

## A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

Virginia Hall is one of the most important American **spies** people have never heard of. Now more than 70 years after her World War II **exploits**, she's having a moment. Her long-hidden story is being told in several books and movies. Here's NPR's Greg Myre.

GREG MYRE, BYLINE: A great place to learn about Virginia Hall is, unfortunately, **off-limits** to the public - the CIA Museum inside the spy agency **headquarters** in Langley, Va.

JANELLE: One of the things that we're looking at is a case that's **devoted** to Virginia Hall. She was the most highly decorated female civilian during World War II.

MYRE: Janelle, the museum's deputy director, shows us around. Like many who work at the CIA, she's not allowed to give her last name to the **media**. So why haven't we heard more about Hall? Janelle answers with a quote from Hall on her display.

JANELLE: It says, many of my friends were killed for talking too much.

MYRE: Yet finally, for no **obvious** reason, Hall's story is **resonating** outside the walls of the CIA. Three books have just come out. Two movies are in the works.

British author Sonia Purnell wrote one of the books, called "A Woman Of No Importance."

SONIA PURNELL: Through a lot of her life ~ the early life ~ she was constantly **rejected** and **belittled**.

MYRE: Hall was born to a wealthy Baltimore family in 1906 and was raised to marry into her own **privileged** circle. But she wanted adventure. She called herself **capricious** and **cantankerous**. She liked to hunt. And she once went to school wearing a **bracelet** made of live snakes. In college, Hall studied in Paris and fell in love with France. She decided to become a **diplomat**, says Purnell.

PURNELL: She wanted to be an **ambassador**. She got pushed back by the State Department. She applied several times.

MYRE: The diplomatic ranks were all but closed to women. Hall did land a clerical job at a U.S. consulate in Turkey. But while hunting birds, she accidentally shot herself in the foot. **Gangrene** set in, and her left leg was **amputated** below the knee. Recovery was long and painful as she learned to use a **clunky**, wooden leg. Yet it was also a turning point, says Craig Gralley, a retired CIA officer who's written his own book on Hall called "Hall Of Mirrors."



CRAIG GRALLEY: She had been given a second chance at life and wasn't going to waste it. And her injury, in fact, might have **bolstered** her or reawakened her **resilience** so that she was, in fact, able to do great things.

MYRE: When World War II **erupted** and Nazi Germany invaded France, Hall volunteered to drive an ambulance for the French. But France was soon overrun, forcing her to **flee** to Britain. A chance meeting with a spy put her in contact with British intelligence. After limited training, this one-legged American woman was among the first British spy sent into Nazi-**occupied** France. She posed as a reporter for The New York Post. Hall was a natural spy, keeping one step ahead of the German secret police - the **Gestapo**.

GRALLEY: Virginia Hall, to a certain extent, was **invisible**. She was able to play on the **chauvinism** of the Gestapo at the time. And none of the Germans early in the war necessarily thought that a woman was **capable** of being a spy.

MYRE: Hall operated in the eastern city of Lyon. She stayed at a **convent** and **persuaded** nuns to help her. Hall organized French Resistance fighters, giving them safe houses and intelligence. This didn't go unnoticed, says Sonia Purnell.

PURNELL: The Germans came to realize that they were after a **limping** lady.

MYRE: Hall constantly changed her appearance.

PURNELL: She could be four different women in the space of an afternoon with four different code names.

MYRE: The man in hot **pursuit** was the Gestapo's infamous Klaus Barbie, known as the Butcher of Lyon for the thousands his forces tortured and killed. Barbie ordered wanted posters of Hall that featured a drawing of her above the words, the enemy's most dangerous spy. The Nazis were on her trail in late 1942. Hall narrowly escaped to Spain, walking three days and 50 miles over the **forbidding** Pyrenees Mountains. While researching his book, Craig Gralley made part of that walk and found it **exhausting**.

GRALLEY: I could only imagine the kind of will and **perseverance** that Virginia Hall had by making this track not on a beautiful day but in the dead of winter and with a **prosthetic** leg that she had to drag behind her through snow.

MYRE: Hall was safe, but she grew restless and wanted to return to France. The British refused, fearing it was too dangerous. However, the Americans were ramping up their own intelligence service ~ the Office of Strategic Services. They needed Hall. Yet the Nazis were everywhere, making it even more difficult for her to operate, says Sonia Purnell.

PURNELL: She got some makeup artist to teach her how to draw in **wrinkles** on her face. She also got a **fierce** ~ a rather sort of scary London dentist to **grind**

down her lovely, white, American teeth so that she looked like a French milkmaid.

MYRE: Hall's second tour in France was even more successful than the first. She called in air drops for the resistance fighters, who blew up bridges and **sabotaged** trains. They reclaimed villages well before Allied troops advanced that deep into France. Hall's network **consisted** of some 1,500 people, including a French-American soldier who later became her husband. Hall's niece, Lorna Catling, is now 89. She recalls meeting her aunt after the war.

LORNA CATLING: She came home in 1946, when I was 16. She was pale and had white hair and crappy clothes.

MYRE: And what did Hall say about the war?

