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Into the Shadows of History: Female Spies of the SOE F-Section and Their Forgotten History

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Abstract

World War II gave way to a new form of intelligence gathering; Britain created the Special Operations Executive (SOE) as a response. Their F-Section that focused specifically on France hired the most unlikely of spies, including mothers, Jewish women, a disabled American, and a Sufi Princess. In this small section, they produced vital work that aided the Allies in their D-Day victory and the French Resistance in their fight against the Germans. When the war was over, the SOE dissolved, and society struggled with how or if they wanted to commemorate the work of these women. When the war ended, there was a spike the women receiving awards and recognition, but within ten years they were forgotten about by the society that once honored them. Starting in the 2000s, there has been a steady rise in scholarship about these agents, though many had passed away before they could see their work celebrated. Now, they are being commemorated in a variety of ways such as having their stories told on the big screen, making their stories more assessable to future generations.

My research drew from the SOE file of Virginia Hall, films about the women, and the rise in scholarship in the form of books and articles.

Keywords: commemoration, espionage, film, France, Great Britain, women, World War II

Imagine you are on a train that is going through Nazi-occupied France. You are minding your own business when a train official comes up to you and asks you to buy a ticket for the French Relief Fund, a fund that is designed to allocate funds for orphans whose parents had died during the beginning of the occupation. As the train goes through France, you see the devastation. Houses are in ruins and France is overrun with Nazis. It is the shell of once was your home, the France you used to know and love. You may not have a lot to donate, but you donate what you can. You watch as the train official goes to more people on the train. You do not pay much attention, but a French woman catches your eye. She seems outraged by this fund. She walks up to a Nazi General who is in your same train car. Your heart starts pounding. You ask yourself if you are prepared to watch another Frenchman perish at the hands of the Nazis. She appears to be fearless. Is this a moment of stupidity or bravery? Your eyes are glued to her as she says to him, "I think that you, who are instrumental in bringing about the need for this fund, should pay for this ticket."[1] This moment feels like forever; how will he react? A man of prominence being humbled by this small lady on this crowded train. At last, the general reaches into his wallet and pulls out enough for a ticket. You breathe a sigh of relief. Who is this small woman? This woman is later known to be Odette Hallowes. The name might not sound familiar now, but soon you will see why she was commemorated.

What is commemoration? Whom do we commemorate? Does society have a say? Does the government? Who earns the right or honor to be commemorated? Does a person's line of work bar them from being commemorated? What about gender? Does the same reign true when it comes to how they are remembered? Essentially, why are people commemorated the way they are? For three of the Special Operation Executive[2] F-Section's finest agents, these questions are relevant as to how they are remembered and why their actions are not as widely known as their contemporaries' wartime careers.[3]

Commemoration is simple: whose legacy do we honor? The Library of Congress has a list of World War II veteran's stories available that include twelve women out of fifty-six stories.[4] This data set breaks down to show us that less than half of these women are remembered for being a wife, while the rest were in the service. One woman worked in Navy intelligence doing clerical work. None of the men appeared to be working in intelligence. That is typical, however, when discussing heroes of the Second World War: there is a gap between men and women in the service, who were prevalent with the war in the shadows, being represented in present research. This is an important distinction to consider when looking for sources. Women are hardly remembered for their services during the Second World War. They are typically remembered in a stereotypical gender role that suited the mid to late 1940s when women were

[1] Loftis, "Code name Lise," pg. 68.

[2] SOE= Special Operations Executive, British Intelligence during the Second World War; F-Section= Part of the SOE that focuses on France; FANY= First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, British female nursing units used as a cover; OSS= Office of Strategic Services, American Intelligence during WWII and precursor to the CIA.

[3] The SOE is one of Britain's intelligence agencies that was created as a reaction to the Second World War. This agency was created in 1940 and disbanded in January of 1945. This was the British counterpart to the American OSS, the precursor to the modern CIA. The F-Section was a specific subsection of the SOE that focused solely on France.

"World War II Veterans with Stories: Experiencing ... - Library of Congress," Veteran's Stories, accessed October 29, 2022, https://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/wwiilist.html.

expected to return home to the prewar social norms. I argue that these women were forgotten because of their line of work and gender.

