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Opening extract from

Rose Under Fire

Written by

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EGMONT

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Rose Moyer Justice
August 2, 1944
Hamble, Southampton, Hampshire
Notes for an Accident Report

I just got back from Celia Forester's funeral. I'm supposed to be writing up an official report for the Tempest she flew into the ground, since she's obviously not going to write it herself and I saw it happen. And also because I feel responsible. I know it wasn't my fault – I really do know that now. But I briefed her. We both had Tempests to deliver and I'd flown one a couple of times before. Celia hadn't. She took off ten minutes after me. If she'd taken off first, we might both still be alive.

I've never had to do a report like this and I don't really know where to begin. Maddie gave me this beautiful leather-bound notebook to draft it in; she thinks it helps to have nice paper, and knew I wouldn't buy any for myself since like everything else it's so scarce. She says you need to bribe yourself because it's always *blah* writing up accident reports. She had to write a big report herself last January and also be grilled in person by the Accident Committee. She's right about nice paper, of course, and I have filled up

a couple of those pretty cloth-bound diaries that lock, but all I ever put in them are attempts at poetry. Too bad I can't put the accident report into verse.

There were a few other Air Transport Auxiliary pilots at Celia's funeral, but Maddie was the only ATA girl besides me. Felicyta couldn't come; she had a delivery chit this morning. Along with Celia and Felicyta, Maddie and I were the ones who gave out Mrs Hatch's strawberries to the soldiers lining up to board the landing craft for the D-Day invasion. It made us into friends. Felicyta was very tearful this morning, banging things around angrily. Probably she shouldn't be flying. I know exactly what Daddy would say – 3000 miles away on Justice Field in Pennsylvania – if it was me: 'Rosie, go home, you shouldn't fly while your friends are being buried.' But the planes have got to be delivered. *There's a war on*.

Boy, am I sick of hearing that.

It never stops. There are planes to deliver every day straight from the factory or just overhauled, painted in fresh camouflage or invasion stripes ready to go to France. I got thrown in at the deep end when I stepped off the ship from New York three months ago, and before the end of May I was delivering Spitfires, real fighter planes, from Southampton's factories near Hamble Aerodrome to just about every airbase in southern England. I was supposed

to get some training, but they just put me through a few flight tests instead. Being the daughter of someone who runs a flight school has paid off in spades – I've been flying since I was twelve, which means I've been flying longer than some of the older pilots, even though I'm only eighteen. The baby on the team.

There was a lull for a week after D-Day, when the invasion started. Actually, I don't think it should be called an 'invasion' when really we are trying to get most of Europe back from the Germans who invaded it in the first place. Our Allied soldiers left for France in the beginning of June, and for one week only military flights got authorised, so there was no flying for us – the Air Transport Auxiliary in Britain are civilian pilots, like the WASPs at home. That was a quiet week, the second week of June. Then the flying bombs started coming in.

Holy smoke, I can't say how much I hate the flying bombs.

V-1 is what the Germans call them. 'V' stands for *Vergeltungswaffe*, retaliation weapon. I worked hard at memorising the real word for it because I always think it means 'VENGEANCE'. Vengeance Weapon 1. The only thing these bombs are meant to do is terrify people. Everyone puts on a brave face though – the English are very good at putting on a brave face, I'll give them that!

People try to make the bombs less scary by giving them stupid names: doodlebugs – sounds like baby talk. Buzz bombs – a phrase for older kids to use. The other ferry pilots call them 'pilotless planes', which should seem simple and technical, but it gives me the creeps. An aircraft flying blind, no cockpit, no windows, no way of landing except to self-destruct? How can you win an air war against a plane that doesn't need a pilot? A plane that turns into a bomb? Our planes, the British and American aircraft I fly every day in the ATA, don't even have radios, much less guns. We don't stand a chance. Celia Forester didn't stand a chance.