CATLING: She never talked about it.

MYRE: President Harry Truman wanted to honor Hall at the White House. Hall declined, saying she wanted to remain undercover. She did receive the Distinguished Service Cross, the only one given to a **civilian** woman in World War II. No outsiders attended the ceremony except Hall's mother. Craig Galley puts it this way.

GRALLEY: I do think that she became America's greatest spy of World War II.

MYRE: Hall then joined the newly formed CIA and worked there 15 years, mostly at **headquarters**. They were not her happiest days. She missed the **adrenaline** of war. Here's Randy, a CIA historian. And we can only use his first name

RANDY: Because as you get higher in **rank**, now it's all about money and personnel and plans and policy and, you know, that sort of bureaucratic stuff.

MYRE: And she faced **discrimination** as a woman.

RANDY: Was she treated properly? Well, in today's **standards**, absolutely not.

MYRE: Hall retired in 1966 and never spoke publicly. She died in 1982, her story still confined to the intelligence community. Now the books are on the shelves. The movies are coming. And at the CIA, **recruits** train in a building called The Virginia Hall Expeditionary Center.

**spy** - *noun* (military) a secret agent hired by a state to obtain information about its enemies or by a business to obtain industrial secrets from competitors; a secret watcher; someone who secretly watches other people; *verb* secretly collect sensitive or classified information; engage in espionage; watch, observe, or inquire secretly; catch sight of

**exploit** - *noun* a notable achievement; *verb* use or manipulate to one's advantage; draw from; make good use of; work excessively hard

**off-limits** - *adj.* barred to a designated group

**headquarters** - *noun* the military installation from which a commander performs the functions of command; (usually plural) the office that serves as the administrative center of an enterprise; (plural) a military unit consisting of a commander and the headquarters staff

**devote** - *verb* set aside or apart for a specific purpose or use; dedicate; give entirely to a specific person, activity, or cause

**obvious** - *adj.* easily perceived by the senses or grasped by the mind

**resonate** - *verb* be received or understood; sound with resonance

**reject** - *noun* the person or thing that is rejected or set aside as inferior in quality; *verb* refuse to accept or acknowledge; reject with contempt; refuse entrance or membership; dismiss from consideration or a contest; deem wrong or inappropriate; refuse to accept; resist immunologically the introduction of some foreign tissue or organ



**belittle** - *verb* lessen the authority, dignity, or reputation of; express a negative opinion of; cause to seem less serious; play down

**privilege** - *noun* a special advantage or immunity or benefit not enjoyed by all; (law) the right to refuse to divulge information obtained in a confidential relationship; a right reserved exclusively by a particular person or group (especially a hereditary or official right); *verb* bestow a privilege upon

**capricious** - *adj.* determined by chance or impulse or whim rather than by necessity or reason; changeable

**cantankerous** - *adj.* having a difficult and contrary disposition; stubbornly obstructive and unwilling to cooperate

**bracelet** - *noun* jewelry worn around the wrist for decoration; a band of cloth or leather or metal links attached to a wristwatch and wrapped around the wrist

**diplomat** - *noun* an official engaged in international negotiations; a person who deals tactfully with others

**ambassador** - *noun* a diplomat of the highest rank; accredited as representative from one country to another; an informal representative

**Gangrene** - *noun* necrotic tissue; a mortified or gangrenous part or mass; the localized death of living cells (as from infection or the interruption of blood supply); *verb* undergo necrosis

**amputate** - *verb* remove surgically

**clunky** - *adj.* making a clunking sound; lacking grace in movement or posture



**bolster** - *noun* a pillow that is often put across a bed underneath the regular pillows; *verb* support and strengthen; prop up with a pillow or bolster; add padding to

**resilience** - *noun* the physical property of a material that can return to its original shape or position after deformation that does not exceed its elastic limit; an occurrence of rebounding or springing back

**erupt** - *verb* become active and spew forth lava and rocks; erupt or intensify suddenly; become raw or open; start abruptly; appear on the skin; break out; start to burn or burst into flames; force out or release suddenly and often violently something pent up

**flee** - *verb* run away quickly

**occupy** - *verb* live (in a certain place); occupy the whole of; engage or engross wholly; march aggressively into another's territory by military force for the purposes of conquest and occupation; require (time or space); keep busy with; be present in; be inside of; be on the mind of

**Gestapo** - *noun* the secret state police in Nazi Germany; known for its terrorist methods

**invisible** - *adj.* impossible or nearly impossible to see; imperceptible by the eye; not prominent or readily noticeable

**chauvinism** - *noun* fanatical patriotism; activity indicative of belief in the superiority of men over women

**capable** - *adj.* (usually followed by ` of') having capacity or ability; (followed by ` of') having the temperament or inclination for; possibly accepting or permitting; having the requisite qualities for; have the skills and qualifications to do things well

**convent** - *noun* a religious residence especially for nuns; a community of people in a religious order (especially nuns) living together

**persuade** - *verb* cause somebody to adopt a certain position, belief, or course of action; twist somebody's arm; win approval or support for

