



COUNCIL ON AMERICA'S MILITARY PAST - U.S.A.

PRESERVING, INTERPRETING AND SHARING OUR MILITARY HERITAGE

presents

The Persistent Pandemic Preservationist August 2021

Editor's Note:

Welcome! This is Volume II, Number 5 of our newsletter featuring historic sites across the country responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic as well as some related issues. The intent is to stay in touch with old and new members, and to share information that is interesting and useful, in the hope that we will create a community of practice among those preserving the nation's military past. Each issue will focus on one or more sites. The original Persistent Preservationist was a most excellent newsletter produced by esteemed CAMP member Col. Hal Youmans, USA (Ret).

Like most of us, I had hoped that the worst of the pandemic was over, and that I could rename this newsletter, maybe turning it into something catchy like The Persistent Post-Pandemic Preservationist. Now I'm not so sure, as our country and the world struggle with the Delta Variant. In any case, we will continue indefinitely to write and publish this newsletter, but we will aim at producing it three times per year like the JAMP and Heliogram schedule. Ideally members will hear from CAMP once a month — receiving either this publication, JAMP, Heliogram, or a note from our President in the form of a CAMP News Roundup.

In this issue I want to do two things. The first is to bring you up to date on a few of the sites that we covered in the past year, to give you a taste of how the military/naval museum world is doing right now. The other is to talk a little about conducting research when museums, libraries, and archives aren't open. I decided to use as a case study Virginia Hall, the remarkable World War II American secret operative, who offers an interesting story for our times.

My thanks to those who have supplied information for this issue, especially the authors of the three books about Virginia Hall and artist Jeff Bass.

I hope this finds you all as well as can be expected.

Stay safe, everyone!

— Nick Reynolds, Editor

Updates from the Field

- The Army's official state-of-the-art new National Museum of the US Army at Ft. Belvoir, VA has had a challenging year — a grand opening, a complete closing on account of COVID, and then a limited reopening. As of August 2, it is open but asks visitors to follow a strict set of guidelines. Chief among them are a timed entry system to control the flow of visitors; a limit on the size of tour groups; and a mask requirement. This ultra-modern museum comes with excellent air-handling equipment, a plus in these times.
- As of July 22, the Maritime Museum of San Diego (California), which describes itself as “a tightly funded non-profit operation sustained and reliant by the combination of admission ticket, special events, on-the-water experience, educational program, tours, and donation revenues” was in a better place than at this time last year. This museum has the advantage that many of its exhibits are historic ships that are already outdoors, which makes it well-suited for

visits during the Pandemic. In June, it proceeded to reopen its indoor exhibits, enabling it once again to share its unique treasures with the public, and started to operate on something like its pre-Pandemic schedule.

- Two other forts, one owned by a state, the other by a city, report cross-cutting pressures, and show why it is not always easy to generalize about the effects of the Pandemic.
 - Ft. Ontario, a historic 19th-century star-shaped fort wonderfully situated on the shores of Lake Ontario, experienced a burst of visitors as Covid-19 strictures loosened somewhat in the spring and early summer. Posts on the Friends of the Park website show the interesting things that happened when Americans were finally able to travel — to include a vintage car rally. Current pressures on the state budget mean that the fort, which is part of the NY State Parks System, may have to cut back on some of its programs. However, there may be a Federal solution. The Fort Ontario Study Act has directed the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study in order to evaluate the fort's national significance and determine whether it can and should become part of the national park system. One factor that makes it unique is that, from August 1944 to February 1946, the fort hosted the only World War II emergency shelter for European war refugees on American soil, the majority of whom were Jewish. This interesting process is described at: [https://parkplanning.nps.gov/Fort OntarioSRS](https://parkplanning.nps.gov/FortOntarioSRS). The link includes beautiful pictures of the fort and describes the way that members of the public may comment on line, by phone, or (heaven forefend) even snail mail between September and November of this year.
 - 1700 miles to the southwest the picture at another 19th-century fort is similar in some ways but different in others. Fort Concho is a National Historic Landmark owned and operated by the city of San Angelo. As such it follows state mandates. Thus far in 2021, guests have been able to come for the fort's regular programs, events, and building rentals. Attendance levels dropped precipitously in 2020 but rocketed back in 2021. Recent upticks in COVID rates may result in added restrictions but are not expected to lead to outright cancellations. And...the Pandemic has offered opportunities to restore and refurbish. The fort will break ground this month on the reconstruction of Barracks/Mess Hall 3; it will serve as the home for an outstanding research/artifact collection from a regional scholar, expanding and improving the research opportunities at the fort. An anonymous donor has contributed \$2 million for the reconstruction of Barracks/Mess Hall 4.

