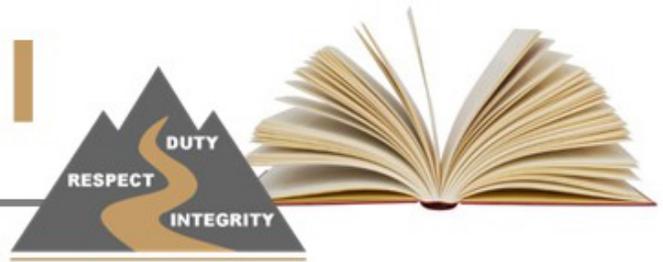


# Professional Reading Program

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



## *A Woman of No Importance* by Sonia Purnell.

### Why Read *A Woman of No Importance*?

*“This book is rather an attempt to reveal how one woman really did help turn the tide of history. How adversity and rejection and suffering can sometimes turn, in the end, into resolve and ultimately triumph ... How women can step out of the construct of conventional femininity to defy all the stereotypes, if only they are given the chance”*

*“The fact that a young woman who had lost her leg in tragic circumstances broke through the tightest constrictions and overcame prejudice and even hostility to help the Allies win the Second World War is astonishing.”*

Virginia Hall became the first Allied woman deployed behind enemy lines during WWII. Despite her prosthetic leg she helped develop a spy network to assist the French resistance. The Gestapo deemed her, “the most dangerous of all Allied spies,” and she is the only civilian woman in WWII to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

While this is not a book that focuses specifically on leadership, it is impossible to read without realizing that Virginia was an outstanding leader who excelled at leading others in extremely difficult, chaotic, and demanding situations outside of the “normal” organizational environment. Reading between the lines, there are a lot of lessons on leadership in dynamic situations to be found in this book. Not only is it an interesting read, but it demonstrates the value of leadership skills in situations that are not typically studied in leadership books and courses.

There are several videos and other resources related to the book and featuring the author available online. Find some of them at the links below, or by using an internet search engine.

- **Sonia Purnell discusses A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE! (2 minutes):**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T91uVkJQWd7w>
- **A Woman of No Importance | Sonia Purnell | Talks at Google (56 minutes):**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJFQcB781Uo>

For more leadership ideas and to dig deeper, check out the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program (WFLDP) blog, Facebook page, Professional Reading Program, and more at the links below:

**Blog:** <http://wildlandfireleadership.blogspot.com/>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/WFLDP>

**Professional Reading Program:** <https://www.nwccg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/prp>

**Main WFLDP page:** <https://www.fireleadership.gov>

## *A Woman of No Importance Discussion Questions*

- 1) Virginia Hall is obviously intelligent, strong-willed, a great judge of people, and resourceful. Did this book challenge your ideas of what one woman can accomplish? In what ways did her grit and courage inspire you? How can you develop your ability to “read” and successfully interact with people as a leader, as Virginia proved so capable of doing?
- 2) When seeking a position as a diplomat, her application was initially rejected citing an obscure rule barring amputees. Her case was then brought before FDR who had his own physical challenges yet he saw no reason to reconsider her application. Why do you think FDR didn't consider his own physical challenges an impediment to his job but obviously considered Virginia's a disability?
  - 2a) Would you recognize someone else's ability to overcome challenges similar to challenges you have overcome?
- 3) George Bellows, British agent, recognized Virginia as someone the SOE needed. Was there someone in your career who recognized your potential even though others didn't?
  - 3a) Do you seek to recognize potential and encourage it in others?
- 4) Even though Hall's role in securing the Allied victory in France, very few have heard of her. There were other women who contributed significantly to the war efforts. Have you heard of any of these women?
  - 4a) Josephine Baker, French resistance agent and civil rights activist.
  - 4b) Edith Cavell, British nurse who helped Allied soldiers escape during WWII.
  - 4c) Nancy Harkness, American pilot and Commander during WWII.
  - 4d) Lee Miller, photojournalist during WWII.
- 5) Discuss the leadership qualities displayed by Virginia Hall throughout her career. How might the leadership qualities needed in a clandestine, covert, chaotic, and unconventional environment transfer to the wildland fire environment?
- 6) Throughout the book, Virginia demonstrated a great ability to work with people of varied backgrounds, social status, and cultural affiliation to build trust, create teams and accomplish her goals – how might you be able to develop and apply these skills in your life?
- 7) For most of her career, Virginia faced adversity and demonstrated resilience, from organizational barriers to austere conditions in the field. What can we learn from her example of taking initiative and working through difficulties to accomplish goals? What are some similarities to the wildland fire leadership setting? Some differences?