**limp** - *adj.* not firm; lacking in strength or firmness or resilience; *noun* the uneven manner of walking that results from an injured leg; *verb* walk impeded by some physical limitation or injury; proceed slowly or with difficulty

**pursuit** - *noun* the act of pursuing in an effort to overtake or capture; a search for an alternative that meets cognitive criteria; a diversion that occupies one's time and thoughts (usually pleasantly); an auxiliary activity

**forbid** - *verb* command against; keep from happening or arising; make impossible

**exhausting** - *adj.* producing exhaustion; having a debilitating effect

**perseverance** - *noun* the act of persisting or persevering; continuing or repeating behavior; persistent determination

**prosthetic** - *adj.* relating to or serving as a prosthesis; of or relating to prosthetics

**wrinkle** - *noun* a clever method of doing something (especially something new

and different); a minor difficulty; a slight depression in the smoothness of a surface; *verb* make wrinkles or creases into a smooth surface; become wrinkled or crumpled or creased; make wrinkled or creased; gather or contract into wrinkles or folds; pucker

**fierce** - *adj*; marked by extreme intensity of emotions or convictions; inclined to react violently; fervid; violently agitated and turbulent; ruthless in competition; marked by extreme and violent energy

**grind** - *noun* the act of grinding to a powder or dust; hard monotonous routine work; an insignificant student who is ridiculed as being affected or studying excessively; *verb* reduce to small pieces or particles by pounding or abrading; shape or form by grinding; created by grinding; dance by rotating the pelvis in an erotically suggestive way, often while in contact with one's partner such that the dancers' legs are interlaced; make a grating or grinding sound by rubbing together; press or grind with a crunching noise; work hard

**sabotage** - *noun* a deliberate act of destruction or disruption in which equipment is damaged; *verb* destroy property or hinder normal operations

**consist** - *verb* be composed of; be consistent in form, tenor, or character; be congruous; have its essential character; be comprised or contained in; be embodied in; originate (in)

**adrenaline** - *noun* a catecholamine secreted by the adrenal medulla in response to stress (trade name Adrenalin); stimulates autonomic nerve action

**rank** - *adj.* growing profusely; very fertile; producing profuse growth; very offensive in smell or taste; complete and without restriction or qualification; sometimes used informally as intensifiers; conspicuously and outrageously bad or reprehensible; *noun* a row or line of people (especially soldiers or police) standing abreast of one another; relative status; the ordinary members of an organization (such as the enlisted soldiers of an army); the body of members of an organization or group; position in a social hierarchy; *verb* take or have a position relative to others; take precedence or surpass others in rank; assign a rank or rating to

**discrimination** - *noun* unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice; the cognitive process whereby two or more stimuli are distinguished

**standard** - *adj.* commonly used or supplied; regularly and widely used or sold; established or widely recognized as a model of authority or excellence; conforming to or constituting a standard of measurement or value; or of the usual or regularized or accepted kind; conforming to the established language usage of educated native speakers; *noun* any distinctive flag; an upright pole or beam (especially one used as a support); a basis for comparison; a reference point against which other things can be evaluated; the value behind the money in a monetary system; a board measure = 1980 board feet; the ideal in terms of which something can be judged

**recruit** - *noun* any new member or supporter (as in the armed forces); a recently

enlisted soldier; *verb* cause to assemble or enlist in the military; seek to employ; register formally as a participant or member

## Reading Comprehension: "A Woman of No Importance" - Virginia Hall

### Questions:

**Who is Virginia Hall?**

- a) A British spy during WWII
- b) An American spy during WWII
- c) A German spy during WWII
- d) A journalist for The New York Times

**What made Hall stand out as a spy during WWII?**

- a) She was wealthy and powerful.
- b) She was a one-legged woman who operated in Nazi-occupied France.
- c) She worked openly for British intelligence.
- d) She was caught by the Gestapo and imprisoned.

**How did Hall escape Nazi-occupied France in 1942?**

- a) By flying out of France
- b) By disguising herself as a nun
- c) By walking across the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain
- d) By sneaking into a German transport convoy



**Why didn't Virginia Hall become a U.S. ambassador?**

- a) She was rejected multiple times by the State Department.
- b) She was a spy, not a diplomat.
- c) She didn't want to be involved in politics.
- d) She became ill and couldn't pursue the role.

**What nickname did the Gestapo give Virginia Hall?**

- a) The Invisible Lady
- b) The Limper
- c) The Butcher of Lyon
- d) The Enemy's Most Dangerous Spy

**True or False:**

1. Virginia Hall was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross during WWII.
2. Hall had a prosthetic leg, which limited her ability to spy.
3. She worked for both British and American intelligence agencies during the war.
4. Virginia Hall's story remained secret for years until her death in 1982.
5. Hall never returned to France after her escape to Spain.



### Short Answer:

1. **What significant challenges did Virginia Hall face in her career as a spy?**
2. **How did Hall evade capture by the Gestapo while working with the French Resistance?**
3. **Why did Hall decline President Truman's invitation to the White House after WWII?**

These questions encourage readers to engage with the story of Virginia Hall, a remarkable and overlooked figure in WWII history.