

A Climb to Freedom: A Personal Journey in Virginia Hall's Steps

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I'm hiking above 6,000 feet and have stumbled twice on this narrow and rocky trail deep in the French Pyrenees. There's nothing to grab on to if I fall; only thorny brush and an occasional scrub pine cling to the steep mountain slope. The glaciers of the snow-capped Canigou Massif are to my left; straight ahead, the Pic de la Donna, a rocky cone on the border with Spain, shines in the distance like a star.

As a wave of vertigo approaches, I take a deep breath of clean mountain air and begin to think of others who have made this climb: British and American pilots shot down over Nazi-occupied France, Jews facing deportation to death camps, Frenchmen escaping forced labor in Germany. I have found what the French call a "chemin de la liberté"—a freedom trail of the Second World War linking France with Spain.

Virginia Hall's childhood prepared her well for a life in espionage. The Halls of Baltimore—Edwin, a successful entrepreneur, Barbara, and their children, Virginia and John—loved outdoor adventures on the family farm and holidays in Europe. Young Virginia, a good though not exceptional student, was class president at Roland Park Country School, editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, and captain of the field hockey team. According to her niece, Lorna Catling, Virginia acted in school productions and "always took the role of the pirate chief."^a

Beneath her passion for leading was a streak of independence and self-confidence. The yearbook called Virginia "the most original of our class," and Catling remembered Aunt Virginia as "comfortable in any situation—nothing daunted her." After high school, Virginia went to Barnard and Radcliffe but quit after refusing to take classes required for graduation. She continued her studies in Paris and at the Konsularakademie in Vienna, where she earned a diploma in economics and international law. She also became fluent in French, German, and Italian. She understood Russian, too.

a. Author interview with Lorna Catling, 30 October 2015, at her home in Baltimore, Maryland.

It's been a difficult search. The French—even the locals—have forgotten this freedom trail exists. No historical markers or hikers are on this path. Like a dusty jewel buried in an attic trunk, its value and meaning have been lost to time.

I've come to the Pyrenees not to find any trail, but this very special one. I believe I've found the path used by Virginia Hall, one of America's most accomplished intelligence operatives of World War II, who fled France on short notice in November 1942 to escape capture, torture, and likely death at the hands of Gestapo chief Klaus Barbie, the Butcher of Lyon. But what would have been a difficult trek for an experienced hiker was an exceptional feat for this woman, who made the climb to freedom over the jagged Pyrenees wearing a prosthetic leg.

The Department of State seemed the perfect place to pursue a career for this self-reliant and adventurous woman. Indeed, she found work as a clerk at the US embassy in Warsaw. Virginia served in a number of European posts, including in Turkey. But she grew restless and having ambition sought to join the diplomatic corps, which had very few women at the time. But before she could take the required foreign service examination, she was accidentally wounded while hunting gallinago—a marsh bird found on the shore of the Gediz Peninsula in Turkey. After gangrene set in, Virginia lost a portion of her left leg just below the knee.

The State Department had strict rules against employees with disabilities joining the diplomatic corps, and Hall was furious when she was barred from testing. Her letter of appeal reached then-Secretary of State Cordell Hull, but he dismissed it. Implying Virginia should be satisfied with existing career prospects, the secretary wrote, "Hall could become a fine career girl in the Consular Service." His decision was final. Her preferred career path was blocked.^b

b. For more on Hall's career with the US Department of State, see Gerald K. Haines, "Virginia Hall Goillot: Career Intelligence

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On leave from State Department and back at the family farm in Parkton, Maryland, Virginia learned to walk with the prosthetic limb, which she nicknamed “Cuthbert.” Such devices in the 1930s were clunky appendages made of painted wood that often didn’t fit properly and pressure sores, created when the wood chafed the stump’s tender skin, were common. Though hollow, Cuthbert, with its aluminum foot, weighed more than 7 pounds. It was attached by leather belts wrapped around Virginia’s waist.

The Beginning of My Journey

I arrived in France in search of Virginia’s escape route, armed with three paragraphs from a book written in a language I didn’t understand. My wife translated the brief passage of Vincent Nouzille’s L’Espionne Virginia Hall: une Americaine dans la Guerre, which told of Hall’s arduous journey across the Pyrenees.

I thought a visit to France’s museum dedicated to freedom trails, the Chemin de la Liberté Musée in Saint-Girons in the foothills of the Pyrenees not far from Toulouse, would be the right place to start my search. I began by showing the two-room museum’s curator the paragraphs from Nouzille’s book. My enthusiasm crumbled quickly when she asked to make a copy of my thin record. She was not aware of Hall or Nouzille and had no knowledge of a freedom trail starting in Villefranche-de-Conflent. The museum’s exhibits displayed maps of trails beginning in Toulouse that crossed the central Pyrenees, well to the north of the route Nouzille described. I looked at the trails highlighted in red and blue, and decided that Virginia probably avoided these prominent routes to skirt German patrols and bypass the highest mountain passes. Coming up dry in Saint-Girons, my only option was to go to Villefranche-de-Conflent to conduct my search for Virginia Hall’s trail. (See map on page 4)

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Virginia Hall, having resigned from the State Department to find adventure and new meaning in her life, traveled to Paris on the eve of the German invasion. She saw the war up close as a driver in the French Ambulance Service, but after the Germans rolled through Paris in June 1940, she retreated to London. A vacancy opened at the US War Department, and she accepted a position as a code clerk.

