debrief the staff about the situation in occupied France. In September, she was hired by the U.S. Defense Attaché's Office. But Virginia did not want to end up right where she started, working as a clerk at a U.S. mission. After surviving the Battle of Britain and the *Luftwaffe's* round-the-clock bombings of London which lasted from July to October 1940, Virginia was all the more convinced that she wanted to take the war to the Germans.

## **Joining the British Special Operations Executive (SOE)**

On February 26, 1941, Virginia resigned her position at the U.S. Embassy in London as a code clerk stating that she was “seeking other employment.” What Virginia failed to mention is that she had been recruited by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). After completing the elite SOE's demanding agent training program, Virginia became an SOE special agent in April 1941. She then spent the summer planning her deployment in Vichy France. Virginia, code-named *Germaine*, arrived in France on August 23, 1941 assuming the identity of Brigitte LeContre, a French-American reporter for the *New York Post*. While the SOE usually kept its agents in the field for just six months, Virginia spent the next fifteen months working in Lyon organizing, funding, supplying, and arming the French resistance. She rescued downed Allied airmen, making sure they made it safely back to England. She oversaw SOE parachute drop, designed to supply resistance fighters. She organized sabotage attacks against German supply lines. She engineered POW escapes from German and Vichy French prisons and camps. She served as a liaison for other SOE agents operating in southern France.

Virginia did her job so well that she came to the attention of both the French Vichy Police and the German Gestapo. Because Virginia was a master of evasion and disguise, they never quite managed to figure out who *Germaine* was. But the Nazi authorities had enough information on her that they were looking for a “French-Canadian” nicknamed *la dame qui boite* – the Lady with the Limp. When U.S. and British forces invaded North Africa in November 1942, the fiction that was known as Vichy France came to an abrupt end. German troops took full control of the rest of France. The infamous Klaus Barbie assumed control over the Gestapo in former Vichy territories. “The Butcher of Lyon” – as he would become known – launched a nation-wide hunt to find Virginia, complete with want ads and posters. The Nazis code-named Virginia *Artemis*. Barbie is reputed to have told his staff: “I would give anything to lay my hands on that Canadian bitch.”

But by the time Barbie arrived in Lyon, Virginia had vanished. Despite the winter snows and her wooden leg, Virginia hiked all the way across the Pyrenees and into Spain. After being imprisoned in Spain for twenty days for lacking the proper documentation for entry, Virginia made it back to London in time for Christmas dinner where she was greeted by her SOE colleagues as a hero. Not content to sit around, Virginia wanted to get back out into the field. But now that Virginia was at the top of the Gestapo's most wanted list, the SOE thought that it was much too dangerous to send her back to occupied France. Virginia's next assignment took her to Madrid in May 1943 where she worked undercover as a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. Her job was to run a network of safe houses. But Spain was too far from the front lines for Virginia's liking. She transferred back to London and spent her free time how to become a radio operator. In July 1943, Virginia was made a Member of the British Empire for her outstanding contributions to the Allied war effort. She declined to accept the medal from King George VI for fear it would blow her cover.

## **Transferring to the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS)**

As the SOE refused to send her back behind German lines, Virginia set out to find someone who

would. On March 10, 1944, Virginia joined the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) with the grudging approval of the SOE. By the end of the month, Virginia (now code-named *Diane*) was back in France disguised as an old lady. She was taken to the coast of Bretagne by a wooden speed boat under the cover of darkness. She and a fellow agent landed on the shore in a rubber dinghy. After transiting through Paris, Virginia set up operations in a village south of Paris named Maidou where she monitored and reported on German troop movements. As the Germans had sophisticated radio detection equipment, the job of an undercover radio operator was incredibly dangerous. When the Gestapo began to close in, Virginia moved further south to the town of Cosne where she set up operations in May 1944. With the Allied invasion of France drawing near, OSS agent *Diane* received new orders to organize the local French Résistance forces. Having already done this in Lyon for the SOE, Virginia knew exactly what to do. She went to work contacting the French Résistance network and arranging for weapons, supplies, and other agents to be dropped behind enemy lines.

