

Tekst 9

The following text is the beginning of the first chapter of Return to the Field, by Alexander Fullerton (1997).

Chapter 1

The black-painted Lysander loomed over her, blacker still against the moon and bigger-looking than she'd expected, or remembered from her training days. A plane with one cockpit for the pilot and another behind him for his passenger (or passengers; it would hold two easily enough, 5 even three in emergencies) sounded small – and it was, comparatively speaking – but in this moonlight and from ground level it had a high and bulky look. High-winged, with massive-looking struts; big spats on its wheels, and painted bat-black to reduce visibility when on clandestine missions such as tonight's.

10 It was very cold. Grass still sodden, puddles on the tarmac. Smell of petrol. Marilyn put an arm around her shoulders, squeezed her: 'Have you back with us in two shakes, Rosie.'

'You bet.'

'Rosie.' Hands grasping her arms, and suddenly face to face: 'God, how 15 *many* times one's said it—'

'With me, three now. Third time lucky *again*, huh?'

Same breathlessness, though. You said that sort of thing but still had the same queasy, tensed-up feeling. While the other thing she felt, in her shapeless old coat and looking up at Marilyn's tall elegance, was shabby. 20 It was by design, of course, the norm, befitting not only the general state of things where she was going – German-occupied France – but also the character she'd be playing. From the moment of take-off she'd cease to be Rosie Ewing, aged twenty-five, née Rosalie de Bosque – French father deceased, English mother still bitching away in Buckinghamshire – and 25 become Suzanne Tanguy, former student nurse, French to the marrow of her bones. Pulling herself up the fixed aluminium ladder on this side – the machine's port side – and climbing in . . . The dampness on her cheek from that hug and kiss had come from Marilyn, for God's sake. A tear, or tears – first ever, and why *this* time? She was settling in, locating the 30 safety harness as well as her luggage which they'd already put in – one tatty old suitcase on the shelf and the heavier but equally scruffy one down by her feet. She'd taken the pistol out of that one, transferred it to a pocket in her overcoat; it was a Llama, 9-millimetre, Spanish-made, with a Colt-type action. There were lots of them around in France, even in 35 German hands, and 9-mm ammo was easy to come by. On her two previous missions she hadn't taken a gun at all, but last summer there'd been an agent code-named 'Romeo' with whom she'd gone out to a Lysander rendezvous in the vicinity of Rouen, the Boches¹⁾ had sprung a trap and there'd been a brief firefight in which 'Romeo' had been shot

40 dead and she'd been taken prisoner. She'd resolved soon after that she'd be armed on any future deployment. There were pros and cons but on the whole she thought it was better to have the option.

Another innovation was that she was taking two cyanide capsules instead of only one, and had them in tiny pockets in the hem of the blouse
45 she was wearing. Last time she'd sewn a single pocket into her bra. Marilyn, who'd brought the capsules down with her from London and handed them over half an hour ago in SOE's²⁾ ivy-covered transit-house on this airfield, had understood the reasons for these changes, having read the transcripts of Rosie's de-briefing after her return last time. The
50 de-briefing had been rigorous – had to be, of any agent who'd been in Gestapo hands and could have spilt beans that weren't for spilling. As she might well have done: another minute, and she'd have told the bastards anything they wanted to know.

One of the RAF ground-crew had come up the ladder to help her strap
55 herself in, or to ensure she'd done so – which she had.

'All right, Miss?'

'Lovely, thanks.'

'Best of British, then. Take me 'at off to you, I'll tell you that. We all do.'

'Oh, go on with you. Thanks, anyway.'

60 He'd gone down, and seconds later the machine was moving, filling the night and her head with noise as it rolled forward. She saw Marilyn down there, as the plane's shadow left that group – Marilyn with an arm raised in farewell, the other holding her fancy Wren hat on. The two behind her were the aircraftman who'd driven the Jeep and the WAAF girl who'd
65 come out with them from the Cottage. Reek of high-octane stronger for a moment as the pilot turned across the wind. He'd assured her that although it was still 'on the breezy side' he'd do his best to give her a comfortable ride; he reckoned to be on the ground in France in one hour and forty minutes. The distance to their landing-field was 225 miles – 'as a
70 strong crow might fly' – but he'd be detouring here and there to avoid 'flak-points' – meaning places where you'd be likely to be shot at. They'd be crossing the Channel at about 200 feet, to stay under the enemy's radar, but climbing to about 2000 to pass over the coast, somewhere to the east of Arromanches. When they were well inland, clear of flak-points and on
75 course for their destination, he'd be coming down to treetop height.

He'd asked her, 'Done it before, have you?'

'Not this way.'

'Well. After this experience you'll never consider any *other way*.' They'd all laughed. Laughs came easily, at such times.

noot 1 the Boches: offensive term for German soldiers

noot 2 SOE: Special Operations Executive, a British WW2 military organisation.