Virginia Hall, Vera Atkins, and Odette Hallowes are examples of women in espionage and how women are remembered by the public. The way these women are remembered within the intelligence community is difficult to gage, not only because of the secretive nature of the field, but also because of the SOE was dissolved shortly after the war. Virginia Hall was virtually forgotten by history until twenty years after her death, while Odette Hallowes had immediate stardom after the end of the war that slowly dwindled by the end of her life. In British and American cultures, women were not supposed to be involved in active war zones except as a nurse[5] and *never* as a soldier. It turned misogynistic men's worldview upside down when Virginia Hall was considered to be the most dangerous agent of the war by the Nazis who were hunting her.[6] It seems as though her wartime career made returning soldiers and agents feel inferior. In France, de Gaulle tried to erase the efforts of the allied forces in liberating France. By doing this, he effectively erased the efforts of Virginia Hall from the public memory.[7]

Literature Review

As seen in the bibliography, there is a rise in scholarship and articles being written about the women in the SOE that has taken place in the last three years. This could be because of the declassification of government documents that started to take place in 2004.[8] That leaves fifteen years for researchers to publish their findings on this topic. The uptick in publications could be from the rise in feminist history in the field of history.

In the late 1980s, the women started to get more recognition. Around 40 years after the end of their service and subsequent award ceremonies. These 40+ years left a gap in the literature about the women. They were effectively forgotten about; this was a choice for some but not for all. Atkins was interviewed by the Imperial War Museum to recall her time with the SOE. By this point, Virginia Hall had already passed away with only one obituary to remember her by. When Odette passed in 1995, there were obituaries about her but no literature at the time. The same happened when Vera Atkins passed in 2000.

My earliest secondary sources are from 2004, four years after the passing of Vera Atkins and nearly 20 years after Hall. One of the books is called *The Wolves at the Door: The True Story of America's Greatest Female Spy by Judith L Pearson.* This book glazes over some of what Virginia Hall was able to accomplish but with all things considered, this was a groundbreaking book since no one had written about Virginia Hall previously. That same year, *The Women Who Lived for Danger: The Women Agents of SOE in the Second World War* by Marcus Binney was published. This book focused on the women of the SOE as a whole. It did not specifically focus

[5] Many female SOE agents' cover story in Britain, was that they are part of FANY, First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, the British female nursing unit.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, 271.
[8] "Thousands of Intelligence Documents Opened under the Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act," National Archives, 13 May 2004, www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2004/nr04-55.html#:~:text=Press%20Release%20·%20Thursday%2C%20May%2013%2C%202004&text=Hundreds%20of%20thousands%20of%20pages,Crimes%20Disclosure%20Act%20of%201998.

on the F-Section like my research, but it absorbed the best data from the different women involved, capturing the best information.

The next series of publications are from the mid-2010s until the present. It appears that this research is starting to gain traction, possibly because the classified documents from the war are starting to be released. This is when the different arguments start to emerge since more than two authors begin to research and publish. Each brings their own interests and research questions to look for with their specialized lens. These authors were working with limited materials and the materials often overlap, but because each author is looking for a different thing, different books emerge. Do not misconstrue the previous statement to mean that there is not repeated information seen throughout the books. The major theme seen across the majority of my books are telling the stories of the women in the SOE, because the authors are aware that there is not much literature around the spies. This results in short biographies or in a history of the SOE with the women's stories sprinkled throughout to show their involvement without being the main focus.

Scholars need to be weary of these classified documents because they are not complete. There was a mysterious fire that burned some of the SOE documents and some of the documents were not meant to be released ever. Only a fraction of the story is available for the public. Archival silence can happen for many reasons; is this a case of self-preservation for the government?

The reason why the timeline is important when analyzing my source list is because it shows the giant gaps. It begs the question of why gaps are there. Is it because the very nature of espionage is to keep secrets? Is it because they are women, and society did not want to showcase strong women?