By the time Allied troops landed in Normandy on the morning of June 6, 1944, Virginia and her men were ready. They sabotaged supply lines, attacked German troops, and caused enough chaos behind enemy lines to hinder movements to the north of France. All over France, other OSS- and SOE-led French Résistance groups were doing exactly the same. When Allied troops hit the beaches of southern France on August 16, 1944, Virginia and her fellow agents switched tactics. What had been a guerilla war intended to harass and disrupt German forces became an all out war. On August 26, Virginia and her French Résistance troops accepted the surrender of the German southern command at Le Chambon. As the war in France was winding down, Virginia was instructed to coordinate another parachute drop on September 4. One of the men who arrived as part of the drop was a French-American lieutenant named Paul Goillot who called both Paris and New York home. While it was almost love at first sight, there was still a war to be won.

After clearing their zone of any resistance, Virginia, Paul, and several of their colleagues left Cosne on September 13 looking for more Germans to fight. By September 25, they made it to Paris which had been liberated the month before. After they reporting in, the OSS congratulated Virginia and her team on a job well done and pulled them out of the field. Although it looked like the war would soon be over, the Battle of the Bulge (December 1944 to January 1945) made it clear that the final battle for Germany would be long and hard. As a result, Virginia and Paul volunteered for another dangerous mission, this one behind German lines in Austria. On April 25, Virginia's new OSS team was in position in Switzerland, waiting for their orders to cross the border. But on May 2, the mission was scrubbed. Six days later, Germany surrendered to the Allies. The war in Europe was finally over.

Already a British hero for her work with the SOE, Virginia became an American hero when she received the Distinguished Service Cross on September 23, 1945 for her work with the OSS. In a letter to President Harry S Truman, General William J. Donovan wrote: "Miss Virginia Hall, an American civilian working for this agency in the European Theatre of Operations, has been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against the enemy. We understand that Miss Hall is the first civilian woman in this

war to receive the DSC. Despite the fact that she was well known to the Gestapo, Miss Hall voluntarily returned to France in March 1944 to assist in sabotage operations against the Germans." Although President Truman wanted to present the award at a public ceremony, Virginia insisted on protecting her cover. So instead, General Donovan – who earned both the Medal of Honor and the DSC while in command of the famous "Fighting Irish" regiment during the First World War – gave Virginia her DSC at a private ceremony attended only by her mother. Always modest, Virginia's only comment on receiving America's second highest award for bravery is said to have been: "Not bad for a girl from Baltimore."

### **Working for the CIA**

Back in the United States after the war, Virginia tried to join the U.S. Foreign Service one more time in March 1946 after President Truman dissolved the OSS. But she was turned down once again – this time because of "budgetary cutbacks." As a result, Virginia ended up joining the recently created Central Intelligence Group which would eventually evolve into the Central Intelligence Agency. Virginia spent a good part of 1947 and 1948 working in the field in Europe. After her return to the U.S., she worked for the CIA's National Committee for Free Europe in New York City where she lived with her long-time love, Paul Goillot. The two would finally get married in 1950. While Virginia wanted to stay out in the field, the CIA put her to work as an analyst in the Office of Policy Coordination in Washington in December 1951. Working a variety of jobs at the agency, Virginia was the first woman to become a member of the CIA's Career Staff in 1956. She left ten years later when she reached the mandatory retirement age of sixty. Living on her farm in Barnestown, Maryland, Virginia enjoyed reading, bird-watching, gardening, weaving, and her pet poodles. She died on July 12, 1982 in Rockville, Maryland at the age of 76. Virginia's wartime exploits are meticulously documented in Judith L. Pearson's *The Wolves at the Door: the True Story of America's Greatest Female Spy* (2005).



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Likk IV (neljas)

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poolt.

(väljaandja asutus)

Virginia Hall

(nimi- ja perekonnanimi)

Sünniaeg: 6. aprill 1906

Elukoht: Tallinn, Jõnismägi 5b, 7

31. augustil 1938 a.

(Pitser)

Ch. Kõnnu  
K. Kõnnu

(väljaandja asutise allkiri)



Virginia Hall

(loosootaniku allkiri)

Virginia Hall's Estonian Drivers License. (Photo courtesy: CIA Museum)