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Women at War:
Soviet and American Airwomen in Combat During World War II

By
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ABSTRACT

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Women at War: Soviet and American Airwomen in
Combat During World War II

This thesis explores the combat roles of Soviet and American airwomen during World War II. Both the Soviet Union and the United States utilized women in the war effort between 1943-1945 in different capacities. The United States and the USSR were in very different geographical locations when it came to Germany; the US was across the Atlantic Ocean and not in a vulnerable position while the USSR was fighting a war on its home turf. The need for soldiers was very different. In addition, the cultures of the two countries were very different in their attitudes towards the equality between men and women. Communist ideology dictated that both genders were capable of the same work whereas in the US, society was still heavily inclined towards patriarchal norms.

The Soviet Union was in desperate need of soldiers as German moved farther into the interior of the country. Due to the geographic size of the country, Stalin had no trouble filling his quotas and was willing to accept massive numbers of casualties. In addition to conscripting men, women could join the Red Army in a variety of roles, one of those roles were pilots. In 1941 Marina Raskova was given permission to form Aviation Group 122 which would contain three regiments comprised entirely of women. Those regiments included the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, the 122nd Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment. The women of these regiment took part in numerous combat missions and suffered numerous casualties.

In the United States, most of the jobs women took were in the factories as the men went to war and they kept the United States afloat. Women joined the Army Nurses Core (ANC), the

Women's Auxiliary Core (WAC), and took on various administrative roles, but never entered the war in a combat capacity. In 1942, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) and Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) were formed before they were merged to become the WASPs. Though these women never saw combat, they were responsible for ferrying aircrafts and commanders and were expected to help train the ground troops. The WASPs were disbanded in 1944. This thesis examines both Aviation Group 122 as well as the WASPs in their formation, their equipment and missions, their relationships with their male counterparts, and their disbandment.

Chapter One

“I remember lying at night in the dugout. I am not asleep. Somewhere there is artillery fire. Our cannons are shooting...I really didn’t want to die...I gave an oath, a military oath, that if need be, I’d give my life, but I really didn’t want to die...We were so young when we went to the front. Young girls. I even grew during the war. Mama measured me at home...I grew four inches...”¹ Soldiers in the Soviet Army were sent into battle at a young age and the women who volunteered were no different. Many of them left home as teenagers and either did not return or went back as shells of the women they had been.

Unlike in most other countries there was a tradition of strong, combative women in the Soviet Union,² which lent itself well to women being recruited for the military in World War II. According to Reina Pennington, “...one legendary homeland of the Amazons was the South Russian steppes, where archaeologists have discovered ancient burial sites of women with weapons in Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia—areas of traditional Sarmatian culture.”³ The tradition continued throughout the centuries with legends of *polianitsy*—warrior heroines—spreading through the region. These were legends of, “...warrior heroines, who were credited with powerful physiques and who conquered men in single combat,”⁴ and this lore was common knowledge throughout Russia.⁵ Unlike in other cultures, Russian women had folklore to look to when in need of a role model; the women who could best men in combat served as inspiration. A commander of an engineering battalion is quoted as saying, “if we recall history, we’ll see that at all time Russian women not only saw their husbands, brothers, and sons off to the battlefields

¹ Aleksievich, Svetlana, Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. London: Penguin Books, 2018. 17

² Pennington, Reina, and John Erickson. *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2001. 4

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

and grieved and waited for them, but in perilous times also stood behind their men”.⁶ The quote from the commander is telling because it sets up perfectly the idea that Russian women were never the type to wait on the sidelines and wanted to be a part of defending themselves and their homeland.

In accordance with the legends that permeated Russia, women have been joining the fight since the Napoleonic Wars. In the first Napoleonic War, Nadezhda Durova saw combat. At the time, women were allowed nowhere near the battlefield so Durova went disguised as a male.⁷ Although she was discovered, “...Tsar Alexander I permitted Durova to continue to serve because of her several decorations for heroism; she was the only woman to win the St. George Cross until the end of the First World War”.⁸ The Cross of St. George was awarded for distinction in combat to enlisted men and non-commissioned officers and is associated with the Order of St. George, which is the highest exclusive military order in Imperial Russia for officers.⁹ In order for Durova to have received this medal, she needed to have done something worthy of it. While her actions are not specified, they were enough to keep her in the military despite being a woman.

Russian women continued to participate in combat, and war in general, after the Napoleonic Wars, chiefly the Decembrist Revolt, World War I, and the Bolshevik Revolution. On December 26, 1825, military officers led a rebellion against Tsar Nicolas I who had assumed the throne after Constantine rejected it.¹⁰ The revolt failed, and its leaders were sent to Siberia.

⁶ Ibid, 5

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Shackelford, Michael, Tim Tezer, and Sam Clark. "Medals of Imperial Russia." Russian Medals. Accessed May 28, 2019. <http://www.gwpda.org/medals/russmedl/russia.html>.

¹⁰ "Decembrist Revolt." New World Encyclopedia. Accessed May 28, 2019. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Decembrist_Revolt.

Although women did not play a part in the violence of it, they followed their husbands to their exile and remained loyal.¹¹ According to Anke Hilbrenner, author of “The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia:”

These “Decembrist wives” became symbols of the revolution, but also of the devotion of a wife to her husband. Thus, these women were recognized in a revolutionary context, but instead of representing *women in arms*, their perception strengthened a specific female gender ideal symbolized by sacrifice. Yet the notion of revolution was also, usually, a notion of violence, of armed rebellion, and the idea of the revolutionary woman could also therefore embrace the image of an active woman, and even a violent woman.¹²

The sacrifice the women were willing to make in terms of leaving behind their lives to follow their husbands is indicative that they were willing to make more sacrifices for their husbands, whether that be following them to Siberia or fighting alongside them in other war efforts.

During World War I, officers found it difficult to motivate their soldiers out of the trenches, so the Women’s Battalion of Death was formed in 1917. The battalion was founded by Maria Bochkareva, a woman who had received permission from the Tsar to enlist and Aleksandr Kerensky, the War Minister of the Provisional government, agreed to continue it.¹³ The sole purpose of the Women’s Battalion of Death was to send the women over the trenches first to shame the men into doing the same.¹⁴ Although Bochkareva wanted a battalion of three hundred women, she recruited two thousand in order to weed out the weak. One of the engagements in which the battalion was on the frontline was with the IX corps when they conducted an offensive. Despite Bochkareva’s claims that the attack was a success, the battalion took heavy

¹¹ Hilbrenner, Anke. "The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia." *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, no. 17 (2016). Accessed May 28, 2019. <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/4169>. Originally published online

¹² Ibid

¹³ Pennington, 5

¹⁴ Ibid

losses and was forced to retreat.¹⁵ The Women's Battalion of Death continued to partake in the revolutionary period after the end of World War I due to Bochkareva's staunch opposition to the Bolsheviks. The battalion's involvement in the Revolution amounted to protecting Kerensky during the October Revolution.¹⁶

Other women engaged in the Bolshevik Revolution on both sides. According to Pennington, "many women were active in the Bolshevik cause, but their participation was 'always at secondary or lower levels of leadership'".¹⁷ Pennington takes it a step further by quoting historian Richard Stites who states, "this pattern would be repeated with the Bolsheviks in the Civil War, when the female commissar stood besides, but slightly behind the male commander".¹⁸ Although women were allowed to partake in the military, their involvement was extremely limited, and they were nowhere near equal to men. In total, sixty-six thousand women served in the Red Army during the revolution. This averaged out to be two per cent of all military personnel.¹⁹ Most women served in a traditional capacity as nurses, but some did take positions in leadership or in combat. Additionally, only men were subject to the draft and women with special skills, for example medical training, could be mobilized only in emergency.²⁰ The idea that "gender discrimination was inherent in the class struggle of capitalism and could not exist in a socialist state"²¹ meant that women were allowed to volunteer for military service during this time.

Flying was a brand-new concept in the twentieth century, and, like men, women longed to be on the forefront. In 1911, Lidiia Zverevskaia and Lyubov Golanchikova became the first to

¹⁵ Ibid, 5-6

¹⁶ Ibid, 6

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid, 6-7

²¹ Ibid, 7

receive their pilots' licenses. It was reported by *Flying*, a western aviation magazine, that "two Russian women...have studied aviation, and passed their tests at the German flying grounds at Johannisthal".²² In addition, Golanchikova set an international altitude record for women.²³ After the Bolshevik Revolution, there was a lot of opposition to women joining the military; therefore, female pilots were restricted to being instructors at air-clubs.²⁴ Despite all the hoops women had to jump through, they could not legally be denied acceptance to military training schools or the Osoaviakhim, a paramilitary organization also called 'the Society for Cooperation in Defense and Aviation-Chemical Development,'²⁵—the two ways to learn how to fly—since the Soviet Union was the "...first country in the world to proclaim legal equality for women".²⁶ Select women were begrudgingly granted entrance to the Soviet military.

The sexism women faced while at the Osoaviakhim was not unlike the sexism they faced in their day to day lives, only this time, they were attempting to enter into a man's world. One of the women who was to be a future night-bomber and recipient of the honor of Hero of the Soviet Union (HSU), Marina Chechneva recalls her time at the Osoaviakhim and her instructors there in Wings, Women, and War. She remembers:

The instructors took women in their groups unwillingly. That was clear...Not everyone believed that we would be able to work in the field on an equal basis with men. The example of famous women pilots did not convince the skeptics. 'Aviation is not a woman's affair,' they declared repeatedly, and tried in every way possible to dissuade young women from joining the air club.²⁷

²² Ibid, 7-8

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid, 8

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid, 9

The reluctance on the male side to teach women how to become pilots was not uncommon treatment and was indicative of the type of society women lived in in the early to mid 1900s. Although claims from the Soviet Union stated that the country had complete gender equality, women were still inferior to men on many levels. The sexist attitudes are again apparent in Chechneva's experiences when she was told by her flight commander that, "...even though he knew many women pilots whose skills were quite as good as men's, women were simply not meant to be in aviation".²⁸ Despite the opposition women faced, many of them remained undeterred and continued to fight for their chance to fly.

This sexism continued into the late 1930s and even as it became obvious that war was imminent, women were still turned away from military service. The two most popular ways to become a pilot were either through enlistment and subsequent promotion, or education from a military academy.²⁹ Women were continuously turned away from both options, but the most determined of women tried several times and found other ways to be accepted. For example, fliers such as Zinaida Kokorina and Raisa Aronova were rejected on their first time applying to flight school. In regard to this, Aronova recalls, "I sent a letter. 'I cannot conceive of a life for myself without aviation,' it said frankly. I awaited a reply impatiently. And one arrived: 'women at the present time are not being accepted at the military flying schools'".³⁰ Polina Osipenko took a different approach. According to Pennington, she took a job as a waitress at the Kachinsk Aviation School, and from there used her status to lobby for entry. Despite the societal opposition to women entering aviation, there was no legal basis for them to be denied.³¹

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid, 10

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid, 11

Aviation was extremely popular in the 1930s—a time when the Soviet Union was struggling to keep up with the West—and Stalin invested in the propaganda it provided. As stated by Pennington, “airplanes were a tangible product of Soviet industrialization, and the records set by Soviet pilots demonstrated the superiority of Soviet training. Such flights ‘proved’ the ability of the Soviet Union to compete with Western nations industrially and commercially”.³² The positive effects that aviation had, both domestically and internationally, led to what Robert Tucker called a ‘hierarchy of hero cults,’ and pilots were at the top.³³ The fascination that both the public and Stalin himself had with aviation led to the idolization of pilots, which was encouraged by the Soviet government. Women were included in the idolization and, “the cadre of aviation heroes included a small but influential number of Soviet women pilots, including women who held military rank such as Polina Osipenko and Marina Raskova”.³⁴ The fame the women had garnered proved to serve them well when it came time to lobby for the inclusion of women in combat.

There were several benefits to women serving as pilots, and Stalin capitalized on all of them. The three most prominent female fliers of the 1930s were Marina Raskova, Polina Osipenko, and Valentina Grizodubova, who set a number of women’s distance records. Distance records were, “...regarded as ‘the most honoured’ of aviation feats”.³⁵ As women continued to break barriers and set records, the Soviet government realized there were numerous benefits in allowing women the opportunity to fly, especially when it came to propaganda. The Soviet government quickly exploited their success and:

In addition to demonstrating the industrial and military capability of the Soviet Union, these flights allowed the Soviets to portray not

³² Ibid, 12

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid, 12-13

³⁵ Ibid, 13

only their aircraft but also their women as superior products of socialism. Coverage in newspapers, magazines, and books ensured that the Soviet public was well informed of the feats of the female pilots—perhaps as an inspiration to women who toiled in factories or on collective farms, an example of what the ‘new Soviet woman’ could achieve. By 1939, Soviet women fliers had captured more aviation records than women of any other country.³⁶

The best example of this is the flight of the Rodina, which was the most famous pre-war flight by Soviet women.³⁷ The stance the USSR had on gender equality forced officials to admit women into their ranks, which had untold benefits for its international position as well as its military.

The flight of the Rodina was the first major step for women to be recognized as strong, capable pilots and for them to enter into the military. The crew of the Rodina was Marina Raskova, Polina Osipenko, and Valentina Grizodubova. Their goal, planned by Grizodubova, was to set a new international women’s record for a straight-distance flight.³⁸ The planning process involved many high-level leaders such as Stalin, Molotov, and Gromov, which is indicative of the growing interest among leaders to pursue female pilots as a more permanent entity. Stalin fully supported the flight and was very involved. Lazar Brontman and L. Khavt, authors of The Heroic Flight of the Rodina, claim that, “Comrade Stalin made a number of valuable practical suggestions for the guidance of the crew”.³⁹ Stalin’s involvement, though he likely did not contribute as it was common practice at the time to credit him, suggests that he had every faith the flight would be successful. He continued his support during dinners. Polina Osipenko remembers an interaction with Stalin at Molotov’s dacha as:

I raised a toast and said that more attention should be devoted to women striving to work in the Army. I cited examples of women working on collective farms, drew a parallel between the latter and the Red Army, and pointed out that women could be of great use in the Army as well. Comrade Stalin supported me. He began to talk

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid, 14

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

about this to Comrade Voroshilov. He asked me a number of questions about the work of women fliers.⁴⁰

The support the women pilots received from high-level members would serve them well as they continued to prepare for the Rodina flight, and later in the early 1940s when they campaigned for an all-female regiment of pilots.

