

Spring 2018

Dancing in the airfield: The women of the 46th Taman Guards Aviation Regiment and their journey through war and womanhood

Yasmine L. Vaughan
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vaughan, Yasmine L., "Dancing in the airfield: The women of the 46th Taman Guards Aviation Regiment and their journey through war and womanhood" (2018). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 551.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/551>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

Dancing in the Airfield: The Women of the 46th Taman Guards Aviation Regiment and their Journey through
War and Womanhood

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Yasmine Leigh Vaughan

May 2018

Accepted by the faculty of the History Department, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

Project Advisor: Steven Guerrier, Ph.D.,
Professor, History

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,
Dean, Honors College

Reader: Michael Galgano, Ph.D.,
Professor, History

Reader: Joanne Hartog,
Adjunct Professor, History

Reader: Mary Louise Loe, Ph.D.,
Professor Emerita, History

PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at James Madison University on April 14, 2018.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	3
Introduction	4
Chapter 1: Soviet Society in the Interwar Period	9
Chapter 2: The 46th Taman Guards and their Service on the Eastern Front	36
Chapter 3: The Motivations and Success of the 46th Taman Guards	64
Conclusion	79
Bibliography	82

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank Dr. Steven Guerrier for not only helping me with my research but constantly reminding me to have great expectations for myself. Thank you for our long chats and for always having faith in me. I would also like to thank Dr. Galgano, Dr. Loe, and Ms. Hartog for agreeing to be my readers, and for always encouraging me in my endeavors. Thank you to my informal reader Ms. Amelia Underwood for being so excited about my topic and being willing to listen to me talk out my ideas for a thesis statement. Your conversation with me was the inspiration for my first paragraph. A special thanks goes to Ms. Malia Willey and the Interlibrary Loan office at James Madison University, without whom my bibliography would be rather short. Along those lines, I would also like to thank the Flying Heritage Museum for allowing me to have access to their Chronicles of Courage archive. It was amazing to see “my pilots” telling their own stories. In addition, I would like to thank the History Department of James Madison University and the Honors College, whose funding and support allowed for me to go places I never imagined I would go, and learn things that changed my life. I would like to thank my family, who instilled in me a love for flying that inspired this research. Finally, I would like to thank the women of the 46th, and all of those who have fought for their cause: you have showed me the truth about war and reminded me to keep fighting to see people set free. Your contribution has not been forgotten.

Introduction

History has often obscured the roles women have played in armed conflict. In recent years, women's involvement has been reexamined, and historians are attempting to rewrite the history books and bring to light the contributions women have made both on the home front and on the frontlines. This research, of course, brings up many relevant issues talked about in today's gender climate—namely, “Are women fit for combat?” This is a simplistic question that lacks scope. The question should be: “What *kind* of woman has the ability to succeed in armed conflict, and how does a society cultivate these warrior women?” During World War II, women in the Soviet Union were allowed to serve in all branches of the military, from frontline medics to fighter pilots. The Soviet Union had become the first country in the world to mobilize women into the Air Force. At the beginning of the war, three regiments were formed under the heading of the 122nd Composite Air Group: the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 125th Day Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment. These regiments were commanded by the famous aviatrix Marina Raskova, and all of the personnel recruited for these regiments, from the mechanics to the pilots, were female. The three regiments flew over 30,000 combat missions and produced thirty Heroes of the Soviet Union (HSUs) in their three years of service. The 588th, later renamed the 46th, was the most successful and well-known of the female regiments, famous for its combat record and stunning achievements.

This paper seeks to put into context the unique social constructions that allowed for the recruitment, training, and success of these women pilots. Growing up in a patriotic and militaristic culture that placed influence on the roles women should play as mothers, workers, and patriots, many were used to doing traditionally masculine work for the good of the

collective. These women already knew how to cope with hardship while still maintaining their femininity, and this unique construction of their identity is what spurred them to greatness.

