



THE

LADY

IS A

SPY

**VIRGINIA HALL, WORLD WAR II
HERO OF THE FRENCH RESISTANCE**

DON MITCHELL

THE
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ISA

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VIRGINIA HALL, WORLD WAR II
HERO OF THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

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IN MEMORY OF

Gina Minguillan Gillis
(1965–2015)

and

Liza Minguillan Beyer
(1965–2015)



A remarkable woman, of extraordinary courage and formidable tenacity . . . She did not submit easily to discipline, she had the habit of forming her ideas without regard to the views of others, but she rendered inestimable services to the Allied cause and is a very great friend of France.

*—Maurice Buckmaster,
head of the SOE's F Section*

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON NAMES

During her World War II service, Virginia Hall was known by a number of aliases, or “cover” names, to protect her true identity. This is a common practice in the field of espionage. Her colleagues in British intelligence (the Special Operations Executive, or the SOE), US intelligence (the Office of Strategic Services, or the OSS), and the French Resistance would know her by a variety of names, including: Diane, Marie Monin, Philomène, Brigitte Le Contre, Renée, Marcelle Montagne, Nicolas, Germaine, Anna Müller, and Camille. To avoid confusion, I have minimized references to Virginia Hall’s aliases and have relied primarily on her “true name” to tell her story.

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VIRGINIA HALL'S WAR

*I felt very much that it was my war as well
as my friends' war.*

—Virginia Hall

On a March evening in 1944, a boat pulled out of an English harbor, heading across the English Channel to Nazi-occupied France. On board was Virginia Hall, an American from a prominent Baltimore, Maryland, family and only days away from her thirty-eighth birthday. She was placing her life at great risk by returning to France, where Virginia was well known as a spy. One British intelligence officer would later say of her, “From my point of view and that of many of my colleagues, Virginia Hall can be considered the greatest wartime agent.”

As the boat left the English harbor, Virginia and her colleague—code-named Aramis—went on deck, where they observed three British patrol vessels following them. The boats tested their machine guns and anti-aircraft guns on rocks laying outside the harbor—a sobering reminder



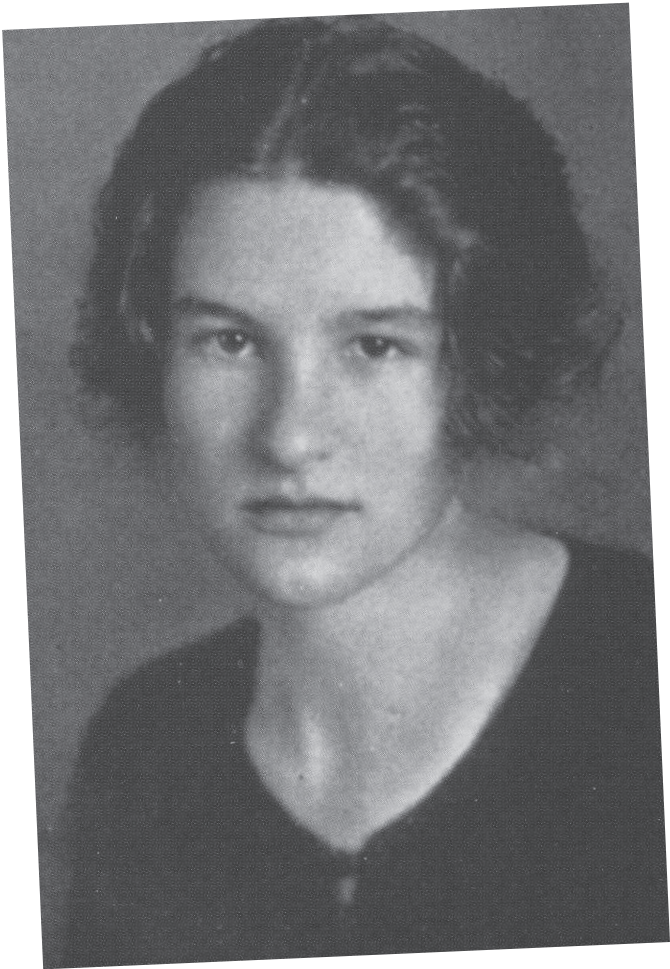
Self portrait of Virginia in a mirror.

that they were about to enter a war zone. After several hours of uncomfortable sleep, they were roused out of their bunks at around 3:00 a.m. to prepare for their landing in France.

Fortunately, the sea was calm as two small boats were lowered over the side of the vessel. Each boat contained four men—three to row and a British officer armed with a Thompson submachine gun—to accompany Virginia and Aramis to shore. They rowed in silence. They could barely see the outline of the cliffs in the darkness as they approached the beach. Finally, they heard the crunch

of stones as the boats slid onto the shore of Brittany in the early morning. Everyone quickly jumped out of the boats, where two men and two women waited to assist them. The bags were gathered up, and the party walked uphill on cobblestones.

As her adventure began, Virginia was determined to meet the challenges she knew were waiting for her.



PART

ONE

A SPY IN TRAINING

I must have liberty, withal as large a charter as I please.

—Virginia Hall's quote upon graduation
from Roland Park Country School,
paraphrasing a quote from William
Shakespeare's *As You Like It*,
Act II, Scene 7

THE FIGHTING BLADE

Virginia Hall was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on April 6, 1906. Her grandfather, John W. Hall, stowed away on one of his father's clipper ships when he was nine years old. John would later become the master of a ship engaged with the China trade. He would go on to make his fortune in Baltimore as president of the Gas and Electric Company and president of the First National Bank. John's son, Edwin "Ned" Lee Hall, was Virginia's father. He had banking interests and owned several movie houses



Baby Virginia in her mother's lap.



Young Virginia and her brother, John, with flowers.

in Baltimore. Ned married his secretary, Barbara Virginia Hammel.