Odette Hallowes

The most decorated spy of World War II is a woman named Odette Hallowes.[9] Hallowes was a mother of three when she decided to go to France.[10] When deciding on spies to recruit, a mother might not be one of your choices, even in twenty-first century America. However, the F-Section had seven other female agents who happened to be mothers.[11]

On September 17, 1941, Hallowes was supposed to be on her way to the Gibraltar before ultimately arriving in France. This would not be the case since her plane crashed.[12] Hallowes was supposed to go by plane again, but unfortunately that plane crashed too. By this point, the only logical way to get Hallowes to Gibraltar was by boat. When she finally arrived in France, one of her first contacts was Peter Churchill. Hallowes' mission was originally to go to

[9] Odette Hallowes was born Odette Marie Celine Brailly. In 1930, she married Mr. Sansom. They were married throughout the war and shortly after the war they filed for divorce. In 1947, she married Peter Churchill, who she met while she was a spy, the marriage did not last long. In 1956, she married Mr. Hallowes, and they were married until her death in 1995.

[10] Loftis, "Code name Lise," pg. 10.

[11] These include Julienne Aisner, Violette Szabo (George Cross Recipient), Yvonne Cormeau, Mary Katherine Herbert (the only agent known to have a baby while in the field), Ginette Jullian, Madeleine Lavigne, and Yvonne Rudellat.

[12] Loftis, "Code name Lise," pg. 28.

Auxerre,[13] but Churchill fought with London, on a bet with Aldophe Rabinovitch,[14] until Hallowes could work with him.[15] "The war had reduced itself to the deep-seated loyalty between a French woman, a Russo-Egyptian, and an Englishman. They were as one."[16]

When Hallowes was working as a field agent for a brief amount of time, she worked first as a courier. This job was one of the riskiest because it meant that she had to relay a lot of important information by just memory across her section of France. Networks depended on her information being accurate and being delivered in a timely manner. When Churchill was momentarily recalled back to London, it was Hallowes and Rabinovitch who ran their circuit singlehandedly. While Hallowes was the effective head of the circuit, unbeknownst to her Hugo Bleicher[17] of the Abwehr, German intelligence, had successfully infiltrated a different circuit and made his way to see Hallowes.

On the night she was captured, Hallowes and Rabinovitch scaled a mountain in order to see Churchill get dropped into France. It was a tearful reunion, because by this point Hallowes and Churchill were already in love and Rabinovitch was part of their new family. This was a short-lived reunion, for they still needed to go down the mountain. On the way back down, Hallowes fell off a cliff and broke her vertebrae. She was knocked unconscious but came back shortly. She scared everyone, but when she came to, she refused to admit anything happened and continued the trek down.

A few hours later, when she was in bed, she heard a knock at the door. One could assume it would be her dearest Churchill, but it was not. A hotel employee knocked and asked for her presence downstairs. Downstairs she finds Bleicher with Nazi and Italian forces waiting to arrest her and Churchill. They told her to take the forces to Churchill's room. While they were arresting Churchill, she was able to hide his wallet on her person to better protect his identity to dispose of when they were taken by car to their first prison. When in custody, they were given the option of being detained by the German or Italian Police, Churchill chose the Italians. On May 13th, 1944, Hallowes was entered into Gestapo records as a prisoner.

In France, she was able to lay the groundwork for her life-saving story. Hallowes effectively saved the circuit leader and her love, Peter Churchill, and herself by saying that Peter Churchill was the nephew of the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and that she and her leader were married. She also denied knowing Rabinovitch, which gave him a couple more valuable months in the field before being captured and killed.

When Hallowes and Churchill were transferred to Fresnes Prison in Paris, they were under the watchful eye of Bleicher. Bleicher always liked Hallowes and offered her many opportunities to have an easier sentence while in Fresnes. She denied every opportunity since no other woman would be receiving extravagant gifts, such as a trip to the opera. Hallowes was living on rations that were just enough to keep her alive but starved. When being interrogated, the Gestapo pulled out her toenails one by one and burned her with fire-hot irons, but she

[13] Loftis, "Code name Lise," pg. 37.
[14] Rabinovitch, code named Arnaud, was known to have the temperament of a wolverine. He did not warm up to any agents other than Hallowes and Peter. The reason why he was able to stay in the field was because he was the best wireless operator in France.
[15] Ibid, 50.
[16] Ibid, 81.
[17] Commonly referred to as Col. Henrich

refused to say a word.[18] The Gestapo quickly realized that they were not going to break this French woman. After surviving this round of torture, she made sure to look out for the other female prisoners and saved her already minimal rations for Peter, her love. On May 12, 1944, she was told to pack her belongings in order to be transferred. The very next day, Hallowes arrived at Karlsruhe Criminal Prison where she spent the next month in isolation.[19] She was kept away from the outside world. This is the calm before the storm that is her time at Ravensbrück, a women's prison.