The Importance of the Eastern Front of World War II

With the exception of the occasional mention of Stalingrad, Western historians often neglect discussions on the Eastern Front in their works. Due to the legacy of the Cold War, it is easy to understand the reasoning for this oversight. However, the Soviet part in the Allied victory cannot be ignored, as the USSR paid the highest price for victory; an estimated 27 million Soviets died during the four years of war. World War II could have turned out very differently had the Soviet Union not been invaded by the Germans. More forces were deployed in the fight on the Eastern Front than in any previous war. To the Soviets, this was the Great Patriotic War: a war in which they were willing to do anything in order to defeat the Germans. The war on the Western front was about liberation; the war on the Eastern front was about survival. Hence, the battles fought on the Eastern front were among the bloodiest, and the conditions they were fought in were among the harshest. Therefore, historians need to engage in further exploration of the Eastern front in order to see the full picture of the conflict and understand the cost of victory.¹

¹ With that being said, occasionally throughout this work the phrase “western” is used. It should be noted that this is not referring to the side of the war fought by the British and the Americans (the “Western front”), but rather referring to battles fought on the western side of the Eastern front. Distinction between areas west *of* the Soviet Union and areas *in* the west of the Soviet Union are denoted by capitalization, with the official Western front being capitalized.

The Importance of Gender in War Stories

Just as looking at both fronts of World War II is important to understanding the whole struggle, the narratives of women at war are necessary for understanding the full picture of any armed conflict. As Svetlana Alexiyevich says in the preface to her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, "...men are prepared from childhood for the fact that they may have to shoot. Women are not taught that... they are not prepared to do that work... and they remember other things and remember differently. They are capable of seeing what is closed to men...Their war has smell, has color, a detailed world of existence..."² Men are encouraged to 'play war' when they are young, and they are taught to be tough and fearless; women, on the other hand, are encouraged to be emotional and taught to be nurturers. Therefore, the way that men and women remember war is very different. Often when men discuss their experience of war, they talk about battles and victories. Women, on the other hand, talk more about personal experiences. War is not just about planes, guns, and ships, but about men, women, and children dying as a causality of clashing ideologies; to ignore the personal aspects of war is to only understand one part of the bigger picture.

Background on Sources

As with any venture into Russian history by Western historians, there are difficulties in gathering sources. As stated before, Western scholars have paid very little attention to the Eastern front of World War II, meaning most information remains in the original Russian. The

² Svetlana Aleksievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, 2017), XXIII.

Russian archives are fragmented, and do not make a distinction between women and men in their accounts. News reports during the war and histories published soon after the war are largely propagandistic, and some of the information is difficult to verify. During the war, most people were discouraged from keeping diaries in case they might fall into enemy hands. Also, journals and letters that were written during the war were subject to scrutiny by friends and NKVD³ officials, making it less likely that authors would include information that was contrary to the state's official narratives.⁴ Following the end of World War II, political tensions prevented Westerners from accessing information for upwards of fifty years, leading to problems of public memory.

Despite these drawbacks, there are also a number of advantages to gathering sources so long after the war. While many of the sources of this time were fueled by propaganda in their analysis, the information that they convey gives a glimpse into how the state shaped the culture. The stories that veterans remember many years after the war are usually the ones that are most important to them, conveying information about the significance of these events. The stories that are repeated by the veterans over many years are given particular emphasis in this paper. It is also easier for some veterans to talk about their experiences after a great amount of time has passed since tragic events. Also, as Anne Noggle says in the preface of her book, "For a people held mute for almost all the years of their lives by terror and despotism, the communication of the spirit has never been silenced...The recent changes wrought in the Soviet Union itself have

³ The NKVD, or People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, is most known in this time for its function of carrying out the Great Purge of Stalin, which led to the death of 3-20 million people.

⁴ According to Lyuba Vinogradova, people spied on their friends out of respect for the political authority, which encouraged them to be hyper vigilant about those who opposed the State's ideas. They also feared they themselves would be arrested in many cases.

made it possible for its citizens not only to speak to foreigners but to speak frankly with us.”⁵

There was a great amount of censorship by the state placed on its people, and as Russia becomes more open to Westerners, the more open people are to talking about their experiences.⁶

⁵ Anne Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994), X.