As the Rodina flight approached, news coverage began in earnest and the crew often had their work interrupted by journalists and photographers. Immediately prior to their departure, they held a press conference that was attended by M. M. Kaganovich, the People's Commissar of the Defense Industry.⁴¹ The flight was meant to last twenty-five to thirty hours and go from Moscow to Komsomolsk; however, poor conditions caused poor communication, and no one heard from the crew after the first ten hours. Despite completing most of their planned route, the crew was forced to land and Raskova, the navigator, had to bail out of the aircraft due to the vulnerability of her physical position. She spent ten days alone trying to find the aircraft.⁴² The news coverage continued after the aircraft was found, reinforcing the idea that what the women did was without precedent and the country was watching. Upon their return to Moscow, according to Brontman, "tens of thousands of people" were there to greet them.⁴³ Although the flight did not reach its final destination, it did break the record by 1,500 meters and established a new women's international nonstop broken-line distance record.⁴⁴ Despite all the opposition they faced trying to get into flight school, Marina Raskova, Polina Osipenko, and Valentina Grizodubova proved that women were capable of everything a man was in the air.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 15

⁴¹ Ibid, 15

⁴² Ibid, 16

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid, 17

Stalin's admiration for aviation went beyond helping with the planning of the Rodina flight; he recognized its use as a propaganda tool and used it to bolster the image of the Soviet Union. The emphasis he put on flying encouraged and allowed women to enter the military as pilots and helped them create an all-female division. While Stalin's interest in aviation began as a tool for propaganda, it soon morphed into something greater that had lasting effects. According to Kenneth Bailes, as documented in Pennington's book, "Stalin's own name and reputation were more closely associated with the practice of technological legitimation than any other major leader during this period, and aviation was one of the most spectacular forms this practice took".⁴⁵ It has already been established that aviation was a way in which the USSR was able to show the West it was on par with them, and by including women, Stalin was able to be seen as progressive. He also had personal relationships with the women and often invited them to the Kremlin.⁴⁶ These personal relationships can be seen in many of Stalin's actions. For example, he acted as a pall-bearer at Polina Osipenko's funeral in 1939— she had been killed in a crash.⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier, there were lasting effects to his involvement, and "Stalin's longtime interest in aviation and his personal acquaintance with the women pilots were almost certainly factors in his approval of the formation of the women's combat regiments during the war".⁴⁸

There are several important figures that need to be discussed when talking about female aviation, but none more important than Marina Raskova. Raskova would become the commander of the first ever female military aviation group, but she started out as the first woman to qualify as an air force navigator. She then became the first female instructor at the Zhukovskii Air

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid, 18

⁴⁸ Ibid

Academy at twenty-two years old, before setting a series of world record flights.⁴⁹ The flight of the Rodina made the entire crew famous, but Raskova truly capitalized on that fame; her book entitled Zapiski Shturmana— which translates to Notes of a Navigator— chronicled the flight and the ordeal she went through.⁵⁰ The book earned her fame and inspired many women to follow in her footsteps. Raisa Aronova remembers how she got into flying, stating, “Indeed it was precisely [Raskova], with her vivid biography, who kindled in me the love of aviation. I admired her record-breaking flights, and after reading Notes of a Navigator, firmly decided to connect my own life with aviation”.⁵¹ This type of sentiment was common among women who wanted to become pilots. Its echoed in Evgeniia Zhigulenko, who said, “Marina Raskova was an exceptional person. A famous pilot and Hero of the Soviet Union, she was still a simple, kind woman. She helped so many young women who wanted to fly”.⁵² Marina Raskova’s mentorship drew many young women to her as she began lobbying for the formation of a women’s regiment.

Even as Germany broke the Molotov-Ribbontrop Pact in 1941, women continued to be denied entrance to the military; those with special skills, such as pilots, were forced to remain off the frontlines and train new pilots while their male counterparts went to fight.⁵³ Despite many women readily volunteering for active duty, they were relegated to traditionally female roles. Evgeniia Zhigulenko remembers that despite having over 1,000 wartime missions, “it’s true that in the first months of the war women weren’t enlisted in aviation units. Women could only serve as nurses, communications operators, or anti-aircraft gunners, even though many of them had been members of aviation clubs before the war”.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ibid, 11

⁵⁰ Ibid, 19

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid, 21

⁵⁴ Ibid

The propaganda that was released after the Nazi invasion continued with this theme as well. Traditional gender roles were adhered to in poems and "...presented women as the embodiments of home and family for which men risked their lives".⁵⁵ This theme is demonstrated in the poem "Wait for me," which reads as follows:

*Wait for me and I'll come back,
Wait with might and main.
Wait when you are drowned by grief
In floods of yellow rain
Wait amid the driving snow,
Wait in torrid heat.
Wait when others cease to wait
Forgetting yesterday.*⁵⁶

While many poems, such as this, focused on love and portrayed how the ideal Soviet woman should act in order to motivate women to stay home and get men to the front, other poems and literature also capitalized on sexuality. According to Barbara Alpern Engel, author of "The Womanly Face of War: Soviet Women Remember World War II," "wartime propaganda portrayed women as passive sexually as well. When women were eroticized in wartime writing, it was as chaste victims, not as seductresses...".⁵⁷ The poem that follows, written by Konstantin Simonov, depicts what the government would print in order to gain more volunteers:

*If you do not want to have
The girl you courted
But never dared to kiss
Because your love was pure—
If you do not want fascists to bruise and beat
And stretch her naked on the floor
In hatred, tears and blood
And see three human dogs despoil
All that you hold dear
In the manliness of your love...
Then kill a German, kill him soon*

⁵⁵ Engel, Barbara Alpern. "The Womanly Face of War." In *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted With or Without Consent*, 138-59. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004. 148

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid, 149

*And every time you see one—kill him.*⁵⁸

Despite the gender equality rhetoric that was preached throughout the socialist country, the propaganda and opportunities that were afforded to women were just as sexist as in any other country, socialist or not. This all changed in October 1941 with the formation of Aviation Group 122.

Raskova's ties to Stalin were instrumental in the formation of the three women's military regiments within Aviation Group 122. As stated previously, many of the names of the female pilots were closely related to Stalin, and Raskova was no exception. As she began to push for integration of women into the military, in the sense that they (the pilots) would have their own battalion, her connections to high-level party members came in very useful. As Pennington states, exactly how Aviation Group 122 came into existence is unclear, but it is clear that Marina Raskova was instrumental. Pennington notes, "in fact, it seems to have been Raskova's idea to form the regiments—an idea that she pushed through a reluctant military establishment by the force of her persistence and with the backing of Joseph Stalin"⁵⁹. Pennington expands on Raskova's connections with Stalin by asserting that Raskova was a member of the Supreme Soviet, a part of the legislative body that had the power to approve constitutional amendments,⁶⁰ and therefore had access to the highest levels of government. In addition, it was claimed that, "prewar gossip, mostly foreign, linked [Stalin's] name to two prominent Russian women, [including] Marina Raskova, the long-distance flier".⁶¹ Though unlikely,⁶² it is interesting to

⁵⁸ Ibid, 149

⁵⁹ Pennington, 22

⁶⁰ "Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union." Wikipedia. May 25, 2019. Accessed May 28, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supreme_Soviet_of_the_Soviet_Union.

⁶¹ Pennington, 23

⁶² Ibid

consider the possibility, that Raskova was involved with Stalin and that helped her get the group started.

Regardless of the help she received from Stalin, it was Raskova who was responsible for the creation of the group. She continuously petitioned the government, and according to an article by the chief of the Main Directorate for Instruction, Formation, and Combat Training of the air force, General A. V. Nikitin, “in the very first days of the Great Patriotic War, HSU Marina Raskova appeared at VVS [air force] headquarters...Characteristically, she didn’t talk only about herself, but about the many other women pilots who passionately wanted to defend their homeland. Stubbornly, so characteristic of Raskova, she soon was able to get her way”.⁶³ Raskova’s persistence paid off; she was able to form not one, but three regiments: fighter, short-range bomber, and night bomber—all comprised of women.⁶⁴ Even still, Raskova faced push back from the government. Pennington references these struggles in a quote from A.

Skopintseva:

Upon the initiative of Hero of the Soviet Union Marina Raskova...three women’s aviation regiments were formed... It was not easy for Raskova to convince those who came out against her idea for the creation of women’s aviation regiments, who tried to prove that war was not a woman’s affair. Coming forward on behalf of one thousand women and girls, who appealed to her at the beginning of the war with patriotic letters, Raskova stubbornly demonstrated that if the war had become a nationwide matter, then it was impossible to reckon with the patriotic feelings of women.⁶⁵

The war in Russia was called ‘The Great Patriotic War,’ which brought forth feelings of patriotism and nationalism. Those feelings encouraged every Russian citizen to contribute to the war effort. Both men and women began to mobilize and, “...entered World War II much as

⁶³ Ibid, 24

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid, 24-25

Western Europeans had entered World War I—their patriotism firm, their faith in victory strong, their willingness to fight and die untroubled...”⁶⁶ That, and the ideology the Soviet Union spouted regarding gender equality, was a powerful combination and rendered arguments against a women’s group useless.

During the process of forming Aviation Group 122, Raskova was inundated with requests from women to join the regiments so much so that she went to Stalin directly and lobbied him to create the group. It is remembered by one of the women in the regiments that public pressure also played a key role: “they didn’t recruit us. We besieged them with requests, demanded. It was only because of the greatest pressure from us that we were taken”.⁶⁷ In addition to the public pressure put on the government, Evgeniia Zhigulenko remembers petitioning and letter-writing, sometimes to Raskova. Zhigulenko states, “when the war started, many of my female peers started writing letters to the government. We demanded to be taken into the army. Of course, they didn’t take us”.⁶⁸ Zhigulenko then goes on to state the role Raskova played in convincing Stalin:

And then Marina Raskova, a famous pilot whom we fondly called the grandmother of Soviet aviation..., went to Stalin about this. And, strange as it may seem, this monster told her, ‘you understand, future generations will not forgive us for sacrificing young girls.’ It was she herself who told us this, this fascinating woman. She said to Stalin, ‘you know, they are running away to the front all the same, they are taking matters into their own hands, and it will be worse, you understand, if they steal airplanes to go’.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Engel, 138

⁶⁷ Pennington, 25

⁶⁸ Ibid, 26

⁶⁹ Ibid

The determination of the women who so desperately wanted to become pilots combined with Marina Raskova's connections to Stalin and other high-level officials made it possible for the first all women military regiments to be formed.

On October 8, 1941, Order No. 0090 of the People's Commissariat of Defense was signed into law, effectively creating three regiments of women aviators which signaled a turning point in Soviet history. Not only were the regiments comprised of only women, but they were to be staffed and commanded by only women as well, including "navigators, mechanics, armorers, and all other support personnel...".⁷⁰ For the first time in history, women would be able to take on roles that had been reserved for males and serve their country on the front lines. For those that would be pilots, they would be sorted into either the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Short-Range Bomber Aviation Regiment, or the 46th Night Bomber Regiment.⁷¹ Once the call went out for volunteers, there was no shortage of women ready and able, demonstrating the drive and willingness the women of the Soviet Union had. The women came from all walks of life, although certain backgrounds were preferred over others. There was a little ethnic diversity among the women with, "most of the women in the 122nd Air Group [were] from Russia, even though the USSR was made up of fifteen different states sprawled across Europe and Asia, all with unique cultural traditions and even their own separate languages."⁷² Some of the women were from Ukraine, what at the time was Belorussia, Kazakhstan, and one was ethnically Jewish.⁷³ Not only were they from different statehoods, but their educational and economic backgrounds were very different as well. As Wein states:

⁷⁰ Ibid, 31

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Wein, Elizabeth. *Thousand Sisters: The Heroic Airwomen of the Soviet Union in World War II*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2019. 96

⁷³ Wein, 96-97

Some were from peasant families, some were the children of intellectuals, some were the children of factory workers and had worked in factories themselves. Some were from tiny villages in the middle of nowhere, while others were from the big cities of Leningrad and Moscow. Only a third of one percent of Soviet women attended universities at this time, so the education level of many of Marina's recruits was off the scale by ordinary standards.⁷⁴

The number of women from all walks of life proves that World War II was not a class war in Russia; people of varying degrees of wealth and privilege fought in the war. The Bolshevik Revolution had succeeded in this ideological aspect.

The selection process for Aviation Group 122 was very particular, and women were recruited to be pilots as well as support staff. A military unit cannot function without those who work behind the scenes. A modern infantry unit has intelligence staff, transportation staff, mechanics and technicians, armor support, and coordinates with other branches of the military, among many other things. These soldiers and officers are integral to the success of the unit. The same goes for the Soviet aviation units and Group 122. Those who were not to be trained as pilots were navigators for the aircrafts, mechanics, and armorers.⁷⁵ It was not possible to simply become a pilot or join the ranks of the support staff; "navigators were recruited from among students at universities and technical schools; mechanics and technicians were recruited primarily among factory and technical workers."⁷⁶ In addition, Aviation Group 122 did not recruit through the public. In fact, "the recruitment for the 122nd was handled primarily through Komsomol [communist youth party]⁷⁷ channels and not by word of mouth; there is no evidence that the call for volunteers received wide publicity. The majority of the volunteers were from

⁷⁴ Wein, 97

⁷⁵ Pennington, 31

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Komsomol." Encyclopædia Britannica. February 14, 2016. Accessed June 07, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Komsomol>.