On July 27, 1944, Hallowes arrived at the Ravensbrück train station and was forced to walk two miles to the camp. She met with the camp commandant, Sühern, and he told her that she was to be referred to as Frau Shurer, so there was no connection to the Churchill name. She was then sent to the Bunker where she lived in complete darkness and in unbearable heat. Her cell was next to the punishment room, so Hallowes could hear the screams and torture that were occurring to her fellow inmates. She suffered a six-day period without food that resulted in her developing scurvy and dysentery. She was sent to the infirmary where she slipped into a semi-coma. The doctors told Sühern that if she remained in the bunker, she would die. She was in the Bunkers for three months and three days before being moved to a new cell. Her new cell was six yards from the crematorium, where she could both hear and smell the final moments of women as they died a painful and heartbreaking death.[20]

May 1945, Hallowes' time at Ravensbrück had finally ended when Sühren drove her to the American soldiers. By this point in the war, Hitler had already committed suicide, and the Nazi regime was falling apart at the seams. The troops were losing and there were children being used on the front lines. American and other allied troops were sweeping their way through Europe and were into Europe. This was a last-ditch attempt to save himself, which failed. Once in the safety and care of the American troops, Hallowes told them exactly who Sühren was.

When Hallowes flew back to Britain, Vera Atkins was waiting for her. She was treated for severe anemia, nervous tension, articular rheumatism, sepsis from when her toenails were pulled out about a year prior, and her fifth vertebrae had dissolved from the fall.[21] [22] The doctors did not give Hallowes a high chance of survival. However, she did survive and wound up testifying in the Ravensbrück trials.

Hallowes was the first woman to ever receive the George Cross which was presented by the British King George who had just created this award. She was the only surviving woman from the SOE's F-Section to receive the highest military honor.[23] Hallowes was honored heavily by the British Empire. She was also awarded the Member of the Order of the British Empire, MBE, for her efforts. On top of those two prestigious awards, Hallowes earned three more

[18] Ibid, 148-150.
[19] Loftis, "Code name Lise," pg. 195.
[20] Ibid, 203-209.
[21] She fell from cliff on her back and likely broke a few vertebrae.
[22] Loftis, "Code name Lise," pg. 235-6.
[23] The other two recipients are Violette Szabo and Noor Inyat Khan who were killed in concentration camps.

awards: the War Medal 1939-1945, France and Germany Star, and 1939-1945 star.[24] [25] France only gave her one award: the Legion of Honour.[26] It could be theorized that the reason why the French did not bestow more awards on her was because her work within France was short lived before she was captured. She worked with British assets more than the French.

Hallowes was highly decorated in her time and gained publicity since the newspapers all fought for the coverage of the first female recipient of the George Cross. British Lion Films chose to make a movie about her war time experiences. This resulted in the 1950 wartime drama, *Odette,* about her life. The movie even had a forward by Maurice Buckmaster. This film was an instant hit. Odette Hallowes became a household name due to the new publicity. Hallowes tried to live a quiet life, which she was able to do after the film aged and was not a hot topic anymore. She chose to stay out of the limelight, which may have also contributed to her lack of recognition.

In 1995, Odette Hallowes passed away. Her obituaries focused on her awards and the reasons why she received these accolades. Hallowes always thought of herself as a mother and a housewife, so her obituaries made sure to mention her daughters. Based on these obituaries, I believe that Hallowes did necessarily not want the media attention, and when the war was over, she wanted to stay out of the public spotlight and be there for her daughters and her husbands.[27]

Virginia Hall

Female agents who were in the field did not have a high rate of return; Virginia Hall was one of the few agents who was not captured by the Gestapo. She successfully outmaneuvered the Gestapo every step of the way. Klaus Barbie, the Gestapo agent known as the Butcher of Lyon, famously said, "I am going to catch that Canadian Bitch" about Hall.[28] This shows just how frustrated the Gestapo was in trying to find the identity of their limping lady. It adds insult to injury that they are getting outsmarted by a woman and a foreigner.

