pathfinder

1943

# rose wingfield

Excerpt from Eighth Air Force Bomber Stories by kind permission of the author Ian McLachlan.

Chapter 1: Pathfinder

Wednesday, 10th November, 1943, started like any other day for housewife Rose Wingfield. Despite work under way for a new bomber base at Eye, the war had impinged little on her life, although she welcomed the extra money earned by laundering for American airmen. Such tranquillity would shatter that day in circumstances Rose would never ever forget.

Having washed and cleared the breakfast dishes, Rose tidied the house before going to Brome village store. Gathering bag, purse and ration books, she cycled the short distance to the shop run by sisters Ethel and Violet Fulcher. Chatting for a few minutes, Rose remarked on the mild weather – she still wore a summer dress and the mid-morning sun had made her journey from Number 20, Brome, very pleasant. It had gone 10.30 a.m. when Rose left the shop and began pedalling homewards past the Old Rectory, now a country house named Oaksmere, Here, the evidence of war was strangely signified by an avenue of stunted lime trees whose tops had been lopped off because they lay on the approach to the new airfield. Work on the big base, which was still under construction, had levelled woodland, demolished two cottages and obliterated Potash Lane. This spoiled surrounding drainage and Rose was not surprised to see four workmen ditching alongside the road. One of them stood at the roadside with a horse and tumbril, while the others laboured in the ditch itself. Rose recognised old Charlie Burridge from Langton Green and called out a cheerful 'Morning, Charlie' a she went by, adding jokingly. ' You aren't digging your own grave, are you?'. Charlie paused, ' I hope not ma'am,' he laughed.

Scarcely had she left the scene when Rose was frightened by a tremendous roar, overhead but behind and near the workmen. Leaping from her bicycle, Rose turned and stood transfixed, barely safe herself, a terrified spectator powerless to prevent any of the rapidly-happening horror. Less than fifty feet above and diving directly at the workmen was a huge bomber (see note) Four engines screaming their last moments, one blazing fiercely. In those moments, in a crashing crescendo of fire and death, Rose saw the workmen fleeing for their lives, but their very existence was overwhelmed by 25 tons of doomed bomber. As the bomber smashed directly on to the road-gang, its propellers knifed cleanly through the rearing terror-stricken horse, chopping the animal in half. Rose saw its head and shoulders tossed bloodily aside as the rest vanished into a hellish fireball of noise and destruction. Charlie Burridge, Walter Clarke and William Dixon died instantly. Charlie's body lay in the ditch from which he had joked with Rose only a few minutes earlier. One of the workmen, thought to be Ernie Barker, almost escaped. Rose saw a figure leaping for safety, only to be scythed down by the bomber's wingtip, he died from his injuries two days later. Stunned by the speed of events, Rose had hardly gained any composure before rescue vehicles hurtled on the scene. A huge pall of acrid, black smoke billowed into a clear blue sky from the intense and angry phosphorous-fed flames. Within the inferno, ammunition cooked and exploded, sending stray bullets zinging with dangerous random across the landscape. Coloured signal flares showered wildly into the countryside as the bomber literally melted into the furrows, cremating both crew and contents. Rose realised she could help no one as Military Policemen ushered shocked eyewitnesses and other spectators away, she turned for home.

Later that day Rose felt compelled to return, if only to convince herself of the shocking reality of the incident she had witnessed. Recognizing Lt McKinney because of her laundry- work, Rose and her husband were allowed nearer the smouldering remains. The only major portions still identifiable were the severed wingtips, both swept back towards the burnt remains of a fin and port tailplane. Wedged beneath, the remains of Dixon's tumbril. The smell of hot metal and burnt flesh stung the nostrils. Rose did not envy the airmen sifting through ashes for human remains and dog tags. Near her feet Rose spotted he scorched remains of a white nylon parachute and appreciating its usefulness for petticoats, picked it up, it was strangely heavy. Rose soon saw the reason attached to the folds, clinging to the molten material was an airman's boot, still containing the remains of a badly burned foot. She threw it down and holding tightly to her husband, turned away to go home.

Note: The plane was a B17 Flying Fortress containing the new Pathfinder equipment