Moscow, or were studying or working in Moscow, when the call went out.”⁷⁸ By not broadcasting the call to the public, Raskova was able to select only those that possessed the skill sets she was looking for. As the Komsomol continued to recruit, they were given strict instruction, likely by Raskova, to select those that were strong and had some kind of technical background. As Pennington notes, “these nonflying volunteers did not know that they were being recruited for aviation; they simply wanted to get to the front.”⁷⁹ As mentioned previously, World War II was a fight for the fatherland and everyone, regardless of gender, was desperate to fight.

In accordance with Soviet tradition, the women that were recruited were not given medical examinations nor tests of strength as it was assumed they were capable of any physical task. Aronova recalls the selection process as, “stringent and thorough.”⁸⁰ The women had to fill out questionnaires, were interviewed, and were continuously warned about the hardships and dangers of military service and even then, asked to truly consider what they were doing.⁸¹ During a time when getting volunteers for the military was absolutely crucial due to the early German success, the hesitation to involve women is somewhat surprising considering that traditionally, women were expected to hold their own. Despite the hesitance to involve women, once the recruits made it through the selection process, they were immediately sent to training. It is important to consider that, “at no point were the women volunteers required to undergo extended medical testing or tests of physical fitness.”⁸² As previously discussed, Russian women fought alongside men, were steeped in the legends of the Amazons, and “it seems that the Soviets simply assumed that the women would be able to do the job; after all, Soviet women had borne

⁷⁸ Pennington, 31

⁷⁹ Ibid, 32

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

the brunt of physical labor in Russia for centuries.”⁸³ This assumption seems to be rooted in truth. A male pilot with the Royal Air Force near Murmansk recalls seeing a group of Russian girls sawing and loading timber onto a troop ship. After deciding to help them, he remembered:

The party was under the command of a girl of about twenty, a qualified engineer. They worked away for three hours like absolute fury, the engineer-girl working the hardest of the lot... Once a lorry was loaded up with sawn timber, the girls would sit down for a breather and start smoking and singing. And then, when another lorry would come up, they'd start in all over again. About halfway through the loading and sawing I felt that I had strained every muscle of my body...but every time I sat down for a rest, there would appear another girl at the end of a log weighing half a ton... and back one would have to go to the treadmill of labour out of pure shame—explaining that one had been three weeks aboard ship, and one was not quite in one's natural athletic condition.⁸⁴

The memory of the British pilot displays the difference in Western and Eastern attitudes towards women. In the West, women would never have been doing so much physical labor, especially during a time when it was typical for them to be housewives. In contrast, it was common in Russia for women to take on those physical responsibilities.

The traits that Russian women had, such as being physically strong and willing to enter a dangerous profession, saw many volunteers to the point where Raskova had to be extremely selective. In addition, once word spread about the three regiments, many of the volunteers had very strong feelings about which unit they would be assigned to. As the German army moved closer to Moscow, it captured the city of Kalinin on October 12th, 1941, prompting those women who had been selected for service in Aviation Group 122 to be sent to Moscow for transportation to their training site. Once the women learned they were guaranteed a spot in an aviation unit, their desperation to just get to the front one way or another quickly dissipated and instead, they

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid, 32-33

began to yearn for a position that would align with their background.⁸⁵ Since all the women recruited had backgrounds in either aviation or a technical field, Raskova needed to be selective about who she placed in which regiment. Many of the women who were trained as pilots desired to only be pilots and because, “so many women pilots applied that only those with the strongest flying backgrounds made the cut for the pilots’ group,” those that did not make the cut to remain pilots often ended up as navigators.⁸⁶ As Raskova was trained as a navigator, she had strict qualifications in mind, but as that regiment was very short on soldiers, she quickly placed those with training there. Those women generally included, “women with a technical education—nearly all the upper-level university students, especially those from scientific fields, ended up as navigators—or women who were pilots and therefore knew a little navigation already. Many volunteers who had trained as pilots by profession were selected as navigators.”⁸⁷ Many of the women who were placed as navigators were extremely unhappy and protested. Galina Migunova, the deputy to Militsiia Kazarinova, the chief of staff of the 122nd, recalls, “Raskova entered the women pilots who had completed this school into the navigators’ group. They protested, pointing out that they wanted to be pilots, that their place was at the controls of a combat aircraft, but it was all in vain.”⁸⁸

Due to the overwhelming number of volunteers, Raskova could afford to choose the best for her pilots which dictated the needs of the army as she communicated to several women. Aronova had initially volunteered in hopes of becoming a pilot but became a navigator instead. In her personal interview with Raskova, (Raskova interviewed every single woman) she was asked what she wanted, to which she replied, “I only want to be a pilot!” ... Raskova answered,

⁸⁵ Ibid, 37

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid, 37-38

‘But you see, you don’t have enough flights—only fifty hours altogether.’”⁸⁹ Even the women that had no desire to become pilots and instead wished to be technicians or mechanics had to go through a selection process. The Mandate Commission, the organization responsible for choosing the support staff, had specific criteria; “those who were stronger physically or who were acquainted with any sort of technical work were assigned to the group of armorers, engine mechanics, and other kinds of aviation specialists.”⁹⁰ Those not chosen as pilots, navigators, or support were made clerks or other staff workers. Migunova looks back on the reactions of those chosen to serve in that aspect; “it seemed to them that all their hopes had collapsed... ‘My girlfriends will be fighting, but I will sit and pore over papers.’”⁹¹ Some of the women understood they would not be flying but were still heartbroken when they got their assignments and realized they would not even be working on planes. One of those women was Zinaida Butkaryova, who had little formal education and was assigned to be a parachute packer for the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment. Despite her initial disappointment in her assignment, she recalled later that, “when one of our aircraft was shot down and the pilot jumped with the parachute I had packed, I felt proud because it was also the result of my job that the pilot got down safely.”⁹² Although certain jobs were not as glamorous as others, every single job was essential to the success of the regiments. The desire of women to serve in specialized aspects of the military allowed Raskova to pick the best and despite the protestations from many of the women, the needs of the army won out and Raskova was able to successfully form her group.

After the selections were complete and the women were put into their regiments, they were issued uniforms which only served to highlight the historical significance of Aviation

⁸⁹ Ibid, 38

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Wein, 95-96

Group 122. The women were issued men's uniforms, including underwear, which posed numerous problems. Pennington describes:

Pants could be hitched up with belts and the cuffs could be rolled up, but footwear was a real problem. The boots were far too large for the women—most wore sizes 34 to 36. If the oversized uniforms made them look ludicrous, the boots made them clumsy. Uniforms could eventually be altered, but the only thing to do with too-big boots was to stuff the toes and shuffle. The women used footcloths to wind around their feet and ankles, but even so, their feet swam inside the boots.⁹³

Not only were the boots oversized and the uniforms ridiculous, they were forced to wear *portyanki*—squares of linen cloth that were used by the Russian army in the seventeenth century—as socks.⁹⁴ Their uniform problems did not just extend to having ill-fitting male ones; in 1943 they were issued parade uniforms, dress uniforms for formal occasions, and were issued skirts without stockings. In addition, some of the women were given new work uniforms that included high-heels rather than boots.⁹⁵ The impracticality of the uniforms that the women were given at first and were then subsequently issued highlights the unpreparedness of the Soviet Army to deal with women entering the military, let alone combat. The high-heels shone a light on the thinking of the time and proved that what the women were doing was without precedent.

Training began in earnest for the women in Engels, located on the eastern side of the Volga River, on October 25th, 1941 where they learned important lifesaving and basic soldiering skills and took the military oath. The very first order that was given to the women was to get their hair cut; many of them had up until that point sported hairstyles that were fashionable for women at the time—long hair that was often styled into braided crowns.⁹⁶ The new haircuts they

⁹³ Pennington, 39

⁹⁴ Wein, 74

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Wein, 78

were told to get were “boy-style”⁹⁷ which consisted of short cropped hair. The women were immediately thrown into a rigorous training regimen which was comprised of, “...ten courses a day plus two hours of drill; navigators studied Morse code for an additional hour and rose earlier than the other students, sleeping only five or six hours a night.”⁹⁸ The women were also trained throughout the night. Raskova knew that sleep would be hard to come by in the field and that, when they did manage to sleep, it would likely be disturbed, so she would sound an alarm from time to time that would require the women to dress and form up outside in less than five minutes. All of this would happen after midnight.⁹⁹ A historic moment took place on November 7th, 1941, the anniversary of the revolution. Aviation Group 122 took the military oath which is administered to all who enter the profession of arms. According to Migunova, after the oath was administered, Raskova made a speech to empower her soldiers where she drew on powerful women who had fought alongside men. She mentioned Joan of Arc, Nadezhda Durova, and Vasilisa Kozhina, who fought against Napoleon.¹⁰⁰ She continued her speech with:

But all these women were individuals, and they fought in men’s units. Such were conditions then. We are Soviet women, women of a free socialist nation. In our constitution it is written that women have equal rights in all fields of activity. Today you took the military oath, you vowed to faithfully defend the homeland. So let’s vow once more, together, to stand to our last breath in defense of our beloved homeland.¹⁰¹

By evoking images of powerful women such as Joan of Arc and Nadezhda Durova, Raskova inspired the women to fight as fiercely as they had. In addition, the women she mentioned did something that was unheard of: serve in the military and in a combat role. What Joan of Arc and

⁹⁷ Pennington, 42

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 42-43

Nadezhda Durova did was exactly what the women of Aviation Group 122 did and all of them challenged a system that had been in place for centuries.

The training for the pilots was condensed into a fraction of the time typical and the women trained in all weather in order to prepare for the harsh winter combat. The normal schedule for flight training was three years, but Raskova concentrated it to six months where the women garnered a minimum of five hundred flying hours. In addition to their in-air training, they went through classroom instruction and flying lesson, which lasted upwards of fifteen hours a day.¹⁰² During the winter of 1941-1942, the pilots learned how to fly in the harsh winters most of them had grown up in. Russia, stereotypically, has extremely cold winters and the winter of 1941-1942 was no exception. The average temperature in Leningrad was -14 degrees Celsius (seven degrees Fahrenheit), in Moscow it was -15 degrees Celsius (5 degrees Fahrenheit), and in Engels, where the women trained in open-cockpits, the average temperature was -16 degrees Celsius (three degrees Fahrenheit).¹⁰³ In an attempt to combat the freezing temperatures and the lack of properly-fitting uniforms, the pilots would use mole fur masks to keep the frostbite out, but many ended up with spots of it anyway.¹⁰⁴ The pilots trained every day and for as many hours the weather let them remain in the air. They worked on, "...flight skills and cross-country navigation tactics. Veteran combat pilots trained the recruits in air combat skills."¹⁰⁵ The training for the navigators was just as intense as the pilots'; "they went in groups in a big four-engine heavy bomber, to give them experience calculating unplanned routes. Training in wartime meant that in the middle of an exercise, the plane might land in a snow-covered field where the navigation students would have to help refuel it by carrying buckets back and forth from a tank

¹⁰² Ibid, 43

¹⁰³ Wein, 89

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 90

truck that couldn't drive through the snow." The rigorous training that Raskova put her soldiers through ensured they would be prepared for the harsh reality of combat.

In addition to their training in the heavy winter, the pilots also trained at night, an area which very few of them had experience. One of the types of planes they would be flying was the Po-2, which was a very small plane that posed a very serious problem: there was no radio. The pilots flying the Po-2s belonged to the 58th Night Bomber Regiment and had to acquire the skill very quickly. The navigators in the small planes would be unable to rely on radio signals to orient them to their surroundings, they had to rely on sight exclusively.¹⁰⁶ According to pilot Raisa Zhitova-Yushina, a typical nighttime training conversation would be, "you see this? I cannot see it! Do you see this? I cannot see it! This is a road. I cannot see it!"¹⁰⁷ The lack of radio equipment proved to be deadly for the pilots. On the night of March 9th, 1942, there was a training exercise conducted which involved several Po-2s and a practice bombing. There are conflicting reports as to what happened, but the sky was clear when the pilots took flight and the night steadily grew worse; winds picked up and snow fell to the point where "it was like flying through milk."¹⁰⁸ The lack of vision and radio equipment was a deadly combination and a crash occurred, killing Liliia Tormosina and her navigator Nadia Komogortseva, and Anya Malakhova and her navigator Marina Vinogradova.¹⁰⁹ At the funeral for the women, Raskova addressed her soldiers. She included in her remarks, "my darlings, my girls, squeeze your heart, stop crying, you shouldn't be sobbing... these are our first losses. There will be many of them. Clench your hearts like a fist..."¹¹⁰ The jarring reality of the war hit the women with these losses and the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 107

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 108

¹⁰⁹ Pennington, 48

¹¹⁰ Wein, 109

588th was postponed from going out to the front by two months in order to receive more training.¹¹¹ Despite the setbacks and losses, the women were still longing to be on the front. In a letter from Liliia Litvyak to her mother, she wrote, “so May has almost ended... We are training a great deal now and this fills us with enthusiasm, since it brings us nearer to... [our goal]—to fight at the front. Virtually no one amongst us wants to live in wartime as peacefully as we do now... All of us are thirsting for battle, especially me.”¹¹² Finally, on May 23rd, 1942, the 588th Night Bomber Regiment received their first combat orders to go to the front and Aviation Group 122 finally set out to do what it was created for.

The Russian tradition of strong women helped pave the way for Aviation Group 122 and those that wished to serve in it. In addition, the Soviet policy of gender equality made it possible for women to fight their way into military service. The training the women in the regiments received from Marina Raskova ensured they would be ready for combat when the time came. The journey that the women embarked on was without precedent and required untold sacrifice. As they moved into combat, their missions would cost dozens of their lives.

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Ibid, 112

Chapter Two

“I believe that women fight more effectively in a separate unit than together with men. The friendship is stronger, things are simpler, there is greater responsibility. I have talked a great deal with women who fought among men. It was more difficult for them than for us.”¹¹³ This belief held by Irina Rakobolskaia, Chief of Staff for the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, was a common one throughout the female regiments.¹¹⁴ There were three regiments in Aviation Group 122: 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment, and 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment. Out of the three, only the 46th Guards Regiment remained entirely female throughout the war.¹¹⁵ This chapter will focus on the three regiments, their differences, and their successes as well as failures.