Virginia Hall, an American, worked perilously in France, collaborating with local resistance groups and creating her own network of Maquisards.[29] This became apparent when in 2007, the French President, Jacques Chirac, honored Hall's efforts. Twenty-five years after Hall passed away, Chirac believed he was the first French official to publicly honor her efforts. It was later found out, after Chirac's honor, by an historian, that Hall was honored with the Croix de Guerre with the Palm which is the highest ranking that a person could receive from the French government at the time.[30] There were no records of this, as the National Archives burned down, so she took that secret to her grave.

[24]"Odette Sansom: The Most Decorated Woman of World War II," Indentifymedals.com, 29 October 2022 https://www.identifymedals.com/article/odette-sansom-the-most-decorated-woman-of-world-war-ii/

[25] Hallowes' awards which are currently on display at the Imperial War Museum.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Please note that Hallowes was married three times throughout her life.

[28] Sonia Purnell, A Woman of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II (New York, NY: Viking, 2019), 164.

[29] French guerillas

[30] Ibid.

In Britain, while Hall was in the field, she was recommended for the Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE) which is one of the highest military honors. She was turned down.[31] She was later awarded the Member of the Order of the British Empire, MBE.[32] It is important to note that the MBE is an award of a lesser distinction. When looking back on Hall's wartime service, it is astonishing she did not receive more commendations. Hall did not believe in wartime awards because she believed it was one's duty to fight for rights and your country. She could have declined an award, but there would be records of that. There are none.

In the United States, her home country, Hall was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) on May 12, 1945 for her work in the European theater. At that point, she was the only civilian woman to be awarded such a distinction. After returning to the United States, Hall worked for the Office of Strategic Services, which was the American version of the SOE. Hall chose to not have a public ceremony, because it would make her identity known while she was still an active intelligence agent. Hall was not one who wanted the accolades, but rather to continue to serve her countries.[33] [34] As the "Memorandum for President Truman" from William J. Donovan, head of OSS, presented this award. The reason why Hall was awarded this Cross was due to her choice to volunteer in May 1944 despite the increased risk due to the Gestapo knowing who she was. In this mission, she was there with two American officers that trained the FFI, French Forces of the Interior, battalion. This directly resulted in the 150 dead Germans and 500 in captivity. Hall also increased her importance by acting as the radio operator between the resistance and the London office. It is important that the OSS and SOE were allied, and since the Americans had a delayed start to the war, the OSS relied on the teachings of the SOE.

If Virginia Hall had these prestigious awards, then why was she largely forgotten? The first book written about her was published in 2005,[35] but, in the last 3 years, Hall has gained more attention with a few more books published. Hall has been largely written out of the narrative of World War II. It is undetermined by my sources if she was written out because she was a spy or a woman. It all depends on what lens the author or research had on when they were writing their work. If they were interested in a feminist history, then they would come to the conclusion that it was because she was a woman. However, historians who specialize in espionage would argue that was her line of work that kept her hidden from the public and the subsequent narrative. The fact that she was a woman in espionage did not help her case. When men have an inferiority complex, they will attempt to erase her work.

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[31] Ibid, 126.

[32] "Virginia Hall MBE Medal Award," International Spy Museum, 29 October 2022, www.spymuseum.org/exhibition-experiences/about-the-collection/collection-highlights/virginia-hall-mbe-medal-award/.

[33] Virginia was an American citizen, but she considered France to be her second country which is why she put herself in continuous danger.

[34] In every work in my bibliography that mentions Hall's awards, they mention how she did not believe in the accolades and was one of the most humble agents to have survived since she did not leave behind any sort of personal writings or works describing her work in her own words.

[35] Wolves at the door by Judith Person. This is not included my research because this book was released before World War II documents were declassified, so I did not see the need to include it in the research.