At the funeral the local minister – vicar, they say here – had never even met Celia. He called her 'a dedicated pilot'.

It doesn't mean *anything*. We're *all* dedicated. But to tell the truth I don't think any of us would have had anything better to say. Celia was so quiet. She was only just posted to Hamble in May, about the same time I was, and for the same reason – to ferry planes for the invasion. She hardly ever talked to *anybody*. I can't blame her – she had a fiancé who was in Bomb Disposal and was killed at Christmas. It's bad enough being a newcomer without being stuck grieving for your sweetheart. Celia wasn't very happy here.

Am I happy here?

I guess I am. I like what I'm doing. I wanted to come *so badly* – I can't believe they gave me that diploma in December, like Laura Ingalls Wilder leaving school at fifteen so she could be a teacher! And now here I am, in England for the first time, not far from where Daddy was born, and I'm actually helping. I'm *useful*. Even without Uncle Roger being so high up in the Royal Engineers, cutting through the red tape for me, I'd have found a way to get here. And I'm a lot luckier than Celia in other ways, not just because I'm still alive – I'm lucky to have met Nick almost as soon as I got here, and lucky to have had so much flying experience before I started.

I've read over that last paragraph and it sounds so chirpy and stuck-up and – just so dumb. But the truth is I have to keep reminding myself again and again that I want to do this, because I'm so tired now. None of us ever get enough sleep. Not just because we're working so hard; it's those horrible flying bombs too.

The tiredness is beginning to show. We're all cracking at the seams, I think. Maddie and I ended up being taken out to lunch by Celia's parents after the funeral, because Maddie was still sitting in our pew sobbing quietly into her handkerchief after everyone else had left, and I was sitting with her and sniffling a bit too. I am sure the Foresters were touched to find anyone showing so much

raw emotion at their daughter's short, bleak funeral, when everyone else there hardly knew her.

But neither one of us had actually been crying for Celia. On the train back to Southampton, Maddie confessed to me, 'My best friend was killed in action, in "enemy action" like it always says in the obituaries, exactly eight months ago. She didn't get a funeral.'

'*My gosh*,' I said. I can't really imagine what it must feel like to have your best friend killed by a bomb or gunfire. So I added, 'Well, it was brave of you to come along today!'

'I felt like a *rat* eating lunch with the Foresters. So cheap and ugly. Them paying for the meal and me trying to think of *anything* to say about Celia apart from, "She was a nice girl but she never talked to anybody."'

'I know. I felt that way too. Look, we're both rats, Maddie – I was being more selfish than you. I couldn't think about anything all day except having to write the darn accident report. Celia had never been up in a Tempest before and we only had one set of Pilot's Notes between us and she refused to take them with her. I should have forced her to take them. And I bet now they won't let any other girls near a Tempest till the accident's been investigated, and if we don't get to fly 'em again it'll be MY FAULT as much as Celia's.'

'They'll let us fly 'em,' Maddie said mournfully. 'Desperate times and all that.'

She's probably right. The fighter pilots need all the Tempests they can get. They're the best planes we've got for shooting down flying bombs.

When Maddie and I got back to the aerodrome at Hamble, Felicyta was waiting for us. She was sitting in a corner of the Operations room and had made a little funeral feast. She had a plate of toast cut up in one-inch squares with a bit of margarine and the tiniest blob of strawberry jam on each square – simple but pretty.

'We make do with not much as usual,' Felicyta said, and tried to smile. 'Here are teacups. Was it terrible?'

I nodded. Maddie grimaced.

'Celia's mother says we should share the things from her locker,' I said. 'Mrs Forester doesn't want any of it back.'

Now we all grimaced.

'Someone's got to do it,' I said. Maddie began pouring tea, and Felicyta touched me lightly on the shoulder, like she wanted to support me but was a little embarrassed to show it. She gave an odd, tight smile and said, 'I will take care of Celia's locker. You must report this accident, Rosie?'