Nicknamed the ‘Night Witches’ by German forces who were continuously harassed by the regiment,¹¹⁶ the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, 46th GvNBAP, were famous for their night combat operations as well as the proficiency for which they flew their Po-2 planes. Throughout the regiment’s years of service, it produced twenty-four Heroes of the Soviet Union, flew 24,000 missions, and was involved in the Battles of Stalingrad, Novorossisk, Minsk, Warsaw, Berlin, and the defense of the Transcaucasus.¹¹⁷¹¹⁸

The 46th GvNBAP were extremely proud of what they accomplished, and also of the fact that they were the only one of the three regiments in Aviation Group 122 that remained completely female throughout the war. As Pennington points out, this was “...a fact that every veteran stresses, sometimes in capital letters and underlined, as in a 1993 letter from Polina

¹¹³ Pennington, 80.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 74.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 73.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 72.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 73.

Gelman to the author: ‘OF THE THREE WOMEN’S REGIMENTS FORMED FROM THE 122ND AVIATION GROUP, ONLY THE 46TH GUARDS TAMAN (588 BAP) REMAINED PURELY FEMALE UNTIL THE END OF THE WAR.’¹¹⁹ The pride that the women of the 46th GvNBAP had regarding their status as the only all-female regiment in the entirety of the Red Army kept them going throughout the war, to the point where they refused the help of any man. Two high ranking officers of the Red Army, Marshal K. K. Rokossovskii, commander of the 2nd Belorussian Front, and K. A. Vershinin, commander of the 4th Air Army, visited the regiment in 1944. During their visit, “Rokossovskii turned to Vershinin and said, ‘it’s probably hard for the girls to do everything themselves. Maybe we should send them ten or twenty men to help hang bombs and do other heavy work?’ But the women protested loudly, ‘we don’t need any helpers, we’re managing just fine on our own!’”¹²⁰ Pennington continues with a perfect example of this; a radio mechanic was assigned to the regiment to fix a special installation and Rakobolskaia is quoted to have said:

He was a shy, modest little fellow. He went to the dining hall alone, after us... After about a week, the uniform branch sent him some women’s underwear. Whether this was done accidentally or on purpose, you had to laugh a little. He couldn’t take it, and requested to be sent back to his home unit. And so we remained without any men.¹²¹

Throughout the war, the 46th GvNBAP had only one commander who was also a female, unlike the other regiments who had both a male commander and female commander. Evdokiia Bershanskaia was one of the few women who were fortunate enough to train during the 1930s. After training at the Bataisk Aviation School and after serving as a flight instructor, she received

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 73-74.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 74.

¹²¹ Ibid, 74-75.

orders, like many experienced female pilots, to go to Moscow to join Raskova's Group.¹²²

Bershanskaia was beloved by her soldiers; Polina Gelman recalls, "we relied on one another as if we were family. Our commander, Lt. Col. Evdokiia Davydovna Bershanskaia, played a tremendous role in this... I served a long time in the army, and worked in many places. I had many commanders. But I never met such a wonderful person as our commander."¹²³ As a leader, it is as important to be loved as it is to be feared and respected and, based upon two accounts given by her soldiers, Bershanskaia managed a good balance between the two. She was reported to have been:

...unaccustomed to giving orders and unfamiliar with military discipline. Yet she was unafraid to innovate and under her leadership, the 46th became one of the top performing Po-2 night bomber regiments in the Soviet history. Bershanskaia instituted a system of in-house training to provide continual replacement for flying personnel, which meant that the 46th was never taken out of action for regeneration. The sheer endurance of the 46th's crews in three years of unbroken combat service is evidence that Bershanskaia's style was effective, if somewhat unorthodox. Bershanskaia would later be singled out for mention as one of twelve 'remarkable air regiment commanders' in the VVS.¹²⁴

Despite having limited military experience, Bershanskaia was able to turn the 46th into one of the best regiments in Soviet history. Her training methods ensured that the regiment was always in rotation, which was uncommon for military regiments of the time, and she instilled a sense of pride in her soldiers that made them identify with her and their unit.

Despite being one of the most successful and well known regiments in the Red Army, the 46th GvNBAP was one of the most poorly equipped. The women flew Po-2 bomber planes which were an open-cockpit biplane; there was nothing covering the cockpit of the plane. Po-2

¹²² Ibid, 75.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

planes were extremely fragile and very easy to break. Pilot Nina Raspopova recalled her experience in the Po-2 when:

[her] plane was caught in an enemy searchlight and hit by anti-aircraft fire; she remembered, 'my left foot slipped down into an empty space below me; the bottom of the cockpit had been shot away. I felt something hot streaming down my left arm and leg—I was wounded.' Blinded by the lights, with gas streaming from a damaged fuel tank and carrying no parachutes, Raspopova had to try to land the aircraft. She managed to get across the river and down to the ground, but the wood-framed plane had been so badly shot up that Raspopova noticed 'large splinters were sticking out my body.'¹²⁵

This was not the only incident with the Po-2 plane; to begin with, the plane was not built for combat, in fact, it had been used for instruction purposes by flying clubs.¹²⁶ This meant that the planes were not built for the types of missions that were being carried out which posed a huge safety risk to the pilots flying them. In addition, there were no parachutes or self-defense machine guns attached to the Po-2s, the only method of defense were the small bomb racks attached to the aircrafts. They also had no radio or modern instruments that would aid them in flying.¹²⁷ Should the planes come under enemy fire, much like Raspopova did, there was no method of defense and the only choice the pilots had was to bail and attempt to land in friendly territory. Despite the shortcomings of the aircraft, they were flown into battle and remained with the 46th for the duration of the war.

Although its shortcomings made it difficult to fly in combat, the Po-2 was a successful aircraft during its missions. The plane was only able to carry light bomb loads and was only capable of attacking infantry, unarmored vehicles (light troops) which meant the pilots had to

¹²⁵ Ibid, 73.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 75.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

find another way of assaulting their targets.¹²⁸ The 46th GvNBAP decided to use harassment raids which worked extremely well as they, “forced the enemy on all fronts to take precautions, lose sleep, and on occasion suffer the loss of a storage or fuel depot.”¹²⁹ Harassment raids did not cause mass numbers of casualties or destroy bases, but they did allow the pilots to play a psychological game. Soldiers that are paranoid and scared with little sleep are a danger to each other, the 46th GvNBAP consistently threatened the state of mind of the German forces who admitted, “[it would be] wrong to underestimate the effects of the attacks, since they were so unpredictable and therefore were extremely disturbing... [they] reduced the already short rest of the troops and had an adverse effect on supply operations, although the actual physical damage done in the raids was small.”¹³⁰ The Eastern Front provided horror stories for German soldiers and these raids were likely to be part of them. Though the Po-2s had a long list of shortcomings, they were effective in combat as they provided psychological torture to the Germans.

The 46th GvNBAP participated in many campaigns throughout the war, ranging from Stalingrad to Berlin, and were never taken out of rotation. The first time the 46th saw combat was in June of 1942 when they participated in the Battle for Stavropol and bombed the river crossing of the Mius and Don Rivers.¹³¹ From there, the unit was involved in the defense of the Transcaucasus from August-December 1942. In November of 1943 through May of 1944, the unit flew in Kerch, Crimea, and Sevastopol; throughout 1944 they saw action in Mogilev, Minsk, Poland, and completed its combat service in 1945 near the Oder River.¹³² For three straight years the 46th GvNBAP was never taken out of rotation; the veterans were exceptionally proud of this

¹²⁸ Ibid, 79.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 79-80.

¹³¹ Ibid, 73.

¹³² Ibid.

and the number of missions they were able to carry out despite large numbers of losses. In addition, they aided in the liberation of Novorossisk in 1943 where they earned the name of ‘Guards’.¹³³ In regard to the name of ‘Guard,’ Rakobolskaia recalls that, “in our division at that time there was another regiment of Po-2 [which] did not receive Guards. Then we were transferred to another division where there were five regiments, four of them Po-2, and they did not receive Guards...”¹³⁴ The success of the unit was recognized by Soviet military leadership which only fueled the motivation of the regiment’s pilots.

The culture of the time dictated that women stayed out of the military and especially out of the front lines which meant that the 46th GvNBAP was consistently competing with the men and trying to prove themselves. As the unit began to be recognized by Red Army leadership, the motivation of the pilots continued to increase and the demand for them to conduct missions increased as well. According to Pennington, the 46th GvNBAP flew five to ten missions per night and, “...at times, the regiment completed eighty to ninety combat sorties in a night.”¹³⁵ Rakobolskaia remembered, “each flight usually took 45-50 minutes. During the long winter nights we had 12-14 flights. The pilots were so tired they never even came out of the cockpit. In the winter they even brought hot tea to the aircraft.”¹³⁶ When Rakobolskaia was asked why the regiment pushed themselves so, she responded, “out of enthusiasm. In order to prove that we could do anything...we were not content just standing on par with the men’s regiments. We had to constantly increase the daily number of sorties.”¹³⁷ Since they were under scrutiny all the time for being women in what was considered a man’s profession, the pilots of the 46th GvNBAP

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 83.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 80.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

were constantly proving themselves worthy of their accolades while also striving to prove they were on par with the men and going above and beyond.

The desire to prove themselves only increased throughout the war and as Polina Gelman recalls, the women pushed so hard because, “the regiment was all volunteer. Everyone was a patriot. Often they hadn’t completed a landing before they were already spoiling to carry out the next flight. The men even attempted to stop us, they said, ‘the less you fly, the longer you’ll live.’”¹³⁸ Not only were the women trying to demonstrate just how good they were, but they were fighting for their country. The Nazis violated an agreement and invaded their homeland, effectively ensuring every able-bodied person would be on the defense. The resilience of the female pilots is demonstrated by Polina Gelman’s statement on her missions:

Without a break in the course of three years, without rest of leave, I flew on average 5-10 combat flights in the fire of ground batteries and in the blinding beams of searchlights. But that’s the way it is in war. Whoever didn’t want to be there could leave. There weren’t any people like that in our regiment. Only the dying and the wounded left. And the wounded, after the hospital, even despite the protests of the doctor returned to the regiment and continued to fight and even to perish.¹³⁹

The resilience of the women of the 46th GvNBAP is astounding; what is even more remarkable is that they continued to have that resilience as they endured the physical and psychological tolls that the combat flights had on them throughout the war.

Not only did the women of the 46th GvNBAP have to work tirelessly to prove themselves to the men at their level in the Army, but they also had to prove themselves to those in positions of power. In 1942, the commander of the 4th Air Army, General Vershinin, and the commander of the 218th, D. D. Popov, visited the unit. Pennington notes that Popov was not

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 81.

very enthusiastic about having an all-female regiment under his command. In fact, his demeanor was pointed out by his subordinates who commented, “he acted as though he was only interested in the equipment. His face was sullen. He asked nothing, said nothing, silently walking from aircraft to aircraft, not even glancing to the side.”¹⁴⁰ His disdain continued despite being reassured by his commander that they were a good regiment having been led by Raskova herself. In a phone call to Vershinin, Popov said, “‘I’ve received 112 little princesses. Just what am I supposed to do with them?’” Vershinin noted the annoyance in Popov’s voice and replied, ‘They’re not little princesses, Dmitrii Dmitrievich, but full-fledged pilots. And, like all the other pilots, they’re going to fight against the enemy.’”¹⁴¹ Popov’s reservations were typical of the time and despite the reassurances that he got regarding the regiment, he still withheld them from combat until they met his standards.¹⁴²

Flying five to ten missions a night every night for three years takes a lot out of an individual, no matter whether or not that person is a seasoned combat veteran or someone with no military experience, what one sees is harrowing. Pilot Evgeniia Zhigulenko was one of the pilots who recalled her experience attacking a German position in her Po-2: “there is a superhuman psychic overstrain when you are blinded by the searchlights and deafened by the explosions of antiaircraft shells and fire all around you.”¹⁴³ As Pennington points out, all those stimulants can lead to disorientation and physical harm if a pilot were to panic and be unable to tell ground from sky. The physical discomfort the pilots went through is summed up by Larisa Litvinova-Rozanova who detailed, “we inhaled the gunpowder, choking and coughing, unable to

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 77.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 77-78.

¹⁴² Ibid, 78.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 81

breathe, from the anti-aircraft gunfire bursting around us.”¹⁴⁴ Physical injury was also common as expressed above by Raspopova who ended up with splinters in her leg after part of her cockpit was blown out.

The mental stress the women endured was just as damaging. The effects of mental stress can manifest themselves in a variety of ways; Mariia Smirnova recalls that, “aircrews often had trouble falling asleep after missions because of the tension, as well as difficulty trying to sleep during the daylight hours while working at night. She remembered that, ‘we slept two to four hours each day throughout the four years of the war.’”¹⁴⁵ The lack of sleep the women had could result in fatigue which could negatively impact their missions. In order to combat this, the pilots were issued stimulants to keep them alert and awake. Litvinova-Rozanova remembers, “our doctor gave us pills nicknamed Coca-Cola to keep us awake.”¹⁴⁶ Despite the physical and mental stress the women endured every night for three years, Raisa Aronova detailed, “even I find it difficult to believe sometimes that we, young girls, could endure such incredible stress in our combat work. Apparently, our moral strength was immeasurable.”¹⁴⁷

Like any other regiment, the 46th GvNBAP suffered casualties and deaths, especially due to the particularly dangerous nature of their missions. The first major death came in June of 1942 when, on the first mission, one of the three aircraft flown by the regimental and squadron commanders, failed to come back. Their fate was discovered in 1965 when, “from local villagers it was learned that the women had been wounded by ground fire; they managed to land the aircraft, but both pilot and navigator died. The Germans, who occupied the area where the Po-2 landed, had searched the bodies for documents, then thrown them aside. They were later burned

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 82.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 81.

by the villagers.”¹⁴⁸ This harrowing account was not the only one of its kind. During the campaign for the North Caucasus, another three were killed in a midair crash due to mist and fog as well as steep terrain.¹⁴⁹ Pennington comments that in 1942, the missions that were carried out were the most dangerous of the war as it was the time when the Germans renewed their offensive. Polina Gelman remembered that time period:

I remember a night when I flew with tears on my face. We were pushed back from the Ukraine to the Caucasus. We were bombing the advancing column of German tanks. They were advancing so fast that we had not time to change bases. We didn't even have maps. It was August and September, we could not harvest grain, so they were burning. And so I was crying. Because it was my country and it was burning. This was the time they read Stalin's Order No. 227: not one more step back.¹⁵⁰

The dangerous nature of their missions consisted of bloodshed and death and yet, the women persevered. Pennington continues to cite an incident on 31 July 1943 where four crews, which totaled eight people, were lost to German night fighters. Litvinova-Rozanova gave a chilling account of the affair when she recalled, “‘the strangest thing was that no antiaircraft shells were exploding in the air; the antiaircraft guns were silent...’ [she] remembered ‘a bitter tickling in my throat’ as she realized that, for the first time, the Germans were using night fighters. A third aircraft went down and she was next in line.”¹⁵¹ Litvinova-Rozanova summed up the experience with, “that night we lost eight girls in ten minutes... for our whole wartime experience it was our worse, most horrible, tragic night.”¹⁵² In November of 1942, General Vershinin and General Tiulenev, commander of the Transcaucasus Front, presented ten women with medals and another

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 78.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 79.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 85.