Virginia's only sibling was her brother, John, who was four years older. Family lore had it that in their childhood years, John mispronounced Virginia's name, calling her "Dindy," and the nickname stuck. They were a close-knit family.

The Halls had an apartment in Baltimore, but Edwin and Barbara

purchased a country home outside of Baltimore—Box Horn Farm—in Parkton, Maryland. Their house in the country was a welcome respite from the city, particularly in the hot summer months. The farmhouse had plumbing but no central heating until after World War II, so it was most comfortable during the spring and summer. There were woodstoves and fireplaces to provide warmth during cold weather.

In order to satisfy the children's curiosity, the home's library was filled with books. The farm had over one hundred acres and was looked



The family home at Box Horn Farm.

after by a tenant farmer who worked the property for the family. A train, called the Parkton Local, ran regularly between Baltimore and Parkton, and it made the commute easy for Edwin to attend to his business interests in Baltimore. During some parts of the school year, Virginia would also take the commuter train from the farm to her school in Baltimore.



Virginia with pigeons.

Virginia and John loved spending time on the farm. There were hills, orchards, and woods to play in, and the two learned to hunt and fish. The barn was home to horses, goats, chickens, and cows.



Young Virginia riding piggyback on John.

Handling farm animals would later become valuable to Virginia in ways she could not have imagined during her childhood. Looking back at her time there, Virginia once reminded her niece, Lorna Catling, how important it was to learn everything you can. She remarked that “learning to milk the cows for fun turned out to be very handy.”



Virginia and John (left and middle) on the farm.

In 1912, six-year-old Virginia Hall began attending the prestigious Roland Park Country School in Baltimore, where she immediately distinguished herself. Virginia loved sports and was an excellent athlete, playing tennis and baseball and going on to become captain of

the school's varsity basketball and field hockey teams. She also enjoyed acting in the school's theatrical productions—where she sometimes portrayed male characters, a necessity in the all-girls' school.

Virginia also became editor in chief of *Quid Nunc*, the school's yearbook, and was elected president of her senior class. Virginia's profile in her senior yearbook stated:

The “Donna Juanita” of the class now approaches. Though professing to hold Man in contempt, Dindy is yet his closest counterpart—in costume. She is, by her own confession, cantankerous and capricious, but in spite of it all we would not do without her; for she is our class-president, the editor-in-chief of this book, and one of the mainstays of the basket-ball and hockey teams. She has been acclaimed the most original of our class, and she lives up to her reputation at all times. The one thing to expect from Dind is the unexpected.



Virginia (right) playing a man in a costume drama at Roland Park Country School.



Virginia (standing, second from right) and her teammates on the 1924 girls' varsity basketball team at Roland Park Country School.



Young Virginia at Box Horn Farm.

One of Virginia's classmates would later recall that "there was a different manner about her. She was not a typical school girl. She was low key, rather than isolated. She was tall, big-boned and striking, but not in a conventional way. She kept her own counsel but was a definite presence."

Once, Virginia went to school wearing a live garter snake wrapped around her wrist as a bracelet. Self-confident and

seemingly fearless, the school's ninth graders nicknamed her "The Fighting Blade." From an early age, it was clear that Virginia was destined to leave her mark on the world.

CHAPTER 2

STUDENT OF EUROPE

*A*fter graduating from high school, Virginia went to college to pursue her restless intellectual curiosity, as well as her desire for adventure and travel. She attended Radcliffe College (which later merged with Harvard College) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the 1924–25 school year. She majored in economics, with a minor in foreign languages. She then transferred to Barnard College in New York for the 1925–26 academic year. But Virginia was impatient with these prestigious schools because she wasn't able to take the courses she wanted without taking what she considered to be “a lot of uninteresting required courses.”

Virginia's sympathetic father encouraged her to pursue her academic interests in Europe, where she spent a year at the *École des Sciences Politiques* in Paris, France, studying economics and history. She then spent two years in Vienna, Austria, where she studied economics and international law at the *Konsular*



Virginia's father, Ned.

Akademie and graduated in June 1929. During her college years, she spent summers studying at the French Universities of Strasbourg, Grenoble, and Toulouse. Virginia also took courses at the American University in Washington, DC, during the 1929–30 academic

year, as well as additional courses in French at the George Washington University in Washington, DC.

Virginia's extensive travel and study in Europe gave her the opportunity to learn more about the politics, history, and culture of the continent. Her extended residence in Europe, along with immersive language study, made her fluent in French, Italian, and German, though natives could often tell Virginia was a foreign speaker. She also picked up enough Spanish and Russian language skills to make herself understood where those languages were spoken.

Virginia's education and early experiences prepared her for a career in espionage. Prospective spies can be sent to school to learn about foreign languages and cultures, self-defense, fire-arms and munitions training, and espionage tradecraft such as surveillance and covert communications. But getting through



Virginia's 1928 passport.

“spy school” is no guarantee that the student of espionage will be successful.

No single quality guarantees success as a spy, especially in such a specialized and dangerous line of work where exposure—particularly during wartime—can mean imprisonment, torture, and execution. But by the time Virginia had completed her formal education, she had displayed the qualities that would suggest great potential for becoming a successful spy: She was smart with broad intellectual interests; she had an interest in, and skill with, European languages, history, and culture; she was observant; she exhibited leadership; she was self-confident; she



Young Virginia next to a lake.

had courage; she was willing to take risks but without being reckless or irresponsible; she was focused and determined; she demonstrated an ability to play different roles convincingly as an actress; she was adventurous; she had a love of the outdoors; and she was athletic.

Virginia would draw on these and other attributes for the rest of her life. But she would later say that all you really needed to be successful in espionage was common sense. And common sense was something that Virginia Hall had in abundance.

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