

One-legged Wonder

This is the story of how a one-legged woman became the most dangerous spy of the Second World War. She was recruited by the British Special Operations Executive and assisted the French resistance and allied POWs (Prisoners of War). I believe that she played a big part in the Allies winning the war. She showed tremendous courage in the face of adversity and her story deserves to be heard. This is the story of WWII's greatest spy.

Virginia Hall was born in Baltimore, USA in 1906. She attended both Barnard College and Radcliffe college and continued her studies at schools in France, Germany and Austria. She wanted to work in the foreign service. When she was 25, she was appointed to Consular Service clerk at the American Embassy in Warsaw, Poland and seemed to be working towards her goal. Sadly, soon after her appointment, she accidentally shot herself in her left leg while hunting. The medical technology of the time was far less advanced than the technology we have these days, and the injury proved too much. In 1933, her leg was amputated from the knee down and she was given a wooden peg leg to use instead. She named her prosthetic leg; Cuthbert. Her disability prevented her from pursuing her career any further. She resigned in 1939, just as war was breaking out.

Instead of fleeing back home to America, she volunteered as an ambulance driver in France. When the French surrendered in 1940, she moved to England where she took up another clerical position at the American Embassy in London. That was where she caught the attention of the British S.O.E (Special Operations Executive), who were looking for agents to work with the French resistance. In 1941, Hall arrived in Lyon, France, disguised as a New York Post correspondent. She was the S.O.E's very first female agent in France. She spent the following 14 months helping runaway POWs escape, assisting pilots who had survived crashes, providing courier services and obtaining materials for secret presses.

The sales of paper and ink were forbidden, so it was difficult for the resistance forces to share their plans. Against all odds, with help from Hall and others like her, by 1942, resistance papers had reached over 2 million people in France. It was around this time that the Nazis first became aware of Virginia Hall. French double-agents had informed them of the 'limping lady' who had created and strengthened resistance networks across France. The Gestapo had been given the orders: "She is the most dangerous of all allied spies. We must find and destroy her."

When Germany seized France in 1942, the S.O.E decided that it was too dangerous for Hall to remain in the country. She escaped to Spain by walking over the Pyrenees mountains on her one good leg. She transmitted a message to headquarters saying: "Cuthbert is giving me trouble, but I can cope." She didn't say 'wooden leg' because if the message was intercepted

by the Germans, her position would be given away. HQ misunderstood the message and replied with: "If Cuthbert is giving you trouble, have him eliminated."

When she arrived in Spain, she was thrown in prison because she didn't have any entry papers. After six weeks, she managed to smuggle out a message to the embassy in Barcelona, who freed her. After four months of work in Spain, she requested transfer elsewhere. She wrote: "I thought I could help in Spain, but I'm not doing a job. I am living pleasantly and wasting time. It isn't worthwhile and after all, my neck is my own. If I'm willing to get a crick in it, I think that's my prerogative."

She stayed in England for a short period of time before being sent back to France. This time she was working for the US office of strategic services. The Gestapo were still trying to find her and if she was caught, she would probably have been killed. She posed as an elderly milk maid, dyed her hair grey, wore four skirts to hide her small frame and walked with a slow shuffle. She was forced to keep on the move by German soldiers who were desperately attempting to track her radio signals, but proved to be a slippery spy, eluding capture. During this time, she trained three battalions of resistance fighters to use guerrilla warfare against the Nazis.

Before allied forces caught up with her team, Hall reported that they had destroyed rail lines, phone lines, bridges and freight trains, also sabotaging infrastructure that was necessary for German occupation. The team was credited with killing over 150 German troops and capturing 500 more. For her bravery, she was made a member of the Order of the British Empire and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, one to the USA's highest military honours. In 1951, Hall joined the CIA, working as a French Parliamentary Intelligence analyst. And she did it all on one leg.

Virginia Hall truly did play a big role in the allies' WWII victory. She worked extremely well under pressure, during a war AND with the Gestapo hot on her tail. Of all the spies in WWII, this woman is head and shoulders above the rest, in my opinion. She saved many lives by capturing Germans and assisting POWs in escaping to freedom. But overall, she did not give up, no matter what life threw at her. That is the story of WWII's greatest spy, Virginia Hall.

REFERENCE LIST:

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