¹⁵² Ibid.

thirty-two with commemorative watches. Those medals and watches were only the start of the recognition for the women who sacrificed so much.

The women were dedicated to their jobs and to each other and the pride they felt echoed throughout the regiment and their work and was eventually recognized and rewarded. No commander required less from the 46th GvNBAP just because they were women, in fact they demanded the same if not more. The women rose to the challenge and, as Gelman believed, “...our regiment firmly held first place among all in the Air Forces for the number of flights...female thoroughness and sense of responsibility obviously played a role in this.”¹⁵³ The other women firmly believed in this as well as is demonstrated by Senior Lieutenant Serfima Amosova-Taranenko stated:

On one airfield where we were stationed there were two regiments, one female and one male. We had the same missions, the same aircraft, and the same targets, so we worked together. The female regiment performed better and made more combat flights each night than the male regiment. The male pilots before a flight started smoking and talking, but the women even had supper in the cockpit of their aircraft.¹⁵⁴

Their dedication earned them the most Heroes of the Soviet Union awards than any other female regiment; eighteen pilots and six navigators were given the distinction. Irina Favorskaia was offered a spot in the 46th GvNBAP by Raskova herself but turned it down. Her comments regarding the unit after the war are telling: “I didn’t realize that if I had agreed to go I would either be dead, or I would be a Hero of the Soviet Union.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed, the women of the 46th GvNBAP had very similar fates to each other; many of them died and many were honored. Either way, they made immeasurable contributions to their country. In addition, Gelman believed

¹⁵³ Ibid, 88.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 89.

that the reason the 46th GvNBAP received so many Hero of the Soviet Union awards was because, “this was the only regiment among the three...that was completely women, from the start to the finish. In the others, men also served... one of the fundamental criteria for the award was the quality and quantity of successful combat flights.”¹⁵⁶ The most successful of the three regiments, the 46th GvNBAP not only stayed all-female throughout the war, but overcame adversity and distrust from their male counterparts and proved they could not only keep up with their male counterparts, but thrive and go beyond them.

The 586th Fighter Aviation regiment was the second female regiment to enter the war serving from April 1942 to May 1945. The women served as part of the Fighter Aviation of the Air Defense Force of the Soviet Union, or IA/PVO.¹⁵⁷ In total, the regiment completed over, “...9,000 flights, of which 4,419 were combat sorties; 38 enemy aircraft were destroyed and 42 damaged in 125 air engagements.”¹⁵⁸ The 586th had some of the best pilots in the Soviet Union: Raisa Beliaeva, Valeriia Khomiakova, Evgeniia Prokhorova (all of whom were on the women’s aerobatic team prewar), Liliia Litviak, and Katia Budanova who were considered fighter aces.¹⁵⁹ Despite the strength the regiment appeared to have, it was plagued with political problems throughout its service.

The first commander of the 586th was Tamara Kazarinova and, unlike Raskova who commanded the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment, Kazarinova was not well liked by her pilots. She made little effort to get to know her pilots as Aleksandra Makunina remembered, “though we spent a lot of time together at the command post, I was always afraid to ask her personal questions. I didn’t even try to ask. She wouldn’t permit it... I knew nothing about her

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 105.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

personal life. Yes, she was a lonely woman. Maybe because of this she was so strict...”¹⁶⁰

Kazarinova did herself no favors when she would not fly a plane herself and according to official accounts, it was due to a previous leg injury. This was confirmed by Makunina who stated in 1993, “She could not fly in fighters because she was wounded in the leg while she was in the Caucasus... Yes, I saw the blood on her leg. I once came to her in the morning and knocked because I had something urgent to report. I apologized because I saw her without one boot on, and there was blood on her foot. She always covered it up, but she walked with a limp...”¹⁶¹

Although she was injured and unable to fly, Kazarinova created a boundary between herself and her pilots; she could not identify with them or create mutual trust because she was not assuming the same risks and this was part of the problem the regiment faced. Throughout her six-month command of the 586th, Kazarinova came into conflict with the political commissar of the unit, Kulikova, her squadron commanders, and the division commander.¹⁶² The three pilots who had been on the aerobatic team, “Prokhorova, Beliaeva, and Khomiakova...immediately became enemies with the commander, who didn’t know how to fly a fighter. They clashed and those three pilots demanded that the commander be changed.”¹⁶³ The divide worsened as Litviak, Budanova, and Klavdiia Nechaeva got involved as well and “...all of them requested that Kazarinova be removed from the regiment as not being suitable for filling the position. But the division commander did not have the authority to remove a regimental commander from her post and he reported the ‘incident’ to the IA/PVO command.”¹⁶⁴ In order to combat the opposition she was getting, Kazarinova sent eight of her pilots to Stalingrad where there were the highest

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 106-107.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 107.

¹⁶² Ibid, 107-108.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 108.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 108-109.

aviation casualties. Of those eight pilots, only four returned and Nechaeva was killed in action and Litviak, Budanova, and Antonina Lebedeva continued to serve in male regiments instead.¹⁶⁵ Although sending them away got rid of a large portion of Kazarinova's opposition, those pilots went on to become some of the most famous and successful pilots of the war since they were given the chance to fight on the front lines and not just provide a supporting role.¹⁶⁶

The political turmoil in the 586th continued and was deadly for some even after sending away Kazarinova's major opposition. Aleksandr Gridnev, Kazarinova's successor, alleged that Kazarinova had been involved with General Aleksandr Osipenko, the husband of the late Polina Osipenko. Gridnev hated the two; he claimed, "Fighter Aviation of PVO was headed by General Osipenko, who was illiterate...in respect to tactical flying questions, as he did not fly fighter aircraft himself... Osipenko placed Tamara Kazarinova in command [of 586th]... who was completely ignorant regarding tactical flying and did not fly fighters."¹⁶⁷ Gridnev claims that Osipenko played a role in sending the pilots to Stalingrad:

General Osipenko found a 'fitting' way out of the situation that had developed...under the pretext of rendering assistance to Stalingrad, he sent from the regiment the entire 'rebellious' squadron of Beliaeva, in their brand new airplanes, with their maintenance personnel to Stalingrad... From the time they landed, the squadron was divided and sent to different regiments...¹⁶⁸

The political battle that was waged in the 586th had varying consequences that ranged from the squadrons losing some of the best flyers of the regiment to the death of another. Khomiakova's death was one of the most controversial of the regiment. In September 1942, she was sent to Moscow to receive recognition for some of her feats and returned to base in Anisovka only a few

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 109.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 108.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 109.

days later. Immediately upon her return, she was put back onto duty and went on a mission where she subsequently crashed and died. Her death was ruled a combat death so no legal action was taken, but many of the pilots demanded that it be investigated and Kazarinova brought to justice. Gridnev even asserted, "...she should have been imprisoned because of the accident, because she was responsible for the death of Khomiakova."¹⁶⁹ Finally, towards the end of 1942, Kazarinova was taken out of command, put on General Osipenko's staff, and replaced by Major Aleksandr Gridnev.

Unlike Kazarinova, Gridnev was liked and he respected by the pilots and respected them in return. Like the other male commanders put in charge of a women's regiment, his new command was not his first choice, but unlike his counterparts, he embraced the challenge. He had first encountered the 586th in fall 1942 when he saw Prokhorova performing aerobatic maneuvers and was immediately impressed.¹⁷⁰ When he officially took over the regiment, he started the pilots on a new training regimen which included, "'Combat Training Course 42.' This training consisted of daytime work in formation and group coordination in flights and squadrons, with target practice against towed targets. Navigation flights were also conducted and solo flights for perfecting piloting techniques were assigned."¹⁷¹ At the end of the war, Gridnev had nothing but the highest opinion of the women he commanded. He stated that, "our experience showed that women fighter pilots in the majority of circumstances, much better than men, endured g-loads to the body which arose during abrupt and sharp changes of aircraft attitude... Also the women-pilots had greater endurance than men during high-altitude flights without oxygen."¹⁷² Gridnev remained a proponent of the women's regiments and stressed that they required no

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 110-111.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 114.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 115.

¹⁷² Ibid, 124-125.

special treatment. The women too respected their commander; Makunina remembered, “‘Batia’ (Daddy), he was the real commander of the regiment. He was only ordinary-looking, but he was very funny... he’s an excellent storyteller, with a great sense of humor. It was very pleasant to be in his company. He tried to appear very serious but his eyes were smiling.”¹⁷³ It is much easier for a regiment to get behind and follow the orders of a commander they respect; it helped that Gridnev flew his own fighter plane on missions unlike Kazarinova. The successes of the 586th came when he took over the regiment.

The women of the 586th were some of the best pilots the Soviet Union had to offer and they conducted numerous combat flights. The women responsible for the flights included Raisa Beliaeva, Valeriia Khomiakova, Evgeniia Prokhorova, Liliia Litviak, and Katia Budanova.¹⁷⁴ Before her untimely death, Khomiakova became the first woman to shoot down an enemy aircraft at night when, on 24 September 1942, she shot down a Ju-88 bomber.¹⁷⁵ Prokhorova, a member of the aerobatics team prewar, impressed Gridnev even before he was her commander. In May 1942, he stopped in Anisovka and asked if there really was a female regiment stationed there. He was answered by a male engineer who told him, “...just how poorly prepared the women were: ‘Judge for yourself, is it really possible for anyone to master flying fighters in just a few months?... they’ve learned how to take off and land, and now they think of themselves as fighter pilots, they have all sorts of pretensions.’”¹⁷⁶ As the male engineer was talking, a Yak-1 took off and began to perform a series of aerobatics, impressing everyone: “‘Who’s that pilot?’ asked one of Gridnev’s pilots. A female mechanic answered, ‘it’s one of the women from the

¹⁷³ Ibid, 113.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 105.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 109.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 114.

second squadron.”¹⁷⁷ Despite the disbelief that a woman could fly like that, when the plane landed, it was Prokhorova who stepped out from the cockpit.¹⁷⁸ Gridnev remembers Prokhorova as, “the idol of all the women pilots, the technicians, in fact, the entire personnel of the regiment.”¹⁷⁹ Raisa Beliaeva is also remembered as one of the great pilots of the Soviet Union and, like Prokhorova and Khomiakova, she was admired by her commander and regiment. When she was sent to Stalingrad by Kazarinova in 1942, she beat the odds and, not only survived the high casualty rate, but had two kills as well.¹⁸⁰ In addition, Gridnev remembers, “Beliaeva was an exceptional person. It seemed that her body was not even like other bodies; she could withstand very high g’s. During the training flights she could beat any man... I never met any man like her. She could withstand so many g’s that when you were flying against her, you’d black out trying to keep up with her.”¹⁸¹ The affection Gridnev had for his pilots was not lost on or misplaced with Beliaeva. Her childhood friend, Olga Yamshchikova, affectionately recalls that, “...she was strong and dexterous, absolutely tireless, and ‘she could literally do anything... I never met a person who loved their profession more than she did.’”¹⁸² Unfortunately, Khomiakova, Prokhorova, and Beliaeva all shared similar fates. Khomiakova was killed in a crash in 1942 due to Kazarinova’s negligence, Prokhorova was killed in a crash when no one went to find her body in 1942 and it is likely she died from hypothermia, and Beliaeva was also killed in a crash while testing a plane that had just been repaired.¹⁸³ Although there were many others, those three women were some of the most formidable pilots the Soviet Union had to offer and they all were affectionately remembered by their commander.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 119.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 119.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 110, 118, 121.

The 586th participated in various battles in different parts of the Eastern Front. The main purpose the 586th held was to protect fixed targets which included airfields, cities, and transportation centers from German attacks.¹⁸⁴ Despite being active primarily in the middle of the war, they provided support in Stalingrad, Voronezh, Kursk, Kiev, Budapest, and Vienna before they were rotated out of action in 1945.¹⁸⁵ In addition, unlike the 46th GvNBAP, some men were integrated into the 586th and fought alongside the women.¹⁸⁶ Those men included Gridnev, and a pilot by the name of Chulochinikov. Chulochinikov was assigned to the 586th for cowardice in combat but was desperate to prove himself; he flew just as well as the women in the regiment.¹⁸⁷

Along with protecting fixed targets, the 586th were assigned to specialty missions which often included escorts. For example, they were to escort a VIP to Sredniaia near Stalingrad. The VIP in question was Nikita Khrushchev, who at the time was still a political commissar. He was visiting a camp of German prisoners of war and invited the pilots to join him.¹⁸⁸ Another escort in late 1942 that the regiment participated in went south due to weather. It was in this escort that Prokhorova was killed due to extremely poor visibility and poor communication equipment.¹⁸⁹ In 1943, the 586th was transferred to the 101st Fighter Aviation Division and stationed at Voronezh for six months. Gridnev recalls that this was "...some of the most intense combat activity the regiment would experience. 'During that time at Voronezh, every pilot had about three times the usual work.'"¹⁹⁰ The work intensified to the point where the regiment performed 934 flights and

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 105.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 114.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 117.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 118-119.

is credited with taking out seven Ju-88s and three FW-190 fighters.¹⁹¹ In addition, Raisa Surnachevskaia and Tamara Pamiatnykh engaged forty-two German bombers at the same time.