'Yes, I'm writing the accident report. Lucky me.'

'These papers are for you.' Felicyta patted a cardboard

file folder on the table's worn oilcloth. 'It is a letter from the mechanic who examined Celia's plane after her crash. He gave it to me when I flew there this morning. You need to read this before you write the report.'

'Is it secret?'

I had to ask, because so many things are confidential.

'No, it is not secret, but –' She took a deep breath. 'You saw Celia crash. You said you thought the ailerons on her wings did not work. This letter tells why. Celia hit a flying bomb.'

Now that I'm sitting here with this notebook I don't know if I should tell the Accident Committee what the mechanic said, because it is exactly the kind of thing they'll use as an excuse to stop girls flying Tempests – though I bet any guy would do the same thing, given the chance.

Felicyta wasn't kidding. The mechanic thinks Celia ran into a V-1 flying bomb. No – not 'ran into' it – not accidentally. He thinks she did it on purpose. He thinks she tried to tip a flying bomb out of the sky.

Oh – it is crazy.

When Felicyta told me, over the sad little squares of memorial toast, it made me angry. ATA deaths are never that heroic. An ATA pilot is killed *every week* flying faulty planes, flying in bad weather, coming down on cracked-up runways – there was that terrible accident where a

plane skidded and flipped after landing because of the mud, and by the time people got out to the poor pilot he'd *drowned* – stuck upside down in a cockpit full of standing water. HORRIBLE. But not heroic. I've never heard of an ATA pilot getting hit by enemy fire. We don't dogfight. Our bomb bays are empty, our gunsights aren't connected to anything. Our deaths don't ever earn us posthumous medals. Drowning in mud, lost at sea, engine failure after take-off.

So I didn't believe Felicyta initially – she was so convinced by the mechanic's letter, but it felt like she was trying to make Celia's death into a hero's death, when it was just another faulty aircraft.

'Anti-aircraft guns are good for shooting down flying bombs,' Felicyta said. 'But you know the Royal Air Force Tempest squadron takes down as many flying bombs in the air as the gunners do on the ground, and Celia was in a Tempest –'

'She didn't have any guns,' I said. 'She wasn't armed.' Holy smoke, she didn't even have a radio. She couldn't even tell the radio room what was wrong as she was coming in to land.

'You do not need guns,' Felicyta insisted passionately, her eyes blazing. 'The mechanic says if you fly fast enough you can ram a pilotless plane with your wing tip.'

We all leaned our heads in together over the tiny decorated squares of toast, talking in low tones like conspirators.

'I've heard the lads talk about that,' Maddie said. 'Doodlebug tipping.'

'In Polish we call it *taran* – aerial ramming. A Polish pilot rammed a German plane over Warsaw on the first day of the war! The Soviet pilots do it too – same word in Russian. *Taran*. It is the best way to stop a pilotless plane in the air,' Felicyta said. 'Before it reaches a target, when it is still over sea or open country, not over London or Southampton. That is what 56 Squadron 150 Wing does with their Tempests.'

'But they're armed!' I insisted.

'You do not need to be armed for *taran*,' Felicyta said. 'You do not need guns to ram another aircraft.'

'She's right,' Maddie said. 'When our lads come up behind a flying bomb and fire at it, they have to fly into the explosion. Absolutely no fun. But if you tip the bomb with your wing before it's over London, it just dives into a field and there's no mess.'

I just couldn't believe Celia would try such a trick, her first time in a Tempest. But as we all kept saying, we didn't really know her.

'Would you do it, Maddie?' I asked.

She shook her head slowly. It was more of an *I don't know* than a *no*. Maddie's a very careful pilot and probably has more hours than the rest of us put together. She is the only one of us who is a First Officer. But I realised, just then, that I don't really know Maddie, either.

