

SUSPENDED FLIGHT

Leslie Forbes



THE thought of dying in another air battle didn't frighten Agent Fancy. But to be caught down here, grounded for the duration of the war? Unbearable! Robin, desperate for the freedom that escaped every time she landed, studied the enemy terrain that must be crossed to reach her Spitfire. One final obstacle: The Hangman. Without hesitation, she lifted her rifle and fired.

'You missed,' said a man behind her. 'Perhaps your eyes today are too filled with clouds to hit a lion.'

'It wasn't a lion.'

The old man, whose tired mac and flat cap made him unprepossessing (until you looked closely at his lean, queasy face), glanced at the rows of hunting trophies in the Tenants' Hall. 'Impala?'

'A German pilot.'

He offered her his shooting stick. 'Try this Lee Enfield. Every graduate of the Number One Parachute Training School should be issued one, certainly before an airdrop.'

From another adult this might have seemed patronising, but Lordy allowed room for imagined futures, Robin had learned. 'I'm a special agent, trained at Tatton by the S.O.E.,' she said. 'I mustn't be caught with a British weapon in occupied territory.'

'The Special Operations Executive?' His eyebrows lifted. 'Isn't it dangerous for you to reveal this information?'

Careless Talk Costs Lives. Robin and Lordy were aware that such wartime strictures were difficult to maintain on an estate as busy as Tatton Park. Huge numbers of troops were billeted here, many of them foreigners, and there were hosts of volunteers: the Women's Land Army, the Air Raid Wardens, the ARP, the AFS. New people arrived and departed weekly. Inevitably, rumours had circulated about those men and women, boarded at private houses, whose parachute training was segregated from the regular trainees.

'The paratroopers call me Special Agent Fancy now,' Robin said, 'because I'm always hanging around the airfield acting suspicious.'

'I gather they've named a training balloon after you?'

'But they won't let me up in it, Lordy!' Unable to contain her indignation, she burst out, 'And I'm fourteen! And my mum is making barrage balloons back home in Liverpool!'

Was Robin the only person to hear the balloons at Tatton singing?

Fancy's tethering cables hummed a wistful melodic protest and united with moans from her fellow balloons in a plaintive hymn of resistance, first noticed by Robin on the day when Bessie, Tatton's largest training balloon, broke free of her moorings and sailed all the way to Coventry before being recaptured. Earlier that same day, an Air Warden had shown Robin the newspaper photo of another escaped barrage balloon which, pushing gravely against Liverpool windows like a fallen cloud, had eventually settled in one busy street and exploded.

'That was my street,' Robin had said.

The Warden was mortified. 'I'm sorry, love, I forgot. You're one of our little evacuees.'

Evacuees. The word brought back ugly memories of the last time she had seen Ian, their last flight together.

Flee flee evacuee. In flight. Take flight.

So many different ways of saying *escape*.

In September, 1939, only three years ago, they were flying from crimes that had yet to be committed towards heroes and heroines - and cowards - who had yet to be made. 'Look after your little brother and sister, Robin!' their mum called from the train platform. Sally was happy with Amelia Earhart, her doll, but Ian was already crying.



As they got on the train he cried louder. 'Put your gas mask on,' Robin hissed. 'before the others think you're a snivelling little snot.'

'I've peed my pants.'

'Bloody Hell!'

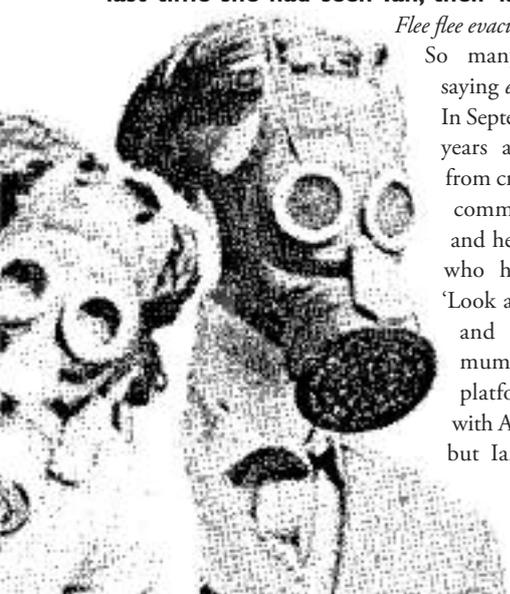
'Mum told you not to use words like bloody,' Sally said. 'You will make a bad impression.'