Pennington describes the feat as:

Pamiatnykh and Surnachevskaia were scrambled to intercept two enemy reconnaissance aircraft. When they reached the patrol area, they discovered instead two groups of German bombers—forty-two aircraft in all. Their regimental commander, who was in the command post when they radioed for instructions, said, ‘What was there to do? I got on the radio and commanded them, ‘Attack!’” Attack they did. Driving a wedge into the German formation, the pilots managed to scatter the bombers, forcing them to drop their bombs well short of target. Moreover, each woman shot down two enemy bombers.¹⁹²

The fearlessness of the pilots to take on a target that greatly outnumbered them showed the courage and resilience of the women of the 586th. The escort missions continued and by 1943, the regiment had escorted the likes of Major Generals, General-Lieutenants, and Senior Lieutenants.¹⁹³ The skill of the pilots of the 586th saw them entrusted to carry out not only combat missions, but missions that require the safety of senior Army leadership.

Political issues continued to haunt the regiment even through the end of the war and prevented the women from getting any sort of military distinction. In the Red Army, it was possible to achieve the honorary status of ‘Guards’, other units such as the 46th GvNBAP had received it and the commander needed to apply for it. Gridnev remembered that Kazarinova herself had come to pick up the paperwork for it and, “Colonel Sergeich who was chairman of the commission signed the document and Kazarinova also signed it. They stamped it. Two guys were with her. They took all the materials, got on the aircraft, and went to Moscow.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 119.

¹⁹² Ibid, 104.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 119.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 122.

Somehow, however, the 586th never received the distinction and Gridnev believed Kazarinova was wholly to blame. He stated that an old friend who worked on staff of IA/PVO said, "...the materials never reached the staff. But in the staff department, they knew that Kazarinova brought the materials to Moscow"¹⁹⁵ and that another friend told him, "she [Kazarinova] told a staff worker at the 9th Fighter Aviation Corps, Colonel Khil'nevich, that she categorically objected to the fact that Gridnev...was going to receive this designation."¹⁹⁶ Not only did the regiment never receive their honorary status, but none of the pilots received the Hero of the Soviet Union award. It is disputed whether or not the pilots qualified as the 586th accounts for 10 percent of the total number of German aircrafts shot down, but most of the women did not reach the individual kill number which was twenty.¹⁹⁷ Gridnev maintains that it was Kazarinova who prevented the women from their awards and stated, "not one woman pilot was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union in our regiment, on account of the prejudice and foolishness of the commander of Fighter Aviation of PVO, General Osipenko. He hated the women's 586th regiment and its commander."¹⁹⁸ Whether or not there was a political agenda, it was strange that the 586th was the only one of the three women's regiments to receive no designations or individual awards despite the prowess of the pilots.

The final regiment in Aviation Group 122 was the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment which served from 1943-1945. The first commander of the 125th was Marina Raskova herself as she was the one who began the Group itself, though her command only lasted a few months. The regiment was stationed at Engels and was ordered to join the 8th Air Army on the Western Front, but they were unable to leave their station due to weather. Raskova made the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 124.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

decision to split up her two squadrons and send the first ahead when the storm broke momentarily while she remained behind with the second squadron and Evgeniia Timofeeva. When the two squadrons finally reconnected, they were split up again and Raskova remained behind once more, this time with planes that had been having engine trouble. She and two other planes set off in bad weather for Stalingrad but never made it to their destination. Two of the planes made emergency landings, but Raskova's crashed and everyone on board was killed.¹⁹⁹ When her body was discovered, it was sent to Moscow to be buried in Red Square and her funeral was considered the first state funeral of the war as figures such as Stalin, Nikitin, and Grizodubova gave speeches in her honor.²⁰⁰ The woman who had set the women's military aviation movement in motion had died. Valentina Kravchenko remembered how the regiment was informed of Raskova's death: "Our commissar gathered us together in a big dugout and told us what had happened. We just cried. She truly affected our regiment. Maybe everything was different without her."²⁰¹ Despite her experience as a pilot and her command, Raskova never saw combat.

After Raskova's death, a man was put in command of the regiment which became a point of friction for several months. As early as 1943, men were being integrated into the 125th, some as gunners, mechanics, and engineers.²⁰² Like the other two regiments, the 125th had trouble gaining the trust and acceptance of their male counterparts, especially the pilots. Galina Ol'khovskaia, a navigator, remembered that the women were met with "...distrust in the division. The male pilots could not accept the idea that, just like them, some girls had mastered

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 91-93.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 93-94.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 94.

²⁰² Ibid, 91.

complicated equipment and would be able to complete any sort of combat mission.”²⁰³ The attitudes of the men were echoed in the new commander of the 125th, Major Valentin Markov. When he received his orders to command the regiment, his friends, “‘...looked at me with obvious pity.’ He admitted he was angry about the assignment and agreed with his friends, who predicted that he ‘would have to go through hell in that regiment.’”²⁰⁴ Unlike Gridnev, Markov went into his command closed off and with a sexist attitude. Upon arrival, Markov greeted the women with a speech that went as follows: “I am your new commander. I warn you that I will be holding you strictly accountable. There will be no allowances made because you are women, so don’t expect them. I ask you to make it a point to remember this. You, of course, have already fulfilled combat missions, but still too few to consider yourselves experienced fighters. We will begin with discipline.”²⁰⁵ The women despised him at first; they went from a commander that liked them and trusted them to a commander that did not believe women belonged in the army. Markov was swiftly nicknamed ‘bayonet’; one of the women, Fedotova recalled that, “in our hearts we mutinied against the new commander.”²⁰⁶

As the war progressed, Markov’s opinion of the regiment began to change. His training regimen was rigorous which tested the women physically and mentally. When he first arrived, he started the regiment on a training program for formation flying: “it was critical in Soviet bomber tactics to maintain a formation in which the defensive guns of the bombers gave optimal coverage for the group.”²⁰⁷ In addition to the training in formation flying, Markov also had them do joint trainings even when they were still flying support in Stalingrad. In regard to the women

²⁰³ Ibid, 95.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 96.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 97.

of his regiment, he remarked, “sometimes, seeing how the girl armorers hung heavy bombs from the aircraft, how the mechanics prepared the airplanes at night, in snowstorms and frost, I thought: ‘well okay, we men are supposed to do all this...but them?! They, who for the most part are still girls...how they must love our homeland.’”²⁰⁸ Through their hard work, the women were able to prove themselves to Markov and he began to gain their trust. Valentina Kravchenko would later go on to become his navigator; she believed that Markov had been counseled on how to talk to them by the regimental doctor, “she was a good psychologist and knew how to talk to us. He never raised his voice to us but he did to the men. I think that she persuaded him not to yell at us, because we would resent it.”²⁰⁹ In fact, the nickname ‘bayonet’ was later changed to ‘Batia’ or ‘Daddy’ in English.²¹⁰ Markov in turn was also very proud of his regiment towards the end of the war and stated, “during the war there was no difference between this regiment and any male regiments. We lived in dugouts, as did other regiments, and flew on the same missions, not more or less dangerous.”²¹¹ Furthermore, the men in other units became accepting of the women to the point where many of them married each other. For example, Mariia Dolina, a pilot, married a navigator from a regiment stationed nearby: “we had been through the hardships of war together so we new each other well...my friends told us that two broken hearts had been mended.”²¹² Despite the difficulties the women faced in regard to male attitudes, through their hard work they were able to prove they were just as capable as the men and they eventually gained the trust of their commander which was reciprocated in kind.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid, 98.

²¹² Ibid.

At the time of their formation, the 125th had been flying Su-2 bombers, but were giving new Pe-2s prior to flying in combat. The Pe-2 was notoriously difficult to fly and required a crew of three, not two. A navigator from the 125th, Galina Brok-Beltsova recalled an incident involving a Pe-2 and one of the male pilots: “A Pe-2 from a male regiment took off before us, crashed into a hangar, and exploded, not being able to clear the hangar... We were next in line to take off. You have to forbid yourself from thinking that your plane will end up the same way... a victory—not over the German troops but over ourselves. You fight your own cowardice.”²¹³ The Pe-2 had a very quick turn around time for missions; it could carry enough fuel for two and a half hours and had a turn around time of one to two hours in between missions meaning that there could be two to three flights per day.²¹⁴ The Pe-2 continued to give the regiment trouble throughout the war and amassed high casualties, but the women were successful despite this.

The women participated in various battles throughout the war and had a very high casualty rate. The official casualty rate of the 125th is around twenty-two percent and totaled twenty-two dead. Other estimates range from forty-six to forty-seven dead, making the potential casualty rate near fifty percent.²¹⁵ From May to July 1943, the 125th supported the 37th Army in the Northern Caucasus and, “...engaged in six air battles, shot down five enemy fighters, and lost five Pe-2 aircraft.”²¹⁶ One of these battles involved Evgeniia Timofeeva who:

...was leading a nine-ship formation, one of three ‘niners,’ in a group attack. Cloud cover forced the bombers to descend to 1,000 meters, separating them from their fighter escort. During the target run, Timofeeva’s group was attacked by eight Me-109s; they managed to shoot down four. They credited this achievement to their strict adherence to maintaining formation and following the plan of fire they had practiced. This engagement was considered

²¹³ Ibid, 91.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 99.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 91.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 99.

significant enough to be highlighted in the official history of the 4th Air Army.²¹⁷

Their missions continued and the 125th provided support in Kursk and Smolensk where two crews were lost.²¹⁸ They also engaged on the Belorussian front; as the Soviets began to go on the offensive, many of the women were terrified of either capture by the Germans or arrest by the Soviets if they were unable to complete particularly dangerous missions.²¹⁹ Throughout their missions, the 125th lost many great women, but continued on to become one of the greatest regiments in Soviet history.

The work of the 125th earned them distinctions, both regimental and individual. Not only were they given the distinction of ‘Guards,’ but they also received an honorary title named after Raskova.²²⁰ In 1945, the regiment received the Order of Suvorov and five women were awarded HSU. One of Markov’s regrets was, “that so few of his aviators received the HSU...he said if he could it over again, he would recommend many more of his personnel for the HSU.”²²¹ One of the most prolific regiments in the Red Army, the 125th earned the trust of their commander and proved themselves time and time again through their hard work.

The soldiers of the Red Army, no matter if they were in the air, on the ground, or hidden in bushes as snipers, were dedicated to their fight. The women of Aviation Group 122 were no exception. They were fighting a war on three fronts: the physical fight against the Germans, the fight to prove themselves to the men of the Soviet Union, and the fight within themselves to overcome their fears.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 99-100.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 101-102.

²²⁰ Ibid, 99.

²²¹ Ibid, 103.

Chapter Three

“I believe in this case, if the war goes on long enough and women are patient, opportunity will come knocking at their doors. However, there is just a chance that this is not the time when women should be patient. We are in a war and we need to fight it with all our ability and every weapon possible. Women pilots, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used.”²²² A supporter of female pilots, Eleanor Roosevelt recognized their potential and championed them as seen by her 1942 *My Day* column that was placed in newspapers nationwide. American women worked throughout World War II; the men went off to fight and left jobs that women picked up to keep the country going. During wartime, women worked in all areas of society and had places within the military including the air. This chapter will focus on the women and the missions of the Women Airforce Service Pilot, or WASP, as well as their creation and disbandment.

The WASP program created out of a shortage of male pilots and had very strict objectives. During the early parts of the war, the United States had a severe shortage of pilots and infantry due to heavy losses and General Arnold, the commander of the Army Air Forces (AAF), wanted, “...all qualified male pilots released for combat duty, and he wanted to redirect male trainees to the Army’s ground forces.”²²³ The personnel shortage for aircrews meant that the AAF was forced to look elsewhere for pilots. Nancy Harkness Love and Jacqueline Cochran were the two women responsible for submitting proposals for what would become the WASP program. They submitted their proposals separately; Love proposed that the AAF should accept women with five hundred or more hours of flight experience and commit them exclusively to the

²²² Yellin, Emily. *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II*. Free Press, 2004. 151.

²²³ Merryman, Molly. *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*. New York University Press, 1998. 7.

Ferrying Division.²²⁴ Cochran, on the other hand, proposed that squadrons of all female pilots would be responsible for all aircraft ferrying operations which would eventually expand into handling all domestic military flights.²²⁵ The differences between these two proposals rested in the women who would join the squadrons; Love's proposal required the use of experienced pilots and the training did not include flying, but instead, "...it involved lessons specific to flying military planes, including AAF regulations for takeoffs, landings, taxiing, and so on, and dealt extensively with the regulations involved with delivering planes, such as filling out forms and the procedures involved in maintaining the secrecy of war planes."²²⁶ Cochran was willing to take women who had their pilots' license, but did not have nearly the number of flight hours Love required. Her training program included a flight school for newer pilots; her pilots would take the same coursework as the men.²²⁷ The Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, WAFS, and Women's Flying Training Detachment, WFTD, were created in 1942 headed by Love and Cochran respectively.²²⁸ In 1943 however, General Henry Arnold stated that he, "...would not have two women's pilot organizations in the AAF—that they had to get together" and with that the WASPs were born.²²⁹

The WASP program was created for the sole purpose of releasing male pilots for combat, General Arnold set forth specific objectives. He remarked, "we anticipated then that the global war would require all our qualified men and many of our women."²³⁰ During World War II, military commanders wanted to be ready in case the United States mainland was attacked and

²²⁴ Ibid, 12.

²²⁵ Ibid, 12-13.

²²⁶ Ibid, 12.

²²⁷ Ibid, 13.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Weatherford, Doris. *American Women and World War II*. Facts on File, 1990., 44.