A Case Study: Research During the Pandemic

For history lovers, research is part and parcel of life. The ideal site will have a museum, an archive, and a library: you can immerse yourself in the past through the artifacts in the museum and then continue your research through the books and documents in the library and the archive—as is the case at Ft. Concho.

The pandemic has limited the ability to travel to sites and has led many archives and libraries to close their doors. What is the researcher to do? Your correspondent posed this question to three of the five (!) authors who have recently written books about Virginia Hall, a World War II spy

originally from Baltimore, Maryland who operated behind the lines in France even though she was missing the bottom half of her left leg. Her mission was to coordinate and support the Resistance against the Nazis first for the British Special Operations Executive and then, around the time of D-Day, for the American Office of Strategic Services. No one had to force this low-key volunteer to take the incredible risks that came with the work.

Why Virginia Hall? My friend Craig Gralley, author of a novel written in the first person, *Hall of Mirrors* (Chrysalis Books, 2019), explains “[w]omen's stories have been un- and under-told for a long time. ... Not only is this a story about a woman, but a disabled woman in a traditionally male-dominated profession, espionage. ... This story is very different because there aren't any references to using her sexual charms. She met and beat men at their own game, on their level.” Authors Heather Demetrios and Erika Robuck expand on this theme. On track to publish her young adult non-fiction book *Codename Badass* (Atheneum Books, 2021) this September, Heather told your correspondent that “more and more writers are passionate about unearthing stories about the many incredible (and often overlooked or utterly invisible) women who made contributions to history. People are eager to read and tell stories about women who broke barriers, fought against the limitations imposed on them by society, and who were just generally kickass.” Erika's *Invisible Woman* (Berkley/Penguin Books, 2021), a work of historical fiction, takes a similar approach, starting with the title. She posits that one book on Hall led to the next because “the collective unconscious is real and powerful. Once these ‘signals’ from the past start, many writers pick up on their frequency.” Craig agrees, pointing out that the books complement each other, reaching different audiences and contributing to the general “buzz” about Hall. As Heather puts it, “I love that we're all presenting her story in different ways - there is something for everyone!” If anything, the Pandemic seems to have stimulated a hunger for books about non-traditional heroes who were able to thrive despite a physical handicap.

Museums and Virginia Hall: CAMP is all about exploring physical sites and artifacts. We can point to at least three museums with Virginia Hall exhibits that played a role in our authors' work — at the CIA, the International Spy Museum in downtown DC, and Spyscape in New York. In Heather's case, the museum exhibit led to the book — a wonderful example of the power of artifacts and why we will always need museums: “The moment I encountered the small exhibit on her at the International Spy Museum..., I immediately knew I had to tell her story. A disabled woman was the Gestapo's most wanted spy in WWII France and I didn't know about it? WHAT?”



At left, a painting of Virginia Hall in action in France in 1944, by Jeffrey W. Bass, reproduced courtesy of the author. At right, an official USG photo of Hall receiving the Distinguished Service Cross from OSS Director William J. Donovan shortly after the war.



How did they collect the information they needed? All three of our authors were lucky enough to have done most if not all of their research before the Pandemic. Important targets were the declassified collections of government files in archives in the United States and Great Britain, especially the US National Archives in College Park, MD and the UK National Archives at Kew. They did not stop there. Craig almost literally traced Hall's steps over the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain that she took when she had to flee the Gestapo. Heather was able to go to France before the Pandemic and visit the places where Virginia operated, to include her original base, Lyon, as well as the safe houses and drop sites that she used. Erika's inability to travel did not stop her: she was able to rely on imaginative work-arounds, to include interviews, YouTube videos, and the iFit app on her Nordictrack treadmill that allowed her to "walk" the Pyrenees. During the Pandemic, our authors were also able to draw on the vast collections that have now been digitized and are available on websites, both of government agencies and private institutions. Some archives are willing to scan documents for a few dollars. Your correspondent has been especially impressed by the 800,000 pages of documents, many of them on World War II, that have been digitized by the FDR Presidential Library, as well as the responsiveness of the referents at the UK National Archives. In July, the US National Archives in College Park, MD announced a procedure for partial reopening starting this month, August. Check www.archives.gov for details.

Bottom line: while the Pandemic has impeded some research that could only be conducted in person, it has not brought research to a standstill by any means, and in this case the result has been an uplifting story told by three prize-winning authors.



Authors Erika Robuck, Craig Gralley, and Heather Demetrios (ER photo by Nick Woodall).

CAMP is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization whose members are interested in the identification, restoration, preservation, and memorialization of old military installations as well as their history and traditions. All persons sharing these interests are invited to join. CAMP publishes an academic journal (The Journal of America's Military Past) and a newsletter on recent developments in historic preservation (Headquarters Heliogram), and holds an annual conference. Find out more at: www.campjump.org.