⁶ The most important sources for understanding the women air regiments' part in the war are Anne Noggle's *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. Following the end of the Cold War, Noggle, a former Women Air Force Service Pilot, traveled to the Soviet Union to interview veterans about their experiences; hers remains the most comprehensive oral history on Soviet women pilots. A number of oral histories have also been collected by the Flying Heritage Museum in WA, offering a unique opportunity to see the veterans tell their own stories. Kazimiera Janina Cottam's work *Women in Air War*, also contains short stories told by the women of the air regiments about their experiences. Cottam also is responsible for *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers*, which contains biographical information on women serving for the Soviet Union. *Wings, Women and War Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* by Reina Pennington is a comprehensive source for the history of the regiments, which includes a list of all the regimental personnel. Sources like *Night Witches* by Bruce Myles should be consulted for pleasure reading only, as it is highly fictionalized and maligned by the veterans themselves. For a more extensive source covering all women who served for the Soviet Union, read *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* by Markwick and Cardona or *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* by Anna Krylova. *War's Unwomanly Face* by Svetlana Aleksievich contains oral histories compiled by Soviet women in all areas of the war, and remains one of the most honest tales of conflict ever written. For information pertaining to the Soviet Air Force, consult *Red Phoenix Rising: The Soviet Air Force in World War II*, the most respected Western source on the VVS during World War II. *The Soviet Air Force in World War II: The Official History* by Ray Wagner and Leland Fetzer is also important, as it is a translated version of the official history published by the ministry of defense. To understand society in the interwar period, consult the anthology *Women in the Stalin Era* edited by Melanie Ilic.

Chapter 1: Soviet Society in the Interwar Period

To understand the reasons why women were included in the military, and more importantly, why they felt they should join the military, requires an examination of Soviet culture, especially in the 1930s and 40s. As a socialist nation, the Soviet Union established itself as a nation of equals. Women were ‘freed’ from their oppression and began working in factories alongside men to help industrialize. When the workday was done, both men and women were encouraged to take up extracurricular activities that would be of help to the state. Many of these activities were militaristic. This emphasis on paramilitary activities led to a number of men and women becoming pilots, including Marina Raskova, the aviatrix who would become the commander of the three women’s regiments. Following the German invasion, both women and men reacted by trying to enlist in the military, because they felt it was their patriotic duty to avenge the attack on their homeland. These factors together shed some light on the reasoning behind the formation of these regiments.

The History of Soviet “Equality”

The roots of women’s emancipation in the USSR began with the October Revolution. The radical males who ushered in socialism in what would become the Soviet Union invited women to join in their quest for the equality of all people. Following the October Revolution, women were seen to be ‘fully emancipated’ and the equal of men.⁷ Women were allowed to

⁷ Anne Eliot Griesse, Richard Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War,” in *Female Soldiers - Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical & Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Loring Goldman (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 62.

divorce, had the right to an abortion until 1920, and were given safer working conditions.⁸ The Communist Party also encouraged women to take up their roles as political and social organizers, and urged them to participate in technical and educational programs.⁹

Under the leadership of Josef Stalin, women expanded their roles outside the home even more. Stalin's First Five Year Plan implemented in 1928, led to rapid industrialization in the country. There were not enough men to fill the factories, so women, driven by poverty or determination, began to move from rural areas to the cities to find work.¹⁰ In the factories, women worked in traditionally male occupations, such as heavy and mechanized jobs. These jobs, however, were not seen as contrary to the female image. Articles in the magazine *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker) concerning construction work on the Moscow Metro made the female drillers out to be girlish and vivacious, despite the fact that it was one of the toughest new jobs women had entered. These women were praised for working hard and for being pretty. One worker said, "I go to work underground in resin shoes, trousers, my head covered with a scarf. But at home and on my day off I love my clothes to be fashionable, beautiful and smart. All our girls love to dress well. If you were to meet one of our Metro builders at the theater or at a party, you would not be able to guess that she works underground."¹¹ A woman was able to do man's

⁸ Melanie Ilic and Karen Petrone, *Women in the Stalin Era*, (New York: Palgrave 2001), 2. It should be noted that as the birth rate fell in the Soviet Union, the policies that allowed for divorce and abortion were taken away.