²³⁰ Merryman, 10.

with all able-bodied men overseas, they were going to need to use women. The three objectives were as follows:

1. To see if women could serve as military pilots, and, if so, to form the nucleus of an organization which could be rapidly expanded.
2. To release male pilots for combat.
3. To decrease the Air Forces' total demands for the cream of the manpower pool.²³¹

Those specific aims limited the women, and, despite their military service, they remained civilian in status though this will be discussed later.

Cochran was put at the helm of the WASPs and had a certain image she felt needed to be upheld; she only recruited those she thought would fit that image. During the 1940s, there was a lot of opposition towards women pilots and Cochran was acutely aware of it; she did not have the luxury of choosing only the best pilots, and she put forth subjective criteria that were, “a matter of choosing clean-cut, stable appearing girls.”²³² The women were selected from a variety of backgrounds, but were discriminated against due to measures beyond their control such as sexual orientation or race; most of the WASPs were white with the exception of two Chinese-Americans.²³³ In fact, Cochran actively discriminated against black women though she never specifically acknowledged it. Though there are no records of this discrimination in applications, one of her journal entries describes her bias:

The so-called Negro question was laid on my doorstep in a very direct way early in the women pilots' training program. Several Negro girls applied for training but never more than one at a time out of the thousands of applicants. I interviewed these particular applicants in proper order without prejudice of preference, hardly knowing what I could do at that stage of my program if any one of them had passed the preliminaries. Fortunately for the formative stages of the work none met all the specifications. Finally one, a

²³¹ Merryman, 7.

²³² Ibid, 15.

²³³ Ibid.

New Jersey school teacher who was a pilot and a fine physical specimen, made application for acceptance as a student at Sweetwater. I asked her to join me for breakfast on a Sunday morning in my New York apartment...I told her the manifold troubles I was having getting the program started and ended by saying that I had no prejudice whatever with respect to the color or race of my applicants but that the complication she had brought for decision might, for one reason or another, prove the straw that would break the camel's back. This fine young Negro girl recognized the force and honesty of my arguments, stated that first of all the women pilots' program should be stabilized and strengthened, and she withdrew her application.²³⁴

The question remains as to whether or not Cochran was truly racist and did not want black women in her program or she understood the optics that an integrated women's pilot program would present during a time when the initiative was already so controversial.

Except for race, Cochran readily accepted women from all backgrounds provided they met her subjective criteria. The WASPs were not publicized, and it was up to the potential recruits to gain information on the program as it was so controversial. Recruitment relied solely on personal invitations from Cochran and Love, conversations with male pilots when it happened to come up, and rare articles published in newspapers.²³⁵ Despite the lack of publicity, over 25,000 women applied, 1,830 were accepted, and 1,076 graduated.²³⁶ The women had come from all over the United States, they came from different socio-economic backgrounds; the one uniting factor. This is accounted for by pilots such as Madge Rutherford Minton who detailed, "the WASPs were women from all walks of life and all economic levels in the United States. We had millionaires, and we had very poor girls who worked very hard just to buy flight time. But they had one thing in common, and that was the love of flying."²³⁷ Ethel Finely reiterated

²³⁴ Ibid, 16.

²³⁵ Ibid, 14.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Minton's point, "we came from all walks of life. Many were teachers. We had everything from teachers to a Ziegfield Follies girl, clerks, secretaries, office workers—every walk of life. But I think underneath all of it was this kind of special characteristic of the love of flying, of patriotism and also the spirit of adventure."²³⁸ This is again reinforced in letters from WASPs to their loved ones. In a letter from Adaline Banks, a trainee, to her sister on 18 July 1943, Banks describes her roommates, "One girl is from California; she is married and her husband is in the Air Corps somewhere in the Pacific. Another girl used to be on a newspaper in Oklahoma City...Adele, my favorite, is from Iowa... There is another girl who was evacuated from the Philippines before Pearl Harbor; her father has been reported missing since Bataan."²³⁹ No matter their background, the women were connected through their love of flying and their patriotism.

The dedication and the love the pilots had for the craft was demonstrated clearly through Cornelia Fort, one of the original WAFS who joined in 1942. She wrote in her diary that:

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly, but I 'know' why as I've never known anything in my life. I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow...I know it in the dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness...For the first time we felt a part of something larger...I, for one, am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have.²⁴⁰

She continued her sentiments in a letter to her mother. Fort declared, "if I die violently, who can say it was 'before my time'? I should have dearly loved to have had a husband and children...I was happiest in the sky—at dawn when the quietness of the air was like a caress, when the noon

²³⁸ Ibid, 14-15.

²³⁹ Yellin, 153.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 157.

sun beat down and at dusk when the sky was drenched with fading light.”²⁴¹ In addition to the love of flying, many women were drawn to the fact that they were in complete control for the first time and that, “...they were doing a job to help win the war. And the WASP also was a working woman.”²⁴²

Prior to 1943 when the WFTD and the WAFS merged to form the WASPs, the WFTD trained women pilots through an intensive program and then sent them to WAFS. There were four objectives that the WFTD training needed to abide by:

1. Academic instruction in technical objects, proficiency which is required in ferrying training type aircraft.
2. Instruction in the fundamental principles required to pilot training type aircraft.
3. Training in accepted procedures of the Air Transport Command.
4. Physical training to maintain and improve physical and mental alertness.²⁴³

In 1942, the training program, “...was twenty-two and a half weeks long and consisted of 115 flight hours, twenty hours of Link training, five hours of physical training each week, and 180 hours of academic instruction in five topics: navigation, weather, aircraft and engines, communications, and ATC procedures.”²⁴⁴ By 1943, however, the training had changed to three different phases: primary, basic, and advanced. Everything was increased, from the academic instruction to the physical training to the length of training itself. The academic instruction began to include math and physics, and the physical training included muscle building to increase upper body strength since the planes needed to be operated manually.²⁴⁵ The final change came in October 1943 when academic instruction was increased to 309 hours and included twelve topics

²⁴¹ Ibid, 158.

²⁴² Merryman, 14.

²⁴³ Ibid, 18.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 19.

rather than just five, flight training was 230 hours, and the total length of training was increased to twenty-seven weeks.²⁴⁶ The women were able to train on a variety of aircrafts. The airfield they trained on, Avenger Field, gradually began to add planes and in 1944 it averaged two hundred training planes that were available to students.²⁴⁷ Betty Stagg Turner who graduated from WASP training in 1944 detailed in a postcard of a PT-19, a training plane, “this is what I fly. Pretty neat huh! I really like them they’re smooth. I’ve got about 53 hours left to fly in them, then to AT6’s...will write to you as soon as I get the chance.”²⁴⁸ Upon her graduation from that plane, she sent an updated message on a postcard of a BT-13, “this is the Basic Trainer I will fly after I finish my training in the AT6 the one I sent Mom. This is a 450 h. p., the AT6 is a 650 h. p. Will start on AT6 June 1. Will send you some picture[s] later.”²⁴⁹ Turner’s enthusiasm was echoed in the testimony of the other women. Throughout the war, the WASPs flew a total of seventy-seven different types of aircrafts.²⁵⁰

A typical day for the trainees was long and full of content, but the women were able to help each other through it. The day would begin at 0600 with barracks cleaning for inspection, then a march to breakfast, then training which would generally include calisthenics, academics, flying, and then evening study before the day concluded at 2200 or 10:00 at night. Their training was also geared toward the military despite their being civilians in technicality and, “it was exactly like the men’s, except they [the women] had more navigation and less aerobatics, which the men used for practicing dogfights.”²⁵¹ Through the long days and difficult training, the women persevered and many remember supporting one another; Thelma Miller remembers: “It

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 20.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Weatherford, 68.

²⁵¹ Merryman, 20.

was very hard. I trained in Texas from May through December. It was very hot—the only relief you got was when you got in a cockpit and got off the ground... You all held each other up—everyone was moral support for each other.”²⁵² The women had a lot more to lose than the men and therefore they supported one another so they could all succeed.

In accordance with the objectives set forth upon their creation, the 141 WASP pilots were relegated strictly to ferrying missions so the men could be freed up for combat. Essentially, ferrying was an airborne delivery service that delivered planes made in the United States to Canada, overseas, and other American bases.²⁵³²⁵⁴ By December 1944, the WASPs had delivered 12,652 aircrafts to domestic locations.²⁵⁵ Their days of ferrying were long and grueling; Minton described her days as, “we usually reported to the flight line at seven o’clock in the morning and looked at the board to see what had been assigned us in the way of an airplane, where it went and what we would need in the way of equipment to take along, and then we would go find our airplane and sign it out at operations and check it over...”²⁵⁶ The unpredictability and the mental stress of their days took its toll on the women.

The intensive navigation training the women had to undertake before they got their wings proved to be extremely necessary. Unlike planes today, these planes had no radios or navigation technology that could help the pilots, so the women were forced to rely on other methods to get to where they needed to go. They used physical cues or flying by the beam. The physical clues often included highways, mountains, and rivers while flying by the beam was flying with the help of Morse Code radio transmissions. There was a grid of beams across the United States and

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Weatherford, 68.

²⁵⁴ Merryman, 23.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

a pilot would listen through her headphones for the signals which would indicate where she was.²⁵⁷

Their flight training, in addition to antiaircraft training, paid off as well as they flew an abundance of different planes. In training they flew single-engine training planes, but upon graduation they had to adapt to two-engine, four-engine, and two-engine cargo planes.²⁵⁸ Minton remembered this well: “I flew BT-13s and AT-6s; I flew C-47s and C-46s, and I also rode in the copilot’s seat in the B-17s.”²⁵⁹ As noted by Merryman, each plane was made by a different manufacturer which meant that everything was different, from controls and speeds to maneuverability, to take-off and landing techniques.²⁶⁰ The skills that were taught in training were put to use during missions.

The WASPs were so effective during their missions their duties were eventually expanded. As male officers saw the success rate of the women, they began to request them for flights as they found the WASPs to be more reliable than the male pilots. Instead, General Arnold wrote, “It was common for commanding officers to say they would rather have WASPs ferry airplanes across the United States than male pilots, because the WASP normally reached her destination a day or two ahead of the time required by a male pilot... When pressed for reasons, the answer usually given was that the WASP didn’t carry an address book with her.”²⁶¹ Though they were unwilling to admit that the women were just as good, if not better than, the men, the success rate of the women spoke for itself. Once their duties expanded, they were responsible for helping to train the male cadets as well. Some of these new duties included

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 24.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 24-25.

towing "...targets for male gunnery students to shoot at. These antiaircraft artillery units practiced during day and dark, and many of them never knew that the plane at which they fired was flown by a woman."²⁶² In addition, they towed gliders that the male cadets used to learn to fly and helped teach 'tracking' which, "you fly a prescribed pattern, while batteries sight and follow your moving plane. It's a tedious job at all times, and at night, in the blinding glare or searchlights, a mean one as well. It is also the kind of aerial undertaking at which women shine."²⁶³ Kaddy Steele recalled towing the targets and the danger it posed: "You couldn't help but realize the danger, but we had a lot of confidence that the people who were doing the training were in control of what was going on, and by and large they were. But because everybody is human, and there's always human errors, there was a definite margin of error..."²⁶⁴ In addition, the WASPs helped with strafing missions and dropped gas and other chemicals on ground troops in addition. This is memorialized by Steele who wrote: "we had target-towing and radar-tracking missions. Then we had strafing missions, where we would go down and simulate strafing the troops as they would be strafed in a combat situation, and we had gassing missions, where we would gas the troops with tear gas, so they could practice using their masks—putting them on in a hurry."²⁶⁵ The women were also used to challenge men's egos when the men were too afraid to fly the B-29: "the male flight crews, their egos challenged, approached the B-29 with new enthusiasm..."²⁶⁶ Despite all of their success, the women were rewarded with tedious tasks and were prohibited from combat.

²⁶² Weatherford, 69.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Merryman, 25.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Yellin, 156

The WASPs faced criticism from a variety of sources including male pilots, media, and Congress. At the end of the day, the roles the WASPs took on were threatening to men and were critical to, "...analyzing the threat that World War II military women posed to cultural assumptions about the construction of gender because their specific, masculine-valued, and frequently dangerous roles offered no means through which the message could be mediated."²⁶⁷ From the highest to the lowest levels, the men did not believe the women belonged in the cockpit. General Arnold wrote, "The use of women pilots serves no military purpose...Frankly I didn't know in 1941 whether a slip of a young girl could fight the controls of a B-17 in the heavy weather they would naturally encounter in operational flying."²⁶⁸ While Arnold's opposition came from a sexist place, his beliefs and actions did not directly cost any one their lives. On the other hand, at the lower levels of service, there was a lot of hostility that led to alleged sabotage of the women's aircrafts. At Camp Davis in North Carolina in 1943, there were fifty thousand men and twenty-five women. The women faced open hostility at both the officer level and enlisted level. For instance, there were two deaths and one serious injury among the women between August and September of that year that were caused by equipment failures:

A concerned Jacqueline Cochran went to Camp Davis after the first death and found the women fearing for their lives. The climate of hostility towards the women might have contributed to the deadly consequences, although no direct link was ever found to specific males. Still, the WASPs were highly disturbed at the shoddily maintained planes and lax attitude of the male officers toward their safety... Then, after the second death, she launched an investigation. In the engine of the second downed plane investigators reported they found enough sugar to make the plane malfunction. Although disturbed by the findings, Cochran decided not to make the stark evidence of apparent sabotage public, or to investigate further, believing that such information would endanger the continuation of the entire WASP program.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Merryman, 4.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 11.

²⁶⁹ Yellin, 158.

The terror the women endured on a daily basis because the male pilots were so threatened by them was detrimental to their individual health, the organizations health, and the war effort. The lengths the men went to, so far as sabotaging an engine with sugar, is indicative of the cultural norms at the time: women belonged in the home and with the children, not in the air.

