

intelligence in public media

The Mysterious Virginia Hall *World War II's Most* *Dangerous Spy*

Reviewed by Hayden Peake

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Reviewer: Hayden Peake has been contributing reviews to *Studies* since 2002.

Searching CIA's public website for "Virginia Hall" results in a series of pages and pictures that summarize the story of the agency's first female operations officer. In *The Mysterious Virginia Hall*, author Claudia Friddell, with the help of family recollections, artifacts, and archival documents, adds details about her early life and intelligence career.

A farm girl from Maryland, nicknamed Dinky by her family, Hall enjoyed horseback riding, hunting, sports, and academics. Her high school yearbook described her as a natural though cantankerous and capricious leader who was class-president, yearbook editor-in-chief, and "the most original of our class."

Friddell explains that it was during family trips to Europe that Hall decided she would become an ambassador one day. After completing university in France, she

made multiple applications to the US Foreign Service. All failed for different reasons, and she accepted an offer to become a State Department clerk. During service in Turkey her ambitions suffered another setback. While bird hunting, she shot herself in the foot, and the complications led to the amputation of her left leg just below the knee.

Undaunted, after recovering at home, Hall returned to her job and was rejected once again for the Foreign Service, ironically this time because she was disabled. Frustrated, she resigned from State, returned to Paris and after the start of WWII, she volunteered to serve in the women's branch of the British Army. Rejected because the Brits weren't accepting foreigners, she became an ambulance driver in France, prosthetic leg—named Cuthbert—notwithstanding.

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The Mysterious Virginia Hall

After France fell to the Nazis, Hall returned to Britain, a decision Friddell emphasizes, that changed her life forever. By August 1941, she had been recruited and trained by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the covert action arm of British intelligence. Returned to France under journalistic cover, she eventually joined the French resistance “Heckler Circuit” where her performance amazed SOE. When in early 1943 the circuit was betrayed to the Gestapo, the “Limping Lady” as she was then known, escaped by crossing the Pyrenees on foot in the winter, and after a brief internment by Spain, returned to London.

When SOE refused to risk retuning Hall to French resistance work, she quit and enlisted in the OSS. Trained as a radio operator, Hall was sent to France

disguised as an elderly woman. There she served until V-E Day.

By then, Hall had decided on an intelligence career, and Friddell explains how she kept her cover when Hall was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross—the only civilian woman so honored during WWII—in a private ceremony, and joined the Central Intelligence Group and then the newly created CIA.

She spent her CIA years working in covert action and retired at the then mandatory age of 60. Hall spent her retirement years in Maryland with her husband, a former agent himself, Paul Goillot. She died in 1982.

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