

L'espionne: Virginia Hall, une Américaine dans la guerre

Intelligence in Public Literature

Vincent Nouzille. (In French) Paris: Fayard, 2007, pp 452, illus.

Reviewed by M.R.D. Foot

This new biography of Virginia Hall is a great improvement on its predecessor, reviewed by “Intelligence Officer’s Bookshelf” reviewer Hayden Peake in 2005.^[1] Monsieur Nouzille understands France, as a Frenchman should, and has worked hard, both in the archives of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), in family papers, and with a few surviving resisters on the spots where his heroine made her clandestine name.

The daughter of a Baltimore magnate, Hall was born in 1906, outstanding at school and at several East Coast colleges, brought up to love Europe, and fluent in several languages. Her first ambition was to be a diplomat, but she got no further than secretarial jobs in US consulates before a shooting accident in Turkey in 1933 cost her the part of her left leg, thus disqualifying her for promotion.

She stayed in Europe, working occasionally as a journalist, and served in an ambulance unit during the collapse of the French army during May–June 1940. Having a neutral nation’s passport, she managed to escape to England, where accidental friendships brought her into touch with the

nascent British subversive service, the SOE.

She was taken on by the French (“F”) Section of that service; she was sworn to secrecy, and sent back to France by boat to Lisbon and onward by train in her own real name. Undercover as a correspondent for the *New York Post*, she submitted a stream of articles to the paper. Hall settled in Lyons, where she had an apartment in her own name and a hotel room—later, another apartment—under a cover name, from which she could conduct her clandestine operations; less respectably, she made friends with a bawd, who could provide valuable intelligence and contacts.

Hall became the lynchpin of her section’s activities in unoccupied southern France; providing money and moral support for her fellow agents, keeping London supplied with useful intelligence, and occasionally helping downed airmen to escape.

Nouzille provides plenty of detail on the circuits she maintained and reveals that in August 1942 she fell into a familiar trap. Abbé Robert Alesch, a double-agent working for the Abwehr, had wormed his way into her confidence and unraveled many of the plots she was engaged in before she skipped, just in time. The day after Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of northwestern Africa, triggered the German occupation of southern France, Hall fled Lyons and managed to find a reliable line, on foot, across the Pyrenees.

She eventually got safely back to London and was interrogated in detail. A few months’ service in Madrid for SOE’s escape section bored her; she returned to London, worked as a briefing officer in F Section, and trained as a wireless telegraph operator. F Section thought her too well known to the enemy to be allowed back into France. She got there all the same, in the spring of 1944, nominally as an agent of OSS, running a circuit called *Saint* (her previous codename had been *Heckler*) in central France, with the personal codename of *Diane*. She survived as best she could during that tumultuous summer, secured several useful arms drops to give teeth to the Maquis, which wanted to fight, and at last had a stroke of personal good fortune. She and Paul Goillot, a Paris-born New Yorker eight years her junior and a late arrival in one of the Jedburgh teams, fell for each other.

She was awarded, besides a membership in the Order of the British Empire, the American Distinguished Service Cross—the first woman to receive it—but refused to attend any public celebration of the fact. She returned to Maryland, where her mother disapproved her relation with

Goillot, whom she eventually married nevertheless in 1957.

When the CIA was formed to resume the work of the dissolved OSS, she joined it and worked for it, unobtrusively as always, but did not greatly care for the work, nor did the Agency always cherish her. She retired when she was 60 and lived 16 years longer on a farm in Maryland; saying always to those who tried to get her to talk, “Many of my friends were killed for talking too much.”

This excellent account of one of the war’s most remarkable secret agents is in splendidly clear French; a translation into English would be most welcome.

Footnotes

[1] Hayden Peake, *Studies in Intelligence* 49 no. 4, “Review of *The Wolves at the Door: The True Story of America’s Greatest Spy*,” 79–82.

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