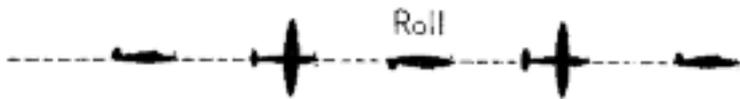
'Bloody bloody *bloody!*'

Conscious of the children who were pointing at Ian and sniggering at the wet patch that was spreading across his shorts, Robin wrapped her coat around him and whispered Aunt Amy's magic remedy for times of trouble: *Rev up your imaginary plane and fly away. Above cyrrus and stratus, above nimbostratus and cirrostratus... up... up... higher than Everest and still climbing - to the top top of the troposphere, to the tallest clouds of all - Cumulonimbus! The towering, furious thundercloud, hurling lightning onto those creeping crawling snipers far below!*

'You look like you stuck your finger in a light socket!' a boy mocked.

Aerial Robin fell to earth and her fine, pale hair blew around like a dandelion seedhead. Flyaway hair, people called it. *But I can't fly. Not yet.* She held tightly to Ian's and Sally's hands as they



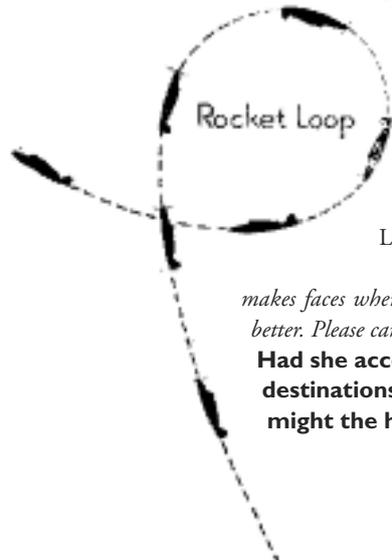


disembarked with the other evacuees and were taken to a village hall. Each child had been tagged with his or her name and home address - *return* address, thought Robin, *as if we are parcels*. Foster parents chose cute young parcels and robust older parcels first, she noted. *And I am neither. I am not a cloud or robin, I am a storky flappy flightless bird, ungainly on the ground*. A middle-aged couple, apologising, 'Sorry, dear, only room for two children,' soon detached Ian and Sally from her. The crowd thinned. **For several hours Robin flew solo in a DH60 Gipsy Moth - or a Tiger Moth, a Leopard Moth? Prepared, anyway, for a fiery destiny.**

Why else name planes after moths? By the time Mr. and Mrs. Thompson arrived to take Ace Pilot Fancy into their cosy nest, she had determined never to be grounded again, whatever the consequences. This was her excuse for stonily ignoring a postcard from Ian which was forwarded to her from Liverpool:

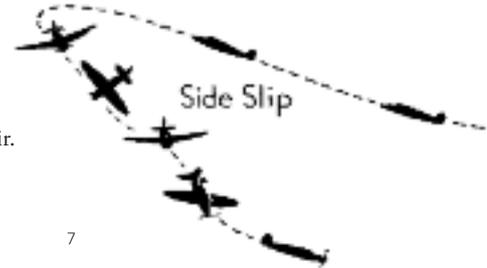
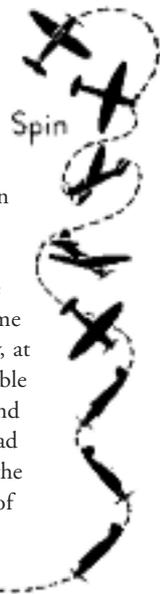
Sally likes it here but the woman makes faces when I wet my bed. I like the dog's face better. Please can Robin take me home.

Had she accepted Ian's request, their final destinations might have been different, as might the hanging man's.



Her dreams of escape had nothing to do with the Thompsons; they welcomed her, treated her as family. In fact, when Robin was caught up a tree dropping parachutes made out of table napkins onto the collie, Mrs. Thompson reclaimed the napkins without complaint and took her flighty guest to help out at Tatton airfield's mobile canteen. 'My son Freddy's paratrooper mates will be happy to give you on-the-spot reports of their training, love.' They were, and did, but they were also racing to become heroes, whereas wartime circumstances had forced Lordy to earth - temporarily, at least, and given his enthusiasm for flight, it was impossible for him not to meet Robin Fancy. Somehow he found patience to answer her endless questions. When she had too many, he gave her 'Britain's Wonderful Air Force', the kind of book usually given to boys, not girls, full of thrilling diagrams whose captions alone were an inspiration: *Aerial Strategy and Tactics. Winged Messengers of Bomber Command. Celestial and Wireless Navigation.*

Air could be dynamic, Lordy taught her; every 5000 feet it became more clear, more blue! Cycling down country lanes on Freddy's old bike, she would take her hands off the handlebars, spread her wings and become aeroplane and pilot, parachute and balloon, flying and falling gracefully while at the same time riding the air. Agent Fancy. Free.



