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The Wolves at the Door: The True Story of America's Greatest Female Spy

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By Judith L. Pearson. Guilford, CT: The Lyon Press, 2005. 324 pages.

Reviewed by Hayden B. Peake

British historian M. R. D. Foot called her an "indomitable agent with a 'brass foot.'"[1] Special Operations Executive (SOE) officer Philippe de Vomécourt wrote that he served in France with this "extraordinary woman . . . with a wooden leg."[2] French author Marcel Ruby said that she lost her leg in a riding accident.[3] Others had her losing a limb after falling under a tram.[4] Former CIA officer Harry Mahoney describes an OSS mission in which she parachuted behind enemy lines with her "wooden leg in her knapsack."[5] Author and former OSS officer Elizabeth McIntosh wrote that she landed in France by boat.[6] The Gestapo put her likeness on a wanted poster. The British made her a Member of the British Empire. The United States awarded her the Distinguished Service Cross "for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against the enemy," the only women to receive that medal for World War II service.[7]

If ever a career in intelligence cried out for a biography, Virginia Hall's qualifies. Yet, in the 60 years since World War II, most histories of OSS fail to mention her.[8] Parts of her intriguing career have emerged gradually in articles and memoirs as official records became available. In the process,

she has become something of a legend. When the British and American World War II intelligence archives were finally released in the 1980s and 1990s, it became possible to clarify contradictions and separate fact from fable. Author Judith Pearson has done that in *The Wolves at the Door*.

This fascinating story begins with Hall's origins in Baltimore where it soon became evident that she had no intention of heading down the road of life to housewifedom. After a year at Barnard and another at Radcliffe, she was off to Europe in 1926 to finish her education at the Sorborne in Paris and the Konsularakademie in Vienna. Then came a series of frustrating attempts to join the Foreign Service. She did not do well in her first examination, so she decided to gain experience and try again while working for the State Department as a clerk overseas. It was while in Turkey, in December 1933, that she lost her lower leg in a hunting accident. After recovering at home, she was fitted with a wooden prosthesis that had rubber under the foot.[9] She then returned to her clerk duties, this time in Venice, Italy, where her foreign service dreams ended: She was told that Department regulations prohibited hiring anyone without the necessary number of appendages. Needing a fresh start, Hall transferred to Tallin, Estonia. But without the prospect of becoming a foreign service officer, she found the work infuriatingly dull and resigned in May 1939. She was in Paris, considering options, when the war started. She volunteered as an ambulance driver for the French army (private second class), serving at the front until France surrendered in May 1940. Out of a job again, she made her way to London, where she found a clerical position with the military attaché in the American embassy. A short time later, she met Vera Atkins and her life changed forever.

Within the French Section of SOE, Vera Atkins was a bit of a legend. The conservatively dressed, chain-smoking special assistant to the head of "F" Section, Col. Maurice Buckmaster, had no prior experience. In fact, she was not even a British subject. But she had well-placed friends, learned quickly, and was soon helping with recruitment, monitoring agent training, and looking after agent needs while behind the lines in France. F Section supported the resistance in matters of training, logistics, and sabotage. Getting suitable agents to work with the French was a constant problem and Atkins developed a knack for finding good ones.[10] While chatting with Hall at a dinner party and learning of her language skills—French and German, albeit with an American accent—plus her ambulance driving experiences, Atkins sensed she possessed poise under pressure. They met the next day for lunch and Atkins convinced Hall to leave the embassy and join SOE.

Since America was not yet in the war and its citizens could travel freely in unoccupied France, Hall was targeted for duty with cover as a reporter for the *New York Post.* Contrary to some accounts that claim Hall was sent to France without any training,[11] Pearson shows that she completed the standard officer courses, with the exception of the parachute portion. On 23 August 1941, she arrived in Vichy, the capital of unoccupied France, and registered with the embassy. Then she went to Lyon, to begin her work in the field. For the next 14 months, using various aliases—Bridgette LeContre, Marie, Philomène, Germaine—she worked to organize the resistance, help downed fliers escape, provide courier service for other agents, and obtain supplies for the clandestine presses and the forgers—all this while managing to write articles for the *Post* and avoid the Gestapo that had penetrated many of the resistance networks.