Though they were held accountable by the military and subject to its regulations, the WASPs were considered civilian throughout their service which was another obstacle they faced. The AAF wanted to militarize the WASP program and recruits were promised that it would be, but that never came to fruition.²⁷⁰ From the moment they began training, the women were given the worst housing assignments, if there were any to be given, where they were allowed to eat was limited, and many were flat out ignored by their male counterparts.²⁷¹ The most shocking of this was the death of a WASP who was copiloting for a male when they crashed. Ann Darr, another WASP, recalled, “Not only did the Army not pay for the transport of her body, or her burial, or give her family a flag to drape on her coffin, but her parents were given no gold star to signify the loss of their child in military service.”²⁷² Darr continues, “the male pilot’s body was sent home to be buried with honors...the female co-pilot...the Army said it was not responsible. The Civil Service said it was not responsible. We took up a collection to send her body home...I was so humiliated that our government could treat us that way.”²⁷³ The lack of militarization meant the women were prohibited from any sort of distinction or benefit; they were the only women’s branch of the military to be in such a position.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Merryman, 27-28.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 21-22.

²⁷² Yellin, 159.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Weatherford, 103.

The lack of militarization posed another problem in that it was very difficult for the organization to gain that recognition and it opened them to different investigations. The only significant voice that opposed the militarization of the WASPs were the unemployed male civilian pilots who were attempting to avoid the draft. Their argument was that they could do the jobs that were being done by the WASPs. By summer 1944 they were getting media coverage.²⁷⁵ They ended up forming a powerful lobby and submitted a series of complaints to Congress that would be called the Ramspeck Report. The Reports included the following:

1. Army Air Forces had embarked upon a costly and unnecessary program of recruiting inexperienced young women for training as noncombat service pilots.
2. Simultaneously, Armed Air Forces was dismissing, or failing to properly utilize, large numbers of male civilian pilot-instructors, who had been trained at a cost of millions of dollars.
3. While insisting upon high qualifications as prerequisite to the retention of the male civilian instructors, Army Air Forces was lowering the standards for female civilian recruits to an almost irreducible minimum.
4. The program was highly experimental.
5. The alleged manpower shortage given as a reason for the recruiting and training of inexperienced personnel was not, as claimed, being alleviated, but instead was being further confused and aggravated.²⁷⁶

The report was extremely sexist and made unfounded accusations that were picked up by the media. In addition, the report alleged that the WASP program cost more than training male pilots at \$12,150.70 per trainee and did not provide comparative statistics for the men though it cost about the same.²⁷⁷ The report stated that the WASPs were wasting taxpayer dollars from, “the war stamps of school children, the taxes of the farmer, the savings of the wage earner, deductions

²⁷⁵ Merryman, 82.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 83.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 85.

from the pay envelope of the laborer, and the earnings of the industry.”²⁷⁸ The report offered three conclusions:

1. The proposal to expand the WASP has not been justified. Therefore, it is recommended that the recruiting of inexperienced personnel and their training for the WASPS be immediately terminated.
2. That the use of the WASPS already trained and in training be continued and provision be made for hospitalization and insurance.
3. There exist several surpluses of experienced pilot personnel available for utilization as service pilots. Therefore it is recommended that the service of these several groups of experienced air personnel be immediately utilized.²⁷⁹

At the same time, there was an investigation launched into the WASPs headed by Rep. James Morrison of Louisiana as well as opposition to the bill that was trying to get the WASPs militarized. Morrison used “...newspaper opinion pieces and editorials to bolster opposition to the WASP bill. In all, he cited three op-ed pieces, one personal statement, and one letter in the weeks prior to the House’s vote on H.R. 4219 [the WASP militarization bill].”²⁸⁰ In one piece that was published, “Why Spend \$100,000 on the WASP Program? Read what Miss Cassinni Says,” Morrison cited a section that suggested Cochran seduced Arnold for his endorsement:

In the last week the shapely pilot has seen her coveted commission coming closer and closer. *** One of the highest placed generals, it seems gazed into her eyes, and since then has taken her cause celebre very much ‘to heart’*** She’s such an attractive composition of wind-blown bob, smiling eyes and outdoor skin nobody blames him.

It’s whispered he’s battling a knight of olde, or olde knight, for ‘the faire Cochran.’ So the announcement can be expected any day that Jackie’s commission has been approved, if the captivated general is victorious in his tournaments.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 86.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 87.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 89.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 90.

The lack of facts that Morrison used to support his ideas and the fact that those arguments were accepted is not surprising for the time. Morrison continued his accusations of sexual favors when he published an editorial piece in the *Idaho Statesmen* in May 1944. The piece included many unfounded accusations such as:

The men are angry about it, and they seem to have additional reasons. For instance, WASPS qualify for transport training after 35 hours of flying time, whereas men must have 1,000, including 200 in heavy craft. We don't know what the explanation is. Probably it is the sentimental softness of American men in regard to their women. In colleges the smooth, good-looking gals can get A's without a lick of work; and in the armed services it may be that dimples have a devastating effect even on generals.²⁸²

The derogatory comments had their desired effect and when it came time to vote on the militarization, H.R. 4219 failed. The debate over the bill was chaired by Rep. Ramspeck whose report was praised by some members of Congress and derailed the debate. After everything, the bill failed with 188 yeas, 169 nays, and seventy-three members refused to vote.²⁸³²⁸⁴ Congress received no letters from WASPs advocating for themselves as Cochran decided not to have them write per military protocol.²⁸⁵

The failure of the bill meant that the organization was to disband in 1944. Cochran and Arnold wrote each WASP a letter, "...telling them that their mission had been completed. Arnold said, 'You have freed male pilots for other work, but now the situation has changed...if you continue in service, you will be replacing instead of releasing our young men. I know that the WASP wouldn't want that.'²⁸⁶ Ann Darr remembered that they were told Arnold would speak

²⁸² Ibid, 91.

²⁸³ Ibid, 93.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 101.

²⁸⁵ Weatherford, 102.

²⁸⁶ Yellin, 161.

for them during the debate and, “we were advised...[to] act like ‘ladies’—and keep silent.”²⁸⁷

Despite their military service, the WASPs would not be recognized until 1977 when they would be granted the status of ‘veteran.’²⁸⁸

In an effort to release more men for combat, the WASPs were formed. Throughout World War II, they participated in ferrying missions across the United States, administrative flights, and aided in training the male cadets for combat. They were never used in combat. Their role was a controversial one and they were subjected to abuse by their male counterparts, lawmakers, and the media, but, “The WASPs performed missions that were both exciting and valuable. Much of what they did was top secret...By taking on roles and missions previously associated with the masculine, WASPs challenged assumptions of male supremacy in wartime culture.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Merryman, 3.

Chapter Four

Throughout World War II, women were utilized in various aspects of the war effort; they were nurses, secretaries, they worked in factories, and some of them were pilots. The Soviet Union and the United States were two of the countries to employ women in their air forces, though the countries did it in very different ways. Although both the Soviet Union and the United States were in desperate need for troops, only the Soviet Union recognized the potential of their female population. The female Soviet pilots fought in combat, had political support at the highest levels of government, and were able to work with their male counterparts; while in comparison, the American WASPs were relegated to non-combat roles, had extremely minimal political support, and their relationships with the male pilots were volatile.

The women of Soviet Aviation Group 122 were directly involved at the front in combat roles while their American counterparts were relegated to support positions. The war on the Eastern Front was drained the Soviet resources and an estimated thirty million Soviet citizens died between the years 1941 and 1945.²⁹⁰ Stalin conscripted any one who was able to fight and is quoted as saying, “The death of one man is a tragedy...the death of a million is a statistic.”²⁹¹ Though it was easy to conscript men for the infantry and simply give them a gun before sending them off to die, there were certain jobs that required special skills. One of these were pilots. As stated in previous chapters, the Soviets were desperate for more pilots and so they implemented a women’s group that served through the end of the war. The women went through a vigorous selection and training process and many of them were either cut or did not receive their first choice job. After intensive training, the women were split into three regiments: the 46th Guards

²⁹⁰ Tharoor, Ishaan. “Don’t Forget How the Soviets Saved the World from Hitler.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 8 May 2015. www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/05/08/dont-forget-how-the-soviet-union-saved-the-world-from-hitler/.

²⁹¹ Sinek, Simon. *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Some Don't*. Penguin Business, 2019. 108

Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment. Each of these regiments were stationed at different bases and were then sent to the front where they participated in numerous campaigns in Stalingrad, Minsk, Warsaw, Kursk, and Berlin. Most of the deaths the Soviet female pilots suffered were in combat. Klavdia Ivanovna Terekhova, a Soviet Air Force captain stated regarding the deaths, “In the first days of training we lost two teams. There were four coffins. All three of our regiments sobbed out loud. Raskova stepped forward. ‘Friends, wipe your tears. These are our first losses. There will be many of them. Clench your hearts like a fist...’ Later, at the front, we buried without tears. We stopped crying.”²⁹² The need for pilots in the Soviet Union combined with the communist ideology that men and women were equal resulted in female pilots participating in combat.

The American WASPs resulted from the same need as the Soviets but were relegated to combat-support roles. While both the WASPs and Aviation Group 122 were domestic forces, the Soviets were fighting a war in their country while the Americans were protected by two oceans. The WASPs, who were forced to stay stateside, began as a ferrying service. Before the WASP organization was created, there were two forces: the WAFS and the WFTD. The WAFS were responsible for carrying out ferrying missions while the WFTD was responsible for training the women before they were sent to the WAFS. Eventually, both branches merged to form the WASPs. Throughout the war, the WASPs gained more responsibility; their duties went from just ferrying aircrafts to helping train infantry soldiers, ferrying aircrafts both domestic and overseas, and transporting important military figures²⁹³²⁹⁴. Despite their increasing responsibility and the

²⁹² Aleksievich, 56.

²⁹³ Merryman, 23.

²⁹⁴ Merryman, 25.

competence they exhibited, the WASPs never saw combat and were disbanded before the war had even ended. The WASPs were never militarized; they were never recognized as part of the military which made it easier for the government to disband it. Soviet Aviation Group 122 was militarized from the beginning; the women were issued uniforms, trained and treated just like men, fought and died in combat, and given the benefits that came with militarization. The WASPs never saw combat, were a civilian organization from beginning to end, and had to fight after the war ended to gain veteran status which was denied as a result of not being militarized.

The political support that the WASPs and Aviation Group 122 received is another important point of comparison. Aviation Group 122 had backing from the Soviet government at the highest level, from Stalin himself. When the need for more pilots became evident, Marina Raskova lobbied for the creation of a women's group. She was successful due to her connections, as it is rumored she knew Stalin personally, and she knew the culture of the USSR.²⁹⁵ Communist ideology dictated that men and women were equal and while there were still feelings that women should not be on the front, the propaganda put forth by the Party helped the women. Yevgeniya Guruleva-Smirnova, a navigator, recalled some of the propaganda:

No other country in the world let women fly combat, but Stalin proclaimed that our women could do everything, could withstand anything! It was a kind of propaganda to show that Soviet women were equal to men and could fulfill any task, to show how might and strong we were. Women could not only bring babies into being but could build hydroelectric plants, fly aircraft, and destroy the enemy.²⁹⁶

Even when it came to their disbandment, Aviation Group 122 was dissolved because it was decided there was not a need for them anymore once the war finished. There were no reports of sexual misconduct or inappropriate behavior, there just simply no longer a need for them.

²⁹⁵ Pennington, 22

²⁹⁶ Strebe, 44.

On the other side of the Pacific, the WASPs had no real political backing and found their biggest supporter in Eleanor Roosevelt. Though she advocated for the creation of a female pilot regiment in her *My Day* column, it was Nancy Harkness Love and Jacqueline Cochran who were responsible for getting the WAFS and WFTD off the ground. After lobbying separately, the women were granted two organizations that were eventually merged into one because the Army could not justify having two female pilot organizations.²⁹⁷ Nearly a year later, undrafted male civilian pilots began lobbying for the disbandment of the WASPs. Due to the lack of political support the women had, the fact they did not advocate for themselves, as well as the amount of political support the men opposing them found, it ended up being very easy for the WASPs to be disbanded. The Ramspeck Report asserted there was no need for a women's regiment due to the sexual misconduct and accusation of Cochran sleeping with General Arnold, the high cost of maintaining the program, and the inability to justify having a separate organization when there were male civilian pilots that could do the same jobs.²⁹⁸ The culture in the United States was still very centered around women as homemakers and when it came to the war effort, it was acceptable for them to partake in jobs that were still considered 'feminine'. Many were nurses or secretaries, and many worked in the factories in the United States. Flying, however, was considered a man's job. Once the war finished, it was easy for the men to transition back to the factory jobs, but it was much more difficult to transition the women back into the home.

The last major point of comparison is the relationship between the female pilots and their male counterparts. In the USSR, the women had to fight to be accepted by men at their rank level, and by those who commanded them, but gained it more quickly than their American counterparts. Strebe describes that, "with the intensity and innate hardships that came with

²⁹⁷ Weatherford, 44.

²⁹⁸ Merryman, 82.

fighting at the front, the Russian women pilots quickly earned the respect of the men they flew with, even those who questioned women's participation in the war and their ability to stand up to the pressures of combat."²⁹⁹ In addition, the relations ended up being so good between the men and women, that many of them ended up marrying each other.³⁰⁰

The WASPs had a much more difficult time and the relations with the men put their lives in danger. Though it was never proven, it was believed that the men would tamper with the aircrafts the women flew; in one case an engine was sabotaged with sugar and the female pilot was killed.³⁰¹ In addition, Aviation Group 122 was widely known throughout the USSR. In comparison, "the details of women's pilots' training remained a closely guarded secret, and since the WASP's public relations plan discouraged media contact, the public and Congress knew little of their accomplishments during the war."³⁰² We've seen how the fact that the WASPs were a 'closely guarded secret' played a major part in their disbandment.

Overall, the female pilots from the United States and the Soviet Union played a significant in World War II. Though they differed in several ways such as combat time, political support, and their relations with their male counterparts, female pilots were fundamental in the establishment of female forces later in the twentieth century. Unlike the men who were fighting, the women in both countries faced war on multiple fronts. They were fighting the enemy and they were fighting for recognition and support on a national and a personal level.

²⁹⁹ Strebe, 43.

³⁰⁰ Pennington, 212.

³⁰¹ Yellin, 158.

³⁰² Strebe, 37-38.

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