With all of this being said, what *did* Virginia Hall do? Hall's time in the field was anything but simple. When Hall joined the SOE, she was the first woman and the first disabled person to join. In my research, she seems to be the first disabled woman to be written about as a spy in this war. The SOE at the time had only ten phone lines, and the F-Section only had eight people. When Hall started training in July 1941, she was one of ten. On August 23, 1941, Hall left for Lisbon to start her mission in France. She was known as Agent 3844 and was assumed to have only a fifty percent chance of living past the first few days in France. On September 4, 1941, she registered her arrival in France with the Vichy authorities as a journalist for the New York Post. Hall had to act fast, lone agents were at a higher risk of discovery. In the span of an afternoon, she could transform herself into three to four women.[36]

"London was left 'with little else in the field except Miss Virginia Hall.'"[37] She secured valuable safe houses, gathered intelligence from the contacts that she was able to recruit[38] , travelled across France to take care of her people, and even planned jail breaks. She became infamous within the resistance community for her skillful plans of jail breaking. She was Britain's most valuable asset in the field, but her efforts were virtually unknown.

In 1942, Hall received her recall orders from London, and throughout the month of June, she fought to keep her post. In August, London sent agent Nicolas Bodington to Lyon to discuss Hall's future with the F-Section. At the end of the conversation, Hall had successfully secured her post and opened the door for more female agents. She at the time was working with 25 different SOE organizations, six pianists[39] in the free zone, and eight different circuits.[40]

This put Virginia Hall in a position of being licensed to kill. The famed double agent, Alesch, had infiltrated her network, and the Gestapo were hot on her trail. She sent a message to London asking for a flight out of France. She was unable to get one, so she took the last train to Perpignan, a French town that was 20 miles away from the Spanish border. In Perpignan, Hall was able to find a guide and two men to guide her through the mountains. Hall was always on the lookout for connections and seized the opportunity to befriend the two men she would be travelling the mountains with, she hoped that these men would be indebted to her and would later help her with a mission.

As seen in Appendix 2, the route Hall had to use to go through the mountains was brutal. It is November so the conditions are freezing. She climbed over 13,000 feet in harsh conditions that caused Cuthbert[41] to slowly deteriorate.[42] At one point during the climb, the group had to be in a single file otherwise they would have be in mortal danger. Hall had no choice but to keep up with the men. The mountain guides were known to be ruthless and if a member of their group slowed down everyone else, they would be left in the mountains to die.

When she safely made it into Spain, she was arrested at the train station for illegal entry. She spent a couple of weeks in a Spanish prison, before being released to the American

[36] Bridgette, Virginia, Marie, or Germaine.
[37] Purnell, "A Woman of No Importance," pg. 53.
[38] People were more likely to talk freely about their feelings to an American
[39] Able to help with wireless transmitting
[40] Purnell, "A Woman of No Importance," pg. 134.
[41] Cuthbert was the nickname of Hall's prosthetic leg.
[42] In a funny line of communication: she told London that Cuthbert was being tiresome, to which the London Radio Operator responded to just eliminate him. Not realizing of course, that Cuthbert is a prothesis.

consulate. When she was able, she promptly returned to London in order to be sent back to France. She had left a network that was so deeply rooted that it made the other agents look like amateurs. The F-Section deemed it too risky to send her back to France. She briefly worked in Spain in that SOE section, before returning to London where she paid for her own lessons in wireless operations. This made her ever more valuable. While students were not usually allowed to leave the training grounds on the weekends, Hall repeatedly took mystery trips. It was later found out that she was speaking to the American OSS, in order to join their ranks.

The Americans disguised Hall as Dianne, a woman in her late 60s. Hall had to meet with Hollywood makeup artists in order to change her facial features. She reentered France just sixteen months after her narrow escape. Sixteen months is not a long time, and the Gestapo still regarded Hall's capture as one of their top priorities. When Hall entered the field with the OSS, she was one of five agents. Hall was able to receive a 35% pay increase[43] when she joined the Americans, but she had to prove *again* that women could lead, since she was dropped with a male agent, Aramis, who was utterly incapable and was supposed to be in charge of Hall. That did not last long at all. Hall quickly broke ties with him in the field and went on to establish her own networks. She went undercover as a milkmaid, where she was able to sell her cheese to German soldiers and gather intelligence. She gathered so much intelligence, she had to transmit to Britain nightly.