‘How high can balloons sail if they aren’t tethered?’ she asked Lordy.

‘For security reasons, that information mustn’t be divulged,’ he said, his voice conspiratorial. ‘Agent to agent, though, I can risk telling you that a balloon’s lift is increased if there is a wind. However, the greater the height, the greater the weight of mooring cable to be lifted.’

‘In stormy weather -’

‘Captive balloons can also act as excellent lightning conductors, and when struck by lightning or enemy aircraft, they are usually set on fire.’

Agent Fancy was puzzled by her hero Freddy and his mysterious Fall From Grace.

Throughout pre-flight training Freddy Thompson had been cocky as hell - and brave, too. A future hero, no doubt about it. Look how quickly he’d gone back up after that first jump, his broken leg barely mended!

Although the only visible injury after his second airdrop was a relocated nose (enough bandages over it to transform his face into the Mummy’s), that jump must have been difficult, Fancy reasoned, or why had he been given home leave again? And who was the creepy doctor that continued to visit him?

‘Fearful Freddy’ she heard other trainees call him.

‘Your fearful wounds still not mended?’

‘Seeing the head doctor, Fearful? How’re you hanging?’

‘Be sure to watch out for the Hangman on your next flight!’

Robin was expert on a paratrooper’s training: only two airdrops from a balloon, then graduation to a Whitley bomber for seven more. Yet Freddy was scheduled for a third balloon drop - why? Searching for answers to her questions, she followed him to the barn one night and found him standing in the hay loft, staring down. ‘What you doing up there, Freddy?’

‘Practising.’

‘For what?’

‘Jumping. Landing.’



Landing a parachute was like jumping off a ten foot wall, so people said. He was twenty feet up.

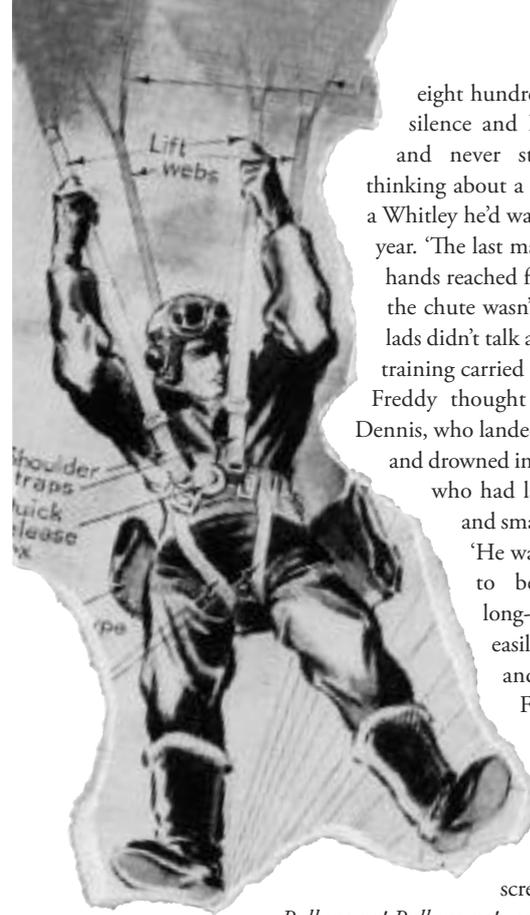
'You could break another leg, Freddy.'

'If I'm lucky.'

With those mumbled words began a confession she sensed he was desperate to make. Before Freddy's first jump, it seemed, the commanding officer had pronounced to new recruits that in 3,890 live drops from Whitleys there had been only twenty-five broken limbs and four fatalities. Safety measures had improved, with balloons now being introduced for initial practice. The second jump from these was reputed to be the worst, because you were thinking about the previous one. 'They insisted that on our first we'd be too frightened to think,' Freddy told Robin. 'But the third, from a plane, would be a piece of cake. You're in the air fast, the earth is further away and a Whitley's noise deadens your imagination.'



