



*Sarratt Fire brigade tend to the aftermath*

## **“Just because I'm a woman, mine has to be a strange case.”**

On the day that the newspapers recorded the funeral of former Prime Minister David Lloyd-George (one-time invitee to our village during an election campaign), and also told of British armour rolling through the Ruhr, it would be fewer than six weeks before ‘Victory in Europe’. Tragically however, following a twist of fate in the skies over Sarratt one Saturday afternoon, that 31st March, six young aircrew of the nearby Bovington airfield would not live to enjoy it. As the 75th Anniversary of this tragedy approaches, it was felt necessary to retell their now mostly forgotten story. In researching their lives, the author has come to contact close relatives and unified a now international movement to have their war contribution properly recognised for the benefit of future generations both here in Sarratt, as well as back in the United States.

The clock had just struck Four in the afternoon, a light breeze pushed a scattering of clouds through the skies above, as a football match played out below. Just then a startling sound grabbed the attention of local schoolboy Jim Bignell, who recounted:

*“We looked up to see that a B-17 [Flying Fortress] and a Dakota [C-47] had collided, the B-17's port wing had sliced off the complete tail unit of the Dakota. For a moment the Dakota hung in the air, before starting down and its tail unit began slowly fluttering earthwards like a falling leaf. The B-17 flew on straight and level for a few seconds, before pitching down in a vertical dive. I can still remember the plan view in silhouette against the sky, with part of the port wing missing. As both aircraft were at about circuit height, there was obviously no time for anyone to get out. The aircraft ended up about half a mile apart, the B-17 burned, but the Dakota didn't. What a sad occasion.”*

Jim, like every wartime boy, thought not of the potential carnage that awaited him, but the opportunity of getting ‘first dibs’ on yet another war relic to show off to his friends. Fortunately for him, and despite using his bicycle, he was not to be first to this scene near

White Dell Farm, in Bragmans Lane, as the local Fire Brigade stationed in Sarratt also witnessed the mid-air collision and beat him to it. As you will no doubt have read in pages overleaf, these local volunteer firefighters then had the unenviable task of assisting in the recovery of the victims of both planes. Given the proximity of the crash site to Bovingdon aerodrome, local US ground crew were also soon in attendance, at least one of whom was armed with a camera. Thanks to this quick-thinking operator, the following emotive images can be shared for posterity.

To this day, debate has raged about the true circumstances and cause for the accident. The official crash report, filed 9 April 1945, simply documented: *'The pilot of the B-17 evidently failed to observe the take-off of the C-47 or failed to keep it in sight while circling the field'*. Pilot Error. Case Closed. Or maybe not, for there is local speculation that the B-17 may have been on a joyriding flight. As we do not sadly have the benefit of black-box flight recordings to regain the voices of these unfortunate victims, it will never be known what was exactly said or done in the cockpit of either Captain Hottenstein's B-17 or 1/Lieutenant Thornburg's C-47. However alongside Jim's account, we also have the eyewitness accounts of the US ground and air crews who also saw the lead up to the collision.

Raymond Weber had just landed his own plane and returned to the hanger to fetch his belongings when his co-pilot Lt. Grandstaff commented: *'Look at that B-17 going to fly formation with the 47.'* Weber then observed the B-17 with its undercarriage down hit the C-47 from above and behind. He commented: *'it looked as if the B-17 saw the 47 and was trying to avoid a collision because there was a radical manoeuvre [to bring up the right wing] and a split second later the planes hit. The tail of the C-47 flew off first [struck by the B-17s no. 4 engine] and then the two planes separated and the C-47 went into a spin. It didn't make more than two turns. The B-17 climbed a few hundred feet and fell off a wing and started to spin also.'* Sgt Albert Caprio sighted the B-17 circling in a traffic pattern on the inside and heading directly for the C-47 but appeared to be passing over the C-47 at a 20 degree angle when the collision occurred.