Hall also at this time was turning peasants into guerilla warriors. This took a lot of strength and resilience on Hall's part. Unsurprisingly, men at this point did not like working with a woman, let alone a foreigner. This was not the first time Hall had to overcome such a barrier and it certainly would not be her last. She worked with the men and to hone their skills and recruit others.[44]

On April 18, 1944, Hall was given permission to move to Paris. This is more dangerous than previous assignments since she did not have a French accent, and she had to pose as an elderly French woman. Luckily, she befriended Aramis' landlady who would act as a speaker for Hall to hide her accent. This operation would prove vital. She gathered resistance networks and was able to get them the supplies they desperately needed. Hall pushed London for her own guerilla units but was repeatedly denied. She faced discrimination based on her gender from both her organization and some of the men in the resistance networks. Three months later, Hall was able to lead her own guerilla unit. Her unit and her networks provided sabotage attempts that directly helped with D-Day by slowing the Nazi troops.

Unfortunately, when Allied troops were sweeping through France in 1945, they no longer saw a need for these guerilla warriors. Hall had to discharge her men. This was devastating for Hall and her men. She gave them discharge papers and monetary compensation. Many of the men returned to their home countries to join their war efforts. Just like that, everything Hall had worked for during the entire war was gone.

In 1985, Virginia Hall died in a hospital in Maryland. These few obituaries give a brief description of what Hall's life was like after the war. Since Hall chose to work in the field of espionage and intelligence for her career, there is not a lot of information known about her.

[43] Ibid, 202.
[44] Ibid, 206.

There is barely any information that has been released due to the statute of limitations of the intelligence data being shared.

Vera Atkins

When British Imperial War Museum interviewed Vera Atkins about her wartime experience, this is how they described her role in the war: "British civilian and officer served with F Section, Special Operations Executive at Headquarters, Baker Street, London, GB, 1941-1945."[45] The account is an immense oversimplification of what Vera Atkins was to the F-Section. She was effectively the second in command for the F-Section under Col. Maurice Buckmaster. She worked hard to gain the respect and trust of those around her. The majority of her job revolved around checking the agents' knowledge of France and making sure their costumes were in order. If an agent arrived in mid-September with a full ration card, then that would immediately put them on an enemy's radar. By that point, their rations should have been at least halfway used. Atkins lived for the small details that saved lives.

She was the point of contact for the female agents. She made sure that the women were looked after in a time when women were constantly being overlooked. "Ms. Atkins' heart was with her 400 secret agents. She stood on the runway to watch each of them take off and parachute into France."[46] She tried to be at every departure for the agents, and in my research, I have not found that she missed a single agent in her time. She would send them off to France by yelling a French expletive at them.

Considering how much power Atkins held, it is impressive considering she was not British, but rather Romanian, and born in a time where Romania was considered an enemy state by the British, so all of her achievements were not an easy feat to achieve. Atkins was also Jewish in a time that antisemitism was running rampant in not only Germany and the continent, but in England as well. Col. Buckmaster was her biggest supporter and with his help, she was able to become a British citizen.

Once the war was over, she worked tirelessly to find out what happened to her 118 missing agents and a few other agents from the other intelligence communities. "I could not just abandon their memory. I decided we must find out what happened to each one and where."[47] This was no easy feat, considering the Nazis made it nearly impossible to find people. There was a Nazi decree that went into effect in 1941 called "Nacht und Nebel."[48] This decree was designed to make people who were considered large threats to the state disappear without a trace. Out of her 118 missing agents, she was able to locate 117. All of the 117 were dead. The one that was missing was rumored to have taken the money and ran.

In 1948, she was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government. Her main concern, however, was to have her agents receive the proper recognition. Five years before Atkins passed away, the French government awarded her with the Knight of the Legion of

[45] Imperial War Museum, Imperial War Museum, January 6, 1987, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009338.
[46] Martin, Douglas. "Vera Atkins, 92, Spymaster for British, Dies." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 27, 2000. https://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/27/world/vera-atkins-92-spymaster-for-british-dies.html.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Holocaust Encyclopedia (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed November 17, 2022, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/night-and-fog-decree.