As he and the other three trainees clambered into the passenger cage under the tethered balloon, Freddy was playing the joker as usual. 'The lurching cage was a cradle for rocking babies to sleep, I teased them. Then we started rising. There was this eerie silence,



eight hundred feet of eerie, *evil* silence and I started thinking and never stopped.' He was thinking about a routine drop from a Whitley he'd watched the previous year. 'The last man jumped and his hands reached for the rigging. But the chute wasn't there.' The other lads didn't talk about it afterwards, training carried on as usual.

Freddy thought about his friend Dennis, who landed on a frozen pond and drowned in the mud; and Bill, who had landed in the trees

and smashed both his legs. 'He was the wrong shape to be a paratrooper: long-legged, skinny, and easily broken. Like you and me are, Robin.'

Freddy was unable to remember the jump, but he did remember hanging from the cradle and screaming like a baby

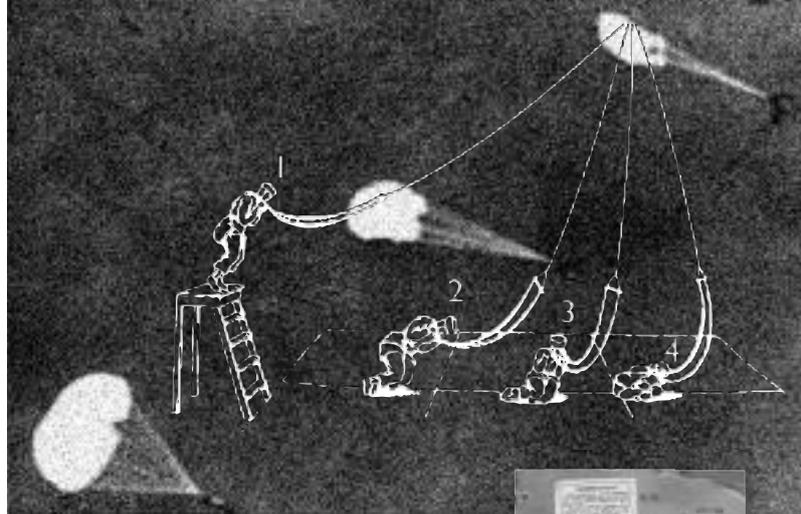
- *Pull me up! Pull me up!* - while the instructor called to him in a soothing voice, a voice you could trust: *Don't worry, just give me your hands.*

So Freddy reached up. And, of course, fell. Unfortunately, the rigging was twisted, which prevented the chute from opening fully, thus increasing his speed of fall, his body oscillating as the ground rushed towards him, until he had revolved 360 degrees and the twists untwisted, the canopy filled. On landing, a brisk ground wind blew up and he couldn't get control of the chute. He was dragged a long long way. 'One lad heard me praying: please God don't let me drown in the mud like Dennis.'

During his six months recovery Freddy kept thinking. Falling. Breaking. The silence of his second ascent made him think about how much longer a parachute takes to open when you jump from balloons than from aircraft, because your body has to create its own slipstream to fill the canopy. **Their instructor that night was the Hangman, a respected ex-pilot to whom visibly bad things had been done in the last war.** Fellow officers claimed that any trainee who survived the Hangman's course would be able to jump with no parachute, crush five legs and still take on the Gerrys single-handed. 'I shut my eyes tight, Robin, and a voice whispered: *Afraid of leaving the cradle, Fearful?* Someone pushed me out, I don't know who.'

At the George, where the paratroopers drank and played darts, Freddy overheard a pretty ambulance driver recounting her version of his second landing. No one had seen him enter the pub. *Poor chap, she was saying, they found him hanging in a tree, only five feet from the ground. He could have got down easily, but he was paralysed with fright, they had to treat him for shock. His instructor said we should have left him hanging there until he lost his fear of heights.*

'From a Whitley I'd be fine, Robin, I know it! But they won't let me near one until I've done another balloon jump. I can't. Not from a balloon. Not again.'



The billowing pillowy silence that terrified him was a sound she longed to hear.

