

SPITFIRE ANGEL

A Ten Minute Play

by

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SPITFIRE ANGEL

TEN MINUTE PLAY

CAST OF CHARACTERS

DIANA BARNATO WALKER: AGE 24. She is wearing the ATA overall uniform.

Diana (January 15, 1918-April 28, 2008) was an English aviatrix. She became interested in aircraft at the age of twenty and joined "the pluckiest sisterhood in military history" the women's arm of the ATA, Air Transport Auxiliary in 1941 as a First Officer. She helped ferry aircraft to the RAF (Royal Air Force) squadrons and bases all over the country. She flew fighters, bombers, and training planes in all kinds of weather and was not allowed to use a radio. She loved the Spitfire because it felt like it was "part of you". (At the age of 45, she briefly held the world air speed record for women when she piloted a two seat R.A.F. Lightning T-4 jet, clocked at 1,262 mph. She died in hospital of pneumonia, aged 90 years.)

DEREK RONALD WALKER: AGE 28. He is in uniform.

Derek was given command of 182 Typhoon Squadron in August of 1943. He was a Wing Leader in No. 16 Typhoon Wing, being in charge of No 124 Airfield, and was about to start his fourth tour of operational flying with the RAF. It was while with 182 Squadron that he received his DFC, Distinguished Flying Cross. He met Diana at age twenty eight and they were married May 10, 1944. Just eighteen months later he was killed in a flying accident.

AIR MARSHAL SIR ARTHUR CONINGHAM: AGE 49. He is in uniform.

2nd Tactical Air Force. KCB, Knights Commander, KBE, Knights Commander of British Empire, DSO, Distinguished Service Order, MC, Military Cross, DFC, Distinguished Military Cross, ATC, Air Traffic Controller. Derek was appointed Personal Assistant to "Maori" Coningham. (He got his nickname because he was born in Australia, but later it got twisted into "Mary".) Coningham had a fine record in WWI as a successful fighter pilot and squadron leader. He was a splendid air commander in WWII and liaison to General Patton. January 30, 1948 he vanished without a trace, along with other passengers and crew from the airliner Star Tiger, in the Bermuda Triangle.

SPITFIRE ANGEL

Scene:

BRUSSELS' EVERE AERODROME. MESS HALL

Time:

SEPTEMBER 1944

ACTION:

Enlarged photos of two invasion striped Spitfires F VII loom up-center stage on Cyclorama. The sky is bright blue. DIANA is seated in the cockpit of a Spitfire center right, and DEREK is seated in the cockpit of the other Spitfire center left, facing Audience. (The actors may simulate the planes by sitting on lite stacked Cubes of different shapes.)

SETTING: INTRODUCTION with SPITFIRES. Then DIANA and DEREK walk into AERODROME down center with table and chairs.

AT RISE: Act opens with INTRODUCTION of SPITFIRE'S flight.

DIANA

It was a lovely sunny day, and my left wing was tucked in well beside Derek's right wing. It was exciting, to say the least, to see the White Cliffs of Dover being left behind after so long. Only the male ATA pilots were allowed to take aircraft across the Channel.

DEREK

A photographic reconnaissance aircraft was needed in Brussels to take pictures of the latest German lines, but I had no spare pilot. So I asked the best ATA pilot I know, my wife.

DIANA

At first I said, I can't go. We're not allowed to cross the Channel.

DEREK

Aha, you will be on leave, so this won't be an ATA job, it's an RAF one.

DIANA

With a flourish he produced a letter signed by his boss, Sir Arthur Coningham, which I have in my flying log-book.

DEREK

Whatever happens, don't land anywhere but at Brussels' Evere Aerodrome. If anything crops up, get yourself back to England.

DIANA

Looking down as we approached land, I could see the masses of bomb craters in the sandy strip of coast lying north-south up from Boulogne. I wanted to sing, throw the aircraft about in celebration of my freedom from my English bonds, but desisted as I had to watch my left wing-tip. I

certainly did not want to bump into Derek. I marveled at the scene.

DEREK

This has to be a unique event: a husband and wife flying two operational Spitfires across to the Continent in wartime.

DIANA

Other husbands and wives may have flown together, but our set of circumstances left them all standing.

DEREK

I'm going to land at Evere now. You may continue for a 'flight test' around Brussels. Don't push the camera button because it will be a waste of film.

(DEREK's stage light on Spitfire dims, and he walks down center to table and chairs in the aerodrome and sits.)

DIANA

I flew the Spitfire around Evere and Brussels. I had a look at where I was told the Germans would be. It all seemed quiet to me, and I couldn't make out from high up where the so-called front line lay. Nobody took a pot shot at me. So I flew low over Brussels and then landed back at Evere.

(DIANA gets out of Spitfire and crosses down center to DEREK, who is standing. They grab each other and kiss fervently.)

DEREK

Darling, I was starting to get worried about you. You've had so many close calls! Is your guardian Angel looking out for you?