⁹ Ilic, 3.

¹⁰ Euridice Charon Cardona and Roger Markwick, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 7; Ilic, 2; Choi Chatterjee, "Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity 1930-1939," in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilic, and Karen Petrone, (New York: Palgrave 2001), 52; Kazimiera Janina Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers* (Nepean, Canada: New Military Pub., 1998), XVIII.

¹¹ Ilic, 4; Lynne Atwood, "Women Workers at Play; the Portrayal of Leisure in the Magazine *Rabotnitsa* in the First Two Decades of Soviet Power," in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilic, and Karen Petrone, (New York: Palgrave 2001), 40-4.

work, but still have womanly attributes. In other words, the inclusion of women in traditionally male spheres was not a complete reversal of gender roles, but rather an expansion of them.

This expansion of gender roles, while glorified by the state, created a double burden for most women. In the Stalinist state, “Soviet superwomen were to be found in every corner of the Union: on collective farms, in the military, in educational circles and institutions of higher learning, in factories, in the field of sports, even in the tunnels of the Moscow Metro.”¹² The state believed that social equality was achieved when women were allowed to leave the home and join the working class.¹³ This equality, however, was just on paper. Both men and women still held traditional patriarchal notions, and while these beliefs were not acknowledged, they still shaped the society. While women made the same wages as men, the majority of women worked in low-skilled jobs. Women were also less likely than men to be promoted. Women’s oppression was a fundamental part of the social structure, and the ideological view that a woman’s primary job was to be a nurturing mother and domestic laborer still persisted. While women were encouraged to take on traditionally male jobs, men were not encouraged to take on traditionally female jobs. This sexual division of labor was further maintained by the lack of resources that could free women from the burden of labor. The USSR did not have the funds to support public canteens, daycares, and other resources that might free women from their domestic obligations.¹⁴ According to Melanie Ilic, historian of women in the Soviet Union, “Rather than providing for

¹² Chatterjee, 31.

¹³ Chatterjee, 54; Alena Heitlinger, “Marxism, Feminism, and Sex Equality” in *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Tova Yedlin (New York: Praeger, 1980), 10.

¹⁴ Alex Holt, “Marxism and women's oppression: Bolshevik Theory and Practice” in *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Tova Yedlin (New York: Praeger, 1980), 87, 93-4, 97 100, 105, 101.

women's liberation, the Stalin era, it could be argued, simply expanded the spheres in which women could be exploited.”¹⁵

While industrialization did not free women from the burdens of domestic life, the government maintained that the USSR was a nation of equals. So, even though these women were not equal to their male counterparts, many women believed that they were. This was accomplished by the marketing of the New Soviet Woman, who was supposedly free from oppression and dedicated to the system that emancipated her. The socialism that Stalin was pitching made women's work in the factories and in their homes a duty to the state. The New Soviet Woman was emulated for being both feminine and hardworking, as well as self-sacrificial and dedicated to the Party.¹⁶ In media such as books, movies, and plays, and posters, the Model Soviet Woman was presented as an equal partner to men, both strong and soft, both a worker and a mother.¹⁷ This worker-mother concept encompassed both single women and those who were married and bearing children. The core of being a woman was rooted in her role as a producer of a future generation of socialists who could work for the good of the Motherland. Being a woman might be her identity, but being a mother was her duty. Motherhood was the one job a man could not perform, leading to its emphasis in the cultural images of femininity. Being a good mother and hard worker was patriotic, but its roots were deeper than that. It was not just a duty, but at the heart of how they framed everything they did. Even the term Motherland (*Rodina*) and its use in the language of the time calls out to this sacred duty of women to be nurturing. When the war began, it was a simple transition from a worker-mother to a soldier-mother: a woman who

¹⁵ Ilic, 6.