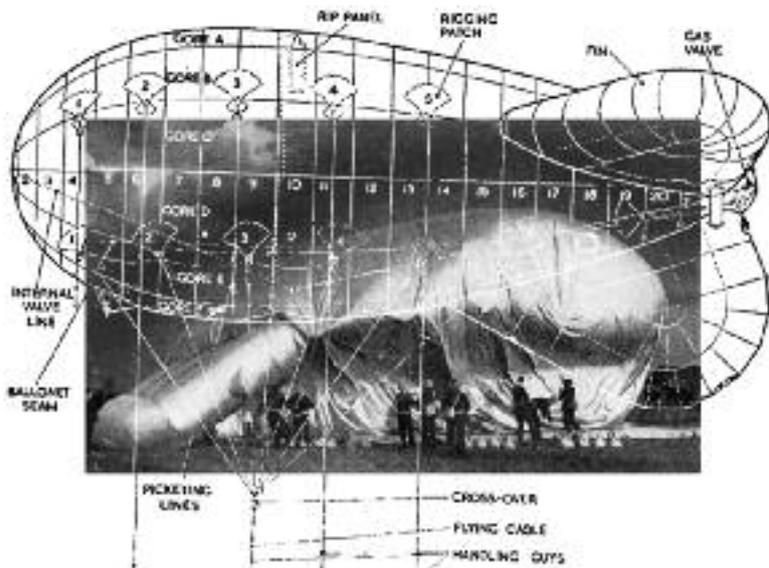
'I could jump for you, Freddy!'

'You wouldn't fall. Gravity wouldn't work. You're not a down-to-earth girl.'

'You're a little scamp!' said Lieutenant Dean. After a winning streak of darts down the pub he was full of good will - and of admiration for Robin's plan. 'Only a *flying* chance of success, though!' But of course he'd find her some kit and a chute, he had great respect for scamps. Dean practised daredevil stunts the way soldiers practised marching, and just as other members of the airforce felt obliged to salute a Wing Commander, Dean felt obliged to break his commandments.



Surprisingly, the Hangman didn't object to 'Fearful', mummified by bandages, arriving for an unscheduled airdrop. All went according to plan. Fancy rose obediently on the cable, three recruits jumped and Robin was preparing to follow them when a hard fast punch of wind threw the Hangman against the side of the balloon cage, knocking him unconscious.



Like a great silver whale, the balloon caught a following wave of dynamic air and detached herself from man's sluggish, pedestrian moorings to obey instead the laws determined by storms and altitude. Here, suspended between earth and sky, Robin was air born, reborn. Ready to break

through the surface ceilings of Spitfires and Messerschmitts - 36,000 feet, 38,000 feet - and ride the surfaces of clouds, she intended to keep flying as far as the balloon would go. Forget what might happen if the Hangman regained consciousness while they were in the air! *Don't think about Freddy.*

'What is the Zone of Avoidance?' she remembered asking Lordy, months ago.

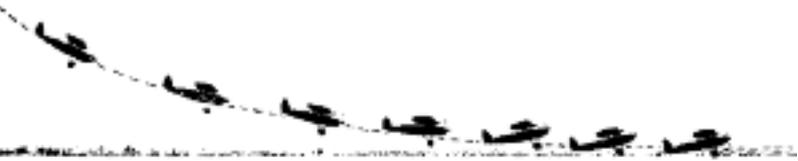
'An area next to The Milky Way,' he said, 'where there appears to be no stars.'

The story was confirmed by the ambulance crew who collected an unconscious Hangman beside Tatton Mere:

Freddy Thompson had managed to deflate a balloon and ground her all by himself. Despite the storm! Fearful Freddy, of all people! From there he had walked to the George, knocked back a pint and left, not a word to anyone. You could no longer accuse him of being afraid to jump, could you? He finished training a few weeks later, then off to fight the Gerrys.

After twenty years, the memories of Freddy's decorated return still made Special Agent Fancy smile, and every time she went flying around Liverpool in her 1962 Triumph Spitfire she felt her wheels lifting off the ground.





LESLIE FORBES is the author of three internationally acclaimed thrillers (*Bombay Ice*, 1998; *Fish, Blood & Bone*, 2000; *Waking Raphael*, 2004) and has also written food books, short stories and many BBC Radio series. Her writing is inspired by the arts and sciences in varied forms - from Italian cookery to Bollywood movies, botanical illustration to forensic photography, chaos theory to contemporary theatre. The book *ABS NCES* (2007), created with artist Oona Grimes, encouraged the writer's ongoing collaboration with visual artists. Since 2003, Forbes has been mentoring survivors of war and torture, helping them to write about their own experiences - and they have been helping her to research her current novel.

Awards: Silver Sony award for writing/presenting her Radio 3 series *Table Talk*; the Barbi-Colombini prize for the best book on Tuscany; 2 Glenfiddich prizes (one for her book and radio series *The Indian Spice Trail*); the Wellcome Trust SciArt award for her collaboration with physicist Pete Barham of Bristol University. *Fish, Blood & Bone* was long-listed for the Orange Prize and Forbes's articles in *Gardens Illustrated* were short-listed for the CRE Race in the Media Awards.

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