DIANA

Always. I'm not worried. I love you, Derek! Thank you for making this trip possible. I've heard all the shops have opened in Brussels with sugar and sweet wines? And no clothes rationing coupons anymore!

DEREK

Their war is over. I'm sure we will have time to do some shopping for such a chic woman of good standing.

DIANA

Oh, stop! We've worked nonstop. It's time for a leave. Can you believe all the lights are on again. No more blackouts!

DEREK

I've got a car waiting for us.

DIANA

This will be more fun than our May honeymoon of only two days.

(SIR CONINGHAM enters the  
MESS HALL.)

SIR CONINGHAM

Aha, I thought I'd find you two love birds here.

DEREK

Sir, I didn't expect you to meet us. What an honor.

SIR CONINGHAM

Diana, how lovely to see you again. I hope the flight was comfortable.

DIANA

Sir, flying is the best antidote to the manifold neuroses which beset modern women.

SIR CONINGHAM

And the Spitfire is Holy Grail?

DIANA

Absolutely. The Spitfire is lovely to fly! It's made for a woman, so dainty and fits like a glove.

DEREK

Darling, the RAF would hardly like to hear that the Spitfire is 'dainty'. She's actually more like a 'mistress'!

DIANA

And with that Rolls-Royce engine it is such a smooth ride.

SIR CONINGHAM

Yes, only the daughter of a Bentley racing car driver, would know. How is Woolf?

DIANA

Well, you saw him carousing at our wedding in May. He never slows down with the women, cars, or his horses.

SIR CONINGHAM

Derek tells me you've had some spine chilling episodes in the air. With one in six ATA women killed you take the honors for still being here in 1944.

DIANA

Fear is a great motivator. My guardian angel saved me twice when my unarmed plane was attacked by German aircraft. We aren't able to use the radio or have full training on the controls.

DEREK

Yes, the women's ATA is at a distinct disadvantage by not teaching flying blind.

SIR CONINGHAM

I must do something about that.

DIANA

I did have a lesson once. I met old friends at the 400 Club in London one night. Max and Billy had both been in the 601 Squadron during the Battle of Britain. As we talked they were horrified to discover that ATA ferry pilots were expected to fly with no radio, in every sort of airplane, in all kinds of weather, even though they had not been shown how to blind-fly.

SIR CONINGHAM

The women's ATA was told to stay in sight of the ground and if you came in contact with the enemy, the ground defenses would engage.

DIANA

Yes. It's a wonderful theory. Isn't it? Well, Billy and Max proceeded to draw the instrument panel on the nightclub's pink linen tablecloth while giving me instructions in case I got into a cloud. Max said, "Straighten up first and think." "Watch your safety height, so climb up high enough," added Billy. "Get back on your original course."

"If you get to your break-off height and you are still in cloud, then forget it. Get up high and quick, then bale out!"

SIR CONINGHAM

So I'm assuming you baled out the next time you were in a cloud?

DIANA

No, I didn't bale out. I was wearing a skirt. I didn't have time to change into overalls. But their lectures and drawings saved my life. I landed at Windrush, Navigation and Blind Flying Establishment. Can you believe that? I didn't even know where I was!

(THE MEN laugh)

An RAF man ran out and came alongside. He said, "Miss, you must be good on instruments." I replied, "I don't know how to blind-fly!" He roared with laughter.

(THEY ALL laugh)

SIR CONINGHAM

You are one very lucky lady.

(NEW BEAT)

Well, I must admit that I hadn't planned on coming to the Aerodrome to meet you today.

DEREK

Sir, your visit did surprise me.

SIR CONINGHAM

I was sent this newspaper article today. I'm afraid we've created a fuss.

(CONINGHAM hands article to  
DEREK.)

DEREK

(DEREK reading)

"The beautiful daughter of the millionaire racing motorist, and her husband, Wing Commander Derek Walker DFC, have flown on a honeymoon trip to Brussels, each piloting their own Spitfire."

DIANA

My goodness. News travels fast! I have your letter, sir, authorizing me to fly to Brussels.



SIR CONINGHAM

The problem is with Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfred Freeman.

DIANA

He's a very great friend of my father and he knows me very well, indeed.

SIR CONINGHAM

He considers my actions 'quite monstrous'.

DIANA

I told my father I would be flying to Brussels but gave him no details. Do you think he may have mentioned it to Marshal Freeman?

SIR CONINGHAM

I'm not sure.

DEREK

As I recall, Marshal Freeman wanted to come to Brussels but was told it wasn't convenient yet?

SIR CONINGHAM

Yes. We have a different philosophy. You know, I believe that it's a good thing to give my people 'breaks' from austerity. Derek hasn't had a break in years and I needed a Spitfire in Brussels to take photographs. And of course, Freeman is annoyed that I have Lady Coningham here with me at HQ's.

DIANA

This is such trivial nonsense. Why do you think I took to the skies? I admit I've had a luxurious lifestyle: A Bentley at age twenty one, but after a while there has to be something more to life than 'things'. I want to fly for my country! I'm not afraid to fly. But I'm terrified of Debutante Balls, Newspaper articles on my father's lovers, and 'the' proper etiquette on the ground.