Officer,” *Prologue*, 1994 (Winter): 249–50.

The United States was not yet in the war, but Virginia’s knowledge of the French countryside, fluency in French and German, and her moxie caught the attention of the British. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had just established the Special Operations Executive to “set Europe ablaze” by supporting underground resistance movements and conducting sabotage operations. But for all of its bravado, the new SOE had little real grasp of the European theater. It was using Michelin guides to cover the French war zone.

The SOE recruited Virginia to be its first woman resident agent in France.^a Using forged documents, false names, and working undercover as a reporter for the *New York Post*, Hall established in August 1941 a headquarters in the Haute Loire Department between the cities of Toulouse and Lyon. Her mission, code-named Geologist-5, was to provide SOE with information on Vichy France, including reports on political developments, economic conditions, and the popular will to resist.

But Virginia went beyond her charter and proved adept at recruiting spies. One agent, Suzanne Bertillon, a former government censor, who Virginia called “my unofficial Vichy correspondent,” established a chain of 90 agents in southern France. The group provided intelligence on ammunition and fuel depots, German troop movements, industrial production, and even a German submarine base under construction in the port of Marseilles, later destroyed by allied bombs.^b Some of Virginia’s encoded communications were sent via Western Union telegram to her cutout George Backer at the *New York Post*, who forwarded the information to SOE London.

Virginia also grew her agent network, code-named Heckler, into an important logistical hub. The British were ramping up agent operations, parachuting men and equipment into France for sabotage operations across the country. Heckler, first on the ground, was centrally located. Hall became an expert at support operations—organizing resistance movements; supplying agents with the money, weapons, and supplies; helping downed airmen to escape; offering safe houses and medical assistance to

a. See, M.R.D. Foot, *An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France, 1940–1944* (Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1966), 170.

b. See Suzanne Bertillon, “Review of Chain–1942 (HIHI Chain)” available in the Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1705143/REVIEW%20OF%20SS%20CHAIN%201942_0001.pdf

wounded agents and pilots. She also developed a specialty: planning and executing jailbreaks. One of her agents, a local doctor named Jean Rousset, established an asylum for the mentally ill to provide medical support and hide escapees until safe passage from France could be found.

According to SOE records, nearly every British agent sent to France received support from Heckler while it was active.^a But being the nerve center made Virginia a target. Lyon's Gestapo chief, Klaus Barbie, who never knew Virginia's true name or nationality, caught wind of her activities and was reported to have said, "I would give anything to get my hands on that limping Canadian bitch."^b He circulated wanted posters and placed a bounty on her head.

It's a given in the world of espionage that the risk of discovery and capture escalates the longer an agent stays behind the lines. Of the more than 400 SOE agents ultimately sent to France, 25 percent didn't return—many were executed on discovery—others survived brutal torture or were shipped to concentration camps.^c German military intelligence—the Abwehr—was extremely successful in infiltrating resistance groups and Allied sabotage networks. According to British historian M. R. D. Foot, by May 1942 there were no organized British networks reporting from occupied France.^d

With so many networks rolled up, Virginia became a more important source and conduit for information. When Virginia heard a French network in Paris codenamed Gloria was desperate to send reports and microfilm of German naval facilities to SOE London, she agreed to help. She didn't know that the leader of Gloria had been captured, tortured, and ultimately killed and that the Abwehr controlled his organization. The Abwehr sent its agent—a Catholic priest turned informant, Abbé Robert Alesh—to courier tampered microfilm to Heckler's drop at Dr. Rousset's office. Virginia didn't trust the abbé and sensed the coming danger: agent networks were collapsing all around and both the Abwehr and Gestapo were closing in. In September 1942, she sent a message to

London: "My address has been given to Vichy . . . I may be watched . . . my time is about up."^e

Closing in on the Trail

The tourist information office was close to the gate of the walled medieval city of Villefranche-de-Conflent. Though I met a blank stare when I asked about nearby trails, one woman's interest was piqued when I told of a chemin de la liberté in her town. She spoke with her colleagues and made a phone call. She held more discussions, then more calls. Finally, she hung up the phone and announced that she knew nothing of a freedom trail nearby, but there was one path, an old one, up the road, outside the village of Py that followed the Rotja River into the mountains. "But be warned," she said, "it is very steep."

