

Crash Landing

At that time the people of Britain would have been shocked to know that women were flying their most famous war plane. But the fact is that the ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary) had over 100 women pilots who delivered more than 300,000 air craft during the war. We had to fly the Spitfires from the factories and deliver them to airfields dotted around the south of England. Normally we would be flying in daylight with good visibility conditions. That is why we were never given instrument training as our instructors told us that with all the restrictions of war time, there was no time or money to spare for this luxury.

Occasionally we had to fly other aircraft — without any kind of additional training at all. Probably some high ranking, non-flying military official somewhere said that all aircraft were exactly the same to fly. Well — I can assure you that this is not true. With unfamiliar aircraft we had ten minutes to read an instruction booklet called the "Ferry Pilot Notes": And that was it. We had to climb in, fire up, taxi and then take off in completely unknown flying machines.

That particular day, the day I came so close to death, was my twenty first birthday. I had no cake or candles that day and my two friends and myself shared some chocolate — the only luxury available in those days. We drank apple juice, and ate apples and cheese. We entertained ourselves with silly stories. But at one solemn moment we also made a toast to absent friends and remembered the girls who had died delivering aircraft.

In the morning we were driven to the factory and my worst fears were realized. Instead of a lovely new and familiar Spitfire I had a bulky Torpedo bomber. We all hated these as several had crashed without any clear reason why. I was able to take the Ferry Pilot Notes into the canteen and studied them over breakfast. I had a very uneasy feeling in my stomach which had nothing to do with the breakfast I was consuming. I had birthday kisses from the other girls but it only made me feel worse.

At about 11 I was given my flight plan and it was time to go. I looked at the sky. There was a strange quality to the light that I didn't like and I was worried. With no instrument training, fog or mist made flying incredibly dangerous and absolutely terrifying. With a heavy heart I fired up the engine.

Within 20 minutes I was approaching the river Forth. But I couldn't see the river as clouds thickened up around me. I took the aircraft lower and lower looking for a glimpse of the ground. At one point I was sure that I was virtually at ground level but I couldn't see a thing. It was too dangerous to continue. I could hear my heart beating even over the roar of the engine.

When it happened — it happened really quickly. The plane hit water. I didn't see anything. I was thrown against my straps — and then a flood of cold seawater in my eyes and mouth. I was a mile out to sea!

I was certain I was going to die. Funnily enough — I was perfectly calm. I even thought that my ATA insurance payment would really be a big help to my Mother. But then survival instinct kicked in. I was still alive — and close to shore. I had no life jacket or any survival gear but I was a good swimmer. I was certain there were no bones broken and I didn't have to swim far. I was picked up by a fishing boat that I had narl-owly missed in the fog. And in the end I got a real birthday drink after all — a cup of spiced, dark rum.

The narrator and her friends had no cake because...

1. ...it was still the day before her birthday.
2. ...they preferred apples and cheese.
3. ...it was hard to obtain one in wartime.
4. ...it was a tradition to eat it in the pilot canteen.