DEREK

Why do you think I love you so much, Diana?

DIANA

Our fellow pilots are dying everyday. I was engaged to a fighter ace in '42. He died in a Spitfire. We had been engaged only one month.

DEREK

(DEREK comforts DIANA.)

Darling, no need to be anxious. You have your guardian angel.

SIR CONINGHAM

Life is short, my dears. You need this time together.

DEREK

Will some action be taken against Diana and me?

SIR CONINGHAM

They are making such a fuss and asking for a court of enquiry. At the very worst you both would be docked some pay.

DEREK

That's rather a stiff penalty, don't you think, sir?

SIR CONINGHAM

I wouldn't trust a court of enquiry. We will compromise. This will all blow over. The weather is changing so there will undoubtedly be some thick fog and no flying for a few days. Enjoy Brussels.

(SIR CONINGHAM exits.)

(DIANA and DEREK embrace and kiss. LIGHTS DIM.)

(SIX DAYS PASS. LIGHTS UP)

DIANA

(DIANA is in the seat of a Spitfire CR. DEREK is in seat of Spitfire CL. The SKY is grey)

Derek and I had been together for longer than on our May honeymoon. We had some glorious days of fun, food, and drink. But time had run out. The photographic reconnaissance aircraft had accomplished its mission and it was time to go back to England. It was confirmed that the weather was dreadful, but Derek had said, "If it's no good we'll come back to Evere." Our plan was to do the same as we'd done on the way out: I would formate on Derek's wing as he had radio. Our destination was again RAF Northholt, just to the north of London.

Derek put up his cruising revs and boost to RAF setting, which were higher than ATA's fuel-saving settings. In that weather I would have preferred to be flying a bit slower in order to be able to map-read, but Derek was undaunted, setting course 280 degrees. I could scarcely see anything except now and then a flash of light underneath from the water over some canal. All the rest was just yellow muck. I was unable to map-read and formate at the same time, so I was hoping Derek would turn back to Evere.

After 20 minutes on a course of 280 degrees there started to be lumps of black muck in the yellow muck. Derek then disappeared into one beside me. When I looked again, he wasn't there!

(LIGHTS OUT on DEREK'S  
Spitfire)

So, suddenly, I was on my own, but where in heaven was I? I went down low to circle, trying to pinpoint my position, but there were no features. I didn't dare to stay in one place very long because I didn't know where the Germans were. No one really knew. Some troops were holding out here and there as the main advance bypassed them. I certainly didn't feel like being shot down.

I didn't even consider trying to find my way back to Evere, for I hadn't a hope of locating it without a radio. If I overflew it by just 15 miles-not that far by air-I would be well and truly over hostile territory.

I could still hardly see anything at all. I wanted that bit of coast line to appear. I set a course of 295 degrees throttling back to ATA cruising revs and boost. In 7 1/2 minutes I'll hit Dungeness, I thought, but as I went out over the sea, I flew straight into sea fog. Low sea fog, right down on the water. I still wasn't much good on instruments but I went up, coming out at 4000 feet in glorious sunshine over puffy white clouds.

After 7 1/2 minutes I looked down as the white clouds turned yellow. Then there was a little gap through which I could see the sea. No land, no houses. Damn! Something had gone wrong!

Pilots are worth more than aircraft so I thought the best thing to do would be to get over land, then bale out. The expensive cameras and film could be forgotten. I might

even be flying up the North Sea instead of across the Channel, in which case I'd run out of petrol!

Suddenly there was a sheen of light ahead, a little line of white in the yellow. Yes, land at last. I remembered Tangmere wasn't far away and I was determined to stay on course. It was so foggy. All the runway lights were on, while green and white flares were being fired up through the murk. Just my luck, they're bringing in a squadron of something and I'll have to wait my turn. I stayed close to the circuit while being on the look-out for aircraft, which I thought would jump out at me from the muck at any moment.

I flew closer and decided it was my turn to land before I ran out of petrol. When you have had a problem it usually happens that the landing is absolutely perfect, and so it was this time. Perhaps one has been concentrating for so long that every fibre of you does things exactly as they should occur, beefed up by adrenalin. Feeling the ground beneath my wheels was terrific. I taxied in, parking by the Watch office, where to my amazement, I saw Derek's Spitfire. Derek came running toward me! His face was white as a sheet!

DEREK

(DEREK runs to DIANA as she  
gets out of the Spitfire)

How on earth did you get here? Do you know that this is the only airfield in the whole of the south of England that is open?

DIANA

Are all the lights and flares for other aircraft?

DEREK

No, darling. They are all for you! I was worried sick.

DIANA

How did you manage?

DEREK

I was guided to Tangmere over the radio, being given course and bearings. But without a radio how did you find the only airfield open in this dreadful fog?

DIANA

I recognized Tangmere on the map. But I didn't know it was the only airfield open. Since you had the radio, I had my guardian angel and that Fellow Up Top keeping an eye on me.

BLACK OUT