'Felicyta would do it,' Maddie said, avoiding an answer. 'Wouldn't you, Fliss? You see a flying bomb in the sky ahead of you, and you're flying a Tempest. Would you make a 180 degree turn and run the other way? Or try to tip it out of the sky?'

'You know what I would do,' Felicyta said, her eyes narrowed. 'Don't you believe a woman could make a *taran* as well as a man? You know what I would do, Maddie Brodatt. But I have never met a flying bomb in the air. Have you?'

'Yes,' Maddie said quietly.

We all stared at her with wide eyes. I am sure my mouth hung open.

'It was back in June,' Maddie said. 'The week after the flying bombs started. I was delivering a Spitfire and I saw it coming towards me, only a couple of hundred feet below. I thought it was another plane. It looked like another plane. But when I waggled my wings it just stayed on course, and then it passed below me – terribly close – and I realised it was a doodlebug. They aren't very big.

Horrible things, eyeless, just a bomb with wings.'

Pilotless, I thought. Ugh. 'Weren't you scared?'

'Not really – you know how you don't worry about a near miss until later, when you think about it afterwards? It was before I'd heard about anybody tipping a doodlebug, and anyway I hadn't a hope of catching it. By the time I'd realised what it was, it was just a speck in the distance, still heading for London. I didn't see it fall.'

I haven't seen one fall, either, but I've heard them. You can hear them THIRTY MILES away, rattling along. Southampton doesn't get fired on as relentlessly as London and Kent, but we get the miserable things often enough that the noise terrifies me. Like being in the next field over to a big John Deere corn picker, clackety clackety clackety. Then the timer counts down, the engine stops, and for a few seconds you don't hear anything as the bomb falls. And then you hear the explosion.

I hate to admit this, but I am so scared of the flying bombs that if I'd known about them ahead of time I would not have come. Even after Uncle Roger's behind-the-scenes scrambling to get the paperwork done for me.

I've read the mechanic's letter now myself. He thinks Celia damaged her wing in a separate incident – separate from the crash, 'possibly the result of a deliberate brush with another aircraft'. He didn't actually mention flying

bombs. But you could tell the idea was in his head.

Now I am upset all over again, remembering the crash. It took me by surprise, watching – I knew something was wrong, of course, but I never expected her to lose control like that, so close to the ground. It happened so suddenly. I'd been waiting for her so we could come back to Hamble together.

I want to talk to Nick about it. He left a message for me – sweet of him, worrying about me having to go to Celia's funeral. It's after nine now, but it's still light out. They have two hours of Daylight Saving in the summer here – they call it Double Summer Time. So I'll walk down to the phone box in the village and hope Nick's not away on some mission. And that I don't get told off by his landlady for calling so late.

Horrible war. So much more horrible here than back in the States. Every few weeks someone's mother or brother or another friend is killed. And already I am fed up with the shortages, never any butter and never enough sleep. The combination of working so hard, and the constant fear, and just the general *blahness* of everything – I wasn't prepared for it. But how could I possibly, possibly have been prepared for it? They've been living with it for five years. All the time I've been swimming at the lake, playing varsity girls' basketball and building a tree house for

Karl and Kurt like a good big sister, crop dusting with Daddy and helping Mother make applesauce, Maddie's been delivering fighter planes. When her best friend was killed by a bomb or whatever it was eight months ago, I was probably sitting in Mr Wagner's creative writing class working out rhyme schemes.

It's so strange to be here at last, and so different from what I expected.

I have put my accident report into verse after all. (I think I am trying to trick myself into writing this darn accident report.) I wish I'd written this poem earlier. It would have been nice to read at Celia's service. I will send a copy to her parents.

For Celia Forester
(by Rose Justice)

The storm will swallow
the brave girl there
who fights destruction
with wings and air –

life and chaos
hover in flight
wing tip to wing tip
until the slight

triumphant moment
when their wings caress
and her crippled Tempest
flies pilotless.

Now that I am an ATA pilot at last, I wish I were a fighter pilot.