My pulse quickened when I stopped at a small clearing on the one-lane road outside the walled city and saw a smooth path next to the Rotja. I walked it a bit before it ended at the road. Was that the trail? I continued on to the small village of Py, and there, in the center of town, pressed behind glass in a wooden frame was a wrinkled map of the nearby nature reserve, which bordered on Spain. It showed a single trail leading out of Mantet, skirting the Pic de la Donya to the Spanish border—all were markers in Nouzille's book. Just then I knew I had found the trail.



a. Commendation for Virginia Hall. British Archives (Kew): HS 9/647/4703284.

b. Judith Pearson, *Wolves at the Door* (The Lyons Press, 2005), 138.

c. About the same percentage of women serving as SOE agents in France lost their lives—13 of 53. Foot, *SOE in France*, 465–69.

d. *Ibid.*, 194.

e. Blind message from Philomene (Hall's code name), 21 September 1942. British Archives (Kew): HS9/647/4 703284.

Virginia Hall's Freedom Trail, November 1942



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According to Nouzille, Hall had passed through the German-proclaimed “forbidden zone” by car to Villefranche-de-Conflent on 12 November 1942 and started her walk into the mountains. She, along with two companions and a guide, followed the Rotja River southward and up to a mountain pass near Mantet—down a valley and over another pass near Pic de la Donya into Spain. They continued down again to the Spanish towns of Setcasas and Camprodon and finally to the village of Sant Juan de las Abadesas, where she was to board a train for Barcelona. Nouzille’s account doesn’t allow for an accurate determination of the distance Virginia actually walked, but given the complex terrain, it could have been as much as 50 miles. (From: Vincent Nouzille. *L’Espionne Virginia Hall: une Américaine dans la Guerre*” (Fayard, 2007) 224–25.)

As I began to walk the path from Py, my thoughts turned to Virginia. How difficult it must have been to hike over the rugged Pyrenees with Cuthbert. Then I remembered Lorna Catling telling me that Virginia, who was not prone to hyperbole, said crossing the Pyrenees was “the scariest part of my life overseas.” And I began to understand. I noticed the topography changing. An overgrown, treed path next to a bold stream began to curve upward. As I began to gain altitude, nearly 5,000 feet in the first 14 miles. as the Rotja got smaller and finally disappeared. The dirt path turned to loose rock and then boulders interrupted the trail. Its sides dropped off steeply and the trees gave way to scrub brush and grass, exposing me to a stiff breeze coming off the snow-covered peaks of the Canigou Massif. I was fortunate. I was hiking on a beautiful day in May, and yet, I was struggling to catch my breath.



A portion of the trail under gentler conditions in May.

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I remembered that Virginia stayed in the Haute Loire another two months after her September message to London. Changing names and safe houses frequently to avoid capture, she told London she had one more mission: to aid the escape of two jailed agents code-named Alex and Fabian. But when the Germans flooded the unoccupied zone with troops after their defeat in North Africa in mid-November 1942, Virginia knew the borders would be sealed and more men would be hunting her. She left with only hours to spare.^a Her agent, Dr. Rousset, was arrested the day after she left, and the rest of Heckler was rolled up soon thereafter.

In November the temperature in the lower elevations of the Pyrenees hover around freezing, and the mountain passes become covered with snow and ice, making footing treacherous. I imagined Virginia taking the steepest part of the slick trail sideways, putting her full weight on her right leg and using her hip to lever Cuthbert over the rocks. The constant pressure on her stump must have been unbearable. I remembered reading that Virginia, in a wireless transmission to London, said Cuthbert was causing her problems. The operator, not knowing that Cuthbert was her artificial limb, said, “If Cuthbert gives you trouble, eliminate him.”

Two days later and after negotiating mountain passes over 7,500 feet in altitude, Virginia arrived exhausted in Spain. But there she made a mistake, unusual for a

a. She arranged the jailbreak but left just days before it was scheduled to take place. Note from Philomene, in Barcelona, 4 December 1942 (Kew) HS9/647/4 703284.

seasoned operative. She arrived at the train station at San Juan de las Abadesas hours before the Barcelona-bound train. She was spotted and jailed by Spanish authorities for illegally crossing the border.

Eventually, the US embassy secured her release, and though Barbie was still hunting her, Hall was determined to return to France. The British refused her request, because she was too well-known to the Gestapo.^b But Hall did return, this time with the US Office of Strategic Services in the spring of 1944 as Allied forces were planning the Normandy invasion for June. With the Germans beginning a retreat, Hall worked her way back to the Haute Loire, where she organized several thousand Maquis, blew up bridges, and conducted other sabotage operations to support the Allies’ D-Day invasion.

Virginia Hall left no memoir, granted no interviews, and spoke little about her overseas life—even with relatives. She was awarded Member of the British Empire and received our country’s Distinguished Service Cross, the only civilian woman in the Second World War to do so. But she refused all but a private ceremony with OSS chief Donovan—even a presentation by President Truman. By this time Virginia had joined the CIA and thought the publicity would blow her cover. And she couldn’t let her career in espionage end that way. Virginia knew she had more mountains to climb.

b. In a 6 October 1943 letter, the chief of the SOE French Section, Maurice Buckmaster, denied Virginia’s request, writing her: “You are too well-known in the country and it would be wishful thinking believing you could escape . . . we do not even want to give him even half a chance by sending in anyone as remarkable as yourself.” British Archives (Kew) HS9/647/4 703284.