Honour. Three years before she passed away, she was awarded the Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, CBE.

In the few books written about the SOE, they only recognized Vera Atkins in the clerical sense. She was known in relation to Buckmaster. While Atkins and Buckmaster had a close working relationship and depended greatly on each other, she was impressive in her own right. It is a shame that she is not remembered more for her own work, but rather for the work she did for Buckmaster.

Conclusion

There seems to be no doubt that these women were largely forgotten about after the war. When men were returning home, they need their jobs back, thus pushing the women back into the stereotypical gender roles of the prewar period. If there were great female heroines for the masses to look up to, it would be harder as a society to return to supposed normalcy. Since these women fought the war in the shadows, it was easy for society to forget them. This brings us back to our original question: Who do we commemorate? Over time as a society, we have started commemorating our women who fought more frequently than before. Well, it depends. We have not chosen to commemorate Hall's "tart friends,"[49] because their jobs are not considered noble or proper in our society. Who are the "tart friends" you may ask. Well, these friends of Hall were French prostitutes of Madame Germaine Guérin. "It was Germaine's 'girls,' though, who were to take perhaps the greatest risks of all to provide Virginia with intelligence."[50] These women drug the German customers, either by their knowledge or not, and rifle through their pockets for information. In some cases, the women would convince the men to try heroin. These men would happen to be pilots and the next day their eyesight would be affected so much that they could not fly. [51]

Over time, society is starting to choose who we commemorate, not the government. These select group of women are being commemorated now more than when they were alive. There are multiple publications showcasing what they were able to achieve in the six years (or less) that the Second World War took place. This shows that society is taking the lead on who we are deciding to remember.

This, of course, does not mean that male agents are no longer being represented by the media. That is far from the case. In the books used in my bibliography that were not women focused, such as *War in the Shadows* by Patrick Marnham. The agents who the book spends the majority of the time talking about is men. It isn't surprising since most agencies, on either side, did not hire many women.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe, MCU, has recently created a series about Agent Carter, a female spy who has become much more than Captain America's love interest. She has to navigate the world that is 1940s America as a single woman fresh out of the governmental espionage scene. She has to deal with implicit and explicit displays of misogyny and sexism, which allows Carter to play on their low standards of what women can do to outplay them. This also means that Carter needs to constantly prove herself.

[49] Purnell, "A Woman of No Importance," pg. 60.
[50] Purnell, "A Woman of No Importance," pg. 63.
[51] Ibid, 62.

There is no doubt that the MCU is one of the most famous movie franchises in the world. I hope that this will get young historians thinking about what female spies were actually like during this time period and if *Agent Carter* is based in any truth. Honestly, one of the best ways to get the younger generation interested in a historical subject is to have it shown in popular media. That flips the idea of commemoration on its head. If society does have a say of who gets commemorated, then it would not be a stretch to think Agent Carter is prepping the new generation of historians to dive deeper into these women spies.

After all, Agent Carter would definitely have more views than movies such as *A Call to Spy* or *Odette*. Marvel is a very wealthy and resourceful branch of Disney, so they have an excellent marketing team. *A Call to Spy* was a small Indy film that outlined the lives of Virginia Hall, Vera Atkins, and Noor Inyat Khan. The movie does its best to show how important each of these women are individually while weaving their stories together throughout the film. *Odette* was able to raise awareness to Hallowes while it was big in the box office, but it did not have the same pull as *Agent Carter* does, so it was put in the depths of film history only to be known by a select few.

It makes you wonder if popular media plays apart in commemoration. That brings us back to our original questions: Whom do we commemorate? Does society have a say? Does the government? Who earns the right or honor to be commemorated? Does a person's line of work bar them from being commemorated? What about gender? Does the same reign true when it comes to how they are remembered? Essentially, why are people commemorated the way they are?

These questions can be simplified to this simple question:

How will *you* remember…
Odette Sansom,
Virginia Hall,
and Vera Atkins?

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Appendix[52]

[52] Adapted from Craig R Gralley, "Climb to Freedom: A Personal Journey in Virginia Hall's Steps," *Studies in Intelligence,* March 2017, https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/A-Climb-to-Freedom.pdf.