¹⁶ Carmen Scheide, “‘Born in October’: The Life and Thought of Aleksandra Vasil’evna Artyukhina, 1889-1969,” in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilic, and Karen Petrone, (New York: Palgrave 2001), 10; Griesse and Stites 63; Ilic 4.

¹⁷ Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945* (Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2011) 43; Cardona 8.

engaged in combat but was still feminine.¹⁸ Here is found the pseudo-equality that lay the groundwork for breeding a generation of women warriors.

The Society of Friends of Chemical Defense and the Chemical Industry

While the Soviet Union was focusing on industrialization and equality, it was also becoming more militaristic. First, the Communist Party pushed aviation as the future of the country. The USSR focused on creating a culture of air-minded individuals for two reasons: first, the airplane across the globe was becoming “an agent and symbol of modernization.”¹⁹ The flying of airplanes was supposed to transform the Soviet Union’s people and landscape. Because of Russia’s size, it seemed that an increased concentration on air power would allow for greater industrialization than roads and railroads would allow. Airplanes would also allow people to rise out of poverty and get jobs in aviation, becoming participants in the great national project of technological development. Along these lines, aviation also demonstrated the benefits of socialism to the Soviet People and to the world.²⁰ As Lee says in *The Soviet Air Force*, “Flying expeditions and airplane competitions made the Soviet Union seem like the most air-minded country in the world.”²¹ A number of air shows were held throughout the country, allowing for the Soviet Union’s peasants to gain exposure to aircraft while also showing to the world the Soviet Union was modernizing.

¹⁸ Chatterjee 60; Ellen Jones, *Red Army and Society: A Sociology of the Soviet Military* (United States of America: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 32; Cardona 11.

¹⁹ Scott W. Palmer, “Peasants into Pilots: Soviet Air-Mindedness as an Ideology of Dominance,” *Technology and Culture*, no. 1 (2000): 3.

²⁰ Palmer 3; Reina Pennington and John Erickson, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 8.

²¹ Asher Lee, *Soviet Air Force* (New York: Harper, 1950), 19.

The second reason for a focus on air power was drawn from the Soviet Union's increased emphasis on militarization. The USSR socialized its people to believe that another war was coming, and every man and woman needed to prepare for it. Where this war would come from was always vague, but citizens possessed "sense of a coming war, or a battle. It was an internal feeling...there was still this nagging feeling that there was danger looming ahead."²² This danger compelled them to join in civil defense, which included air clubs, but also encompassed shooting ranges, radio clubs, and parachuting clubs.

Organizations began to appear all over the country teaching these paramilitary skills. One of these was Society of Friends of Chemical Defense and the Chemical Industry, also known as *Osoaviakhim*.²³ Founded in January 1927, *Osoaviakhim* grew as a result of Stalin's Second Five Year Plan, which concentrated on expanding aviation routes. By 1935, there were 150 air clubs all across the country, with classes on weekends and holidays.²⁴ Nearly 100,000 pilots were trained by 1940.²⁵ Young Soviets were encouraged to spend their leisure time in associations like *Osoaviakhim*, preparing to defend the Motherland from those who opposed socialism. With pseudo-equality at the backdrop, women were encouraged to participate in these ventures as well. The identity of being an engaged citizen and defender of the Motherland was as much a part of the image of the New Soviet Woman as being a worker and mother.²⁶ Women, especially young, unmarried, and childless women, were encouraged as much as their male counterparts to

²² Irina Rakobolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, December 18, 2014, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/116083477/chief-of-staff-irina-vyacheslavovna-rakobolskaya.htm>

²³ *Osoaviakhim is an acronym for Obshchestvo Sodeistviia Oborone, Aviatsionnomu i Khimicheskomu Stroitel'stvu*

²⁴ Kazimiera Jean Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*, (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1983), 1; Kazimiera Jean Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II; The Ground/Air Defense Forces" in *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Tova Yedlin (New York: Praeger, 1980), 116.

²⁵ Lee, 57.