In November 1942, when the Allies invaded North Africa and the Nazis occupied all of France, Hall had to flee—she knew too much to risk capture. Her only means of escape was to walk across the Pyrenees through winter snow to Spain, where she was jailed for a few weeks before being allowed to continue to London. Her first request was to return to France. SOE said no, it was too risky, especially with her likeness on a wanted poster. She settled instead for Madrid. But after nearly a year there, she found the duties unbearably boring and requested something more operational. Returning to London in January 1944, she was assigned the unexciting but not unimportant job of briefing agents and officers about to be sent behind the lines in France. She knew that, with the preparations for D-Day underway, the resistance was critically short of radio operators, so she applied and was trained in radio communications—but with no guarantees.

Until then, Hall had paid little attention to a new American organization she had heard about—the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—that conducted resistance support operations in cooperation with SOE. Now, she made contacts there and decided to transfer if she could be sent back to France to work with the resistance. By March 1944, she was on a motorboat crossing the English Channel headed for the coast of France. Working in disguise as an old woman farmhand, she organized sabotage operations, supported resistance groups as a radio operator and courier, located drop zones for the RAF, and eventually worked with a Jedburgh team to sabotage German military movements. Once again she managed to avoid capture, despite some close calls.

After France was freed, Hall was trained for an OSS assignment in

occupied Vienna, where she had once gone to college; however, the war ended before she could get there. When OSS was abolished at the end of September 1945, Hall stayed on in Europe, working for the follow-on organization, eventually named the Central Intelligence Group (CIG). In 1947, she made the transition to the CIA clandestine service. When she reached the mandatory retirement age of 60 in 1966, Virginia Hall left the CIA as a GS-14, never having been allowed to serve in a peacetime station overseas.

The Wolves at the Door does more than chronicle Hall's extraordinary career. Pearson gives vivid detail about Hall driving a crude ambulance loaded with wounded while under fire; how she twice escaped the continent; how she got through SOE training with her artificial leg (which she called *Cuthbert*); the agent problems she dealt with, including the discovery of a Gestapo double-agent; her disguises and her cover work as a milkmaid and farmer's helper; and how she arranged the escape of several of her agents from a Gestapo prison. We also see something of this remarkable woman's managerial abilities when Pearson tells how she overcame the reluctance of the French resistance to follow orders from a woman. After the war, Hall's achievements were to be publicly recognized with the presentation of the Distinguished Service Cross by President Harry Truman. She declined the honor, however, preferring to receive the award without publicity from OSS chief Gen. William Donovan, and thus preserve her cover for clandestine work in the postwar era.

In writing this story, Judith Pearson examined the recently released SOE files in the British National Archives and the OSS files in the American National Archives. She interviewed Hall's niece in Baltimore and others who knew and wrote about her, including SOE historian Foot. It is an amazing tale of an unheralded woman intelligence officer way ahead of her time—Virginia Hall was a genuine heroine.

[1]M. R. D. Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940–1944* (London: HMSO, 2004 revised), 155.

[2]Philippe de Vomécourt, *An Army of Amateurs* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1961), 223.

[3]Marcel Ruby. *F. Section SOE: The Story of the Buckmaster Network* (London: Leo Cooper, 1988), 65.

[4]Liane Jones, *A Quiet Courage: Women Agents in the French Resistance* (New

York: Bantam Press, 1990), 17.

[5]M. H. Mahoney and Marjorie Locke Mahoney, *Biographic Dictionary of Espionage* (San Francisco, CA: Austin & Winfield Publishers, 1998), 265.

[6]Elizabeth P. McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 147.

[7]Ibid., 149.

[8]See for example, R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), and Bradley F. Smith, *Three Shadow Warriors: OSS and the Origins of the CIA* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

[9]The brass foot story appeared first in M. R. D. Foot's unclassified official history of SOE (see footnote 1 above) and came from the official classified history of the organization (only declassified in 1998) that he was allowed to read, but not cite, when doing his research in the early 1960s. Pearson's research showed that a solid brass foot would have been too heavy and that rubber was needed for comfort and to minimize noise.

[10]For more detail on Atkins, see Sarah Helm. *A Life In Secrets: The Story of Vera Atkins and the Lost Agents of SOE* (London: Little Brown, 2005).

[11]Margret L. Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 191.

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