*The B-17 wing blocking Bragman's Lane*



*Wreckage of Thornburg's and Shirley's C-47 (and below her separated tailplane)*

It is evident that the established flying practice of see-and-avoid failed in the B-17 in all but the final seconds before impact, when contact was then unavoidable. From the eyewitness accounts, there seem to be few plausible explanations for the C-47 becoming invisible in clear skies to Hottenstein, a pilot with almost 1,300 flying hours to his name. The design of the B-17 cockpit may however offer some clues, for the line of sight from the flight deck is noticeably obscured for pilots below their own flight horizon and especially around the protruding engine housings. As Grandstaff confirmed his own flying time that day, Hottenstein's crew ought to have been aware of other planes in the sky, so distraction in the final moments must remain a distinct possibility, especially if local tales about there being 'females' on board is proven true. Extraordinarily, the flight manifest actually substantiates this claim, however this highly unusual female passenger, was no ordinary woman, and nor as you will find out, would she need to be impressed by being taken up on a 'joyride'. Her name was PFC Emma Jane Windham and alongside her five colleagues, this is their story.

Born Emma Jane Burrows in Bexar County, Texas, her early life started inauspiciously when she fled home at the age of 12. She would go on to study Aeronautical Engineering at the University of California, and learned the practicalities of flying at this time. Prior to the US entry into the war, Burrows, now married as Mrs. Windham ('Windy') would develop her skills as director of flight training for the 'Wing of Women Fliers'. Upon enlistment into the Women's Army Corps in 1943 her background enabled her fast-track to service with the 7th Ferrying Group at Gore Field's, Montana



Airbase from where she would gain her own silver 'wings' by June 1944 - the first woman ever to achieve this feat in the history of Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), as well as being the first female crew chief and aerial engineer. As a result she came to be the focus of military magazines at the time, with one favourite quip of hers being that she preferred to fly the bigger 'ships' [bombers] "*just to keep her hand in*". She also absolutely hated any comparison of her work to a 'man's job' especially after she had transferred to Bovingdon only to take on an administrative role at the Air Transport Command, prompting her to further lament: "*I didn't come overseas to fly a desk.*"

Whilst stationed and unable to pilot, she often found herself being stopped by the Military Police demanding an explanation as to where, and in particular, under whose authority she wore her 'wings', so unusual was her status at the time. Despite the public attention towards her extraordinary career, Windham remained humble, answering one reporter: *'I can't say that I envy those men who fly combat, they put their lives out on a limb every time they go up. The flying I do is like walking across the street!'* She also never shied away from frankness, answering another: *'Well as soon as I find the right man, I'm going to settle down and raise chickens'*, which was perhaps not the morale-raising and recruitment-inspiring pitch the WASP board had hoped she would provide.

Tragically she would be killed whilst serving as the aerial flight engineer aboard Hottenstein's B-17, dubbed '*Boots IV*' before being able to fulfil these aspirations, earning her the lamentable distinction of being the only WASP to be killed on active duty in the European Theatre of Operations during WW2. It is hoped her trailblazing service can now be properly remembered alongside that of her fellow B-17 crewmembers: Captain Walter Paul Hottenstein, 1/Lieutenant Joseph Lincoln Cotterman and Pvt. Curtis James Shelton, as well as that of the C-47 flight crew under 1/Lieutenant Maurice Thornburg and 2/Lieutenant Milton J. Shirley. All were subsequently interred with due military rite in Cambridgeshire, before some were repatriated to the United States as per familial wishes after the war.

Shockingly, as WASPs were not considered full military service personnel, her repatriation had to be arranged at her family's own expense which proved so burdensome that her reinterment in San Antonio, Texas in 1948 occurred without a gravestone. This was finally rectified by an historical-researching relative in 2014, but the intervening years were punctuated with the depressingly slow acknowledgment of the wider role of WASPs such as 'Windy' in the US war effort. Incredibly it was not until 1977 that female veterans became entitled to receive basic pension payments, and not until July 2009, that their contribution was officially recognised by the US Senate in its bestowal of the Congressional Gold Medal. It is therefore hoped, following further discussion with the Church of the Holy Cross, the Parish Council and the wider community that a brass plaque can now be produced by the people of Sarratt to reflect and record the inescapable bond this village has with this remarkable woman and her five colleagues who were lost one bright spring afternoon in Sarratt in March 1945.

Gregory Edmund



From left: J.L. Cotterman; W. P. Hottenstein (above); J. C. Shelton (below); M. Thornburg and M. Shirley Jr.