²⁶ Olga Nikonova, "Soviet Amazons: Women Patriots During Prewar Stalinism," *Minerva: Women & War* 2, no. 1 (January 2008): 13.

enroll in clubs and classes.²⁷ However, there were still some who opposed allowing women to join these male endeavors. Since legally women were equal to men, the government had to force some clubs to allow women to join, showing how the collective idea of equality did not always line up with individual views.²⁸ Marina Chechneva, a pilot before the war and member of the women's regiments, said this about the instructor's opinions on women flying:

Quite a few women were studying at the air club; however, the attitude of many of the instructors towards them was, to put it mildly, less than enthusiastic. The instructors took women into their groups and unwillingly. That was clear. Women were only beginning to enter aviation. Not everyone believed that we would be able to work in this 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 Club.²⁹

Even though there were those who did not agree with it, by 1935 up to 25 percent of the flying club graduates were female, totaling 10,000 women graduates in 1932-40.³⁰ Let it be acknowledged that the pressure placed on the flying clubs by the state was almost certainly because of the protests of the women, not due to the Party's own initiative. The Soviet Union was a country obsessed with its image, and it needed its people to believe they had achieved equality even if they had not. This meant that often the state had to take on initiatives to reinforce its pseudo-equality without actually eliminating issues of patriarchy. Equality, in the Party's mind, was measured by the fulfillment of quotas for women's representation in these organizations, and while women were trained to shoot, parachute, and fly planes, they were

²⁷Atwood 39.

²⁸ Pennington 8.

²⁹ Pennington 9.

³⁰ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat* 1; Pennington 9; Cardona 25.

expressly discouraged from trying to join the military.³¹ Training women in military skills was another tool of the state to make the Soviet Union seem progressive without actually establishing gender equality.

Nevertheless, there was plenty of propaganda supporting women's inclusion in paramilitary activities. To join in civil defense was patriotic. This patriotism was marketed as the responsibility of every citizen; they were expected to show loyalty to and protect the state.³² The New Soviet Woman was represented in magazines, movies, political posters, and on postage stamps shooting, flying and engaging in other physical activities that made her the equal partner of men in patriotic love of the Motherland. There were a number of articles in *Rabotnitsa* showing women shooting and flying planes.³³ In movies like *Little Red Devils*, *Pilots*, *I Want to be a Pilot*, *The Front Girl-friends*, and other notable Soviet films women were portrayed as just as tough and skilled as their male counterparts.³⁴ After seeing the film *Lenin in October*, future 46th navigator Zhenya Rudeneva wrote in her diary:

I know very well that, if the hour should come, I shall lay down my life in the cause of my people, as those unknown heroes did in this wonderful film! I want to dedicate my life to science, and I shall. Soviet power has provided all the conditions necessary to enable everyone to realize their dreams, no matter how ambitious, but I'm a member of the Komsomol³⁵ and the common cause is dearer to me than my own career. That is how I look on my profession, and if the Party and the working class require it, I shall set astronomy aside for as long as necessary and become a soldier, or an orderly, or nurse the casualties of gas warfare.³⁶

³¹ Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).57-8. Carmen Scheide, 9; Pennington 10.

³² Ilic, 12.

³³ Atwood, 39; Cardona 8.

³⁴ Kucherenko, 95.

³⁵ The Young Communist League

³⁶ Lyuba Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland: The Soviet Women Who Fought Hitler's Aces*, trans. Arch Tait (London: MacLehose Press, 2015), 39.

When the war broke out, it was hardly any surprise that many highly skilled young women, including those who later joined the 46th, felt they needed to enlist in the army.

Marina Raskova

One of the greatest symbols of aviation power and the New Soviet Woman was Marina Raskova. Raskova was the Amelia Earhart of Russia, beloved by the Soviet people for her exploits in the skies. When the Great Patriotic War began, Raskova was the one in charge of the three female aviation regiments. From a young age Raskova possessed a talent for singing, but when she realized she had to choose between music and chemistry, she chose chemistry, pursuing a career in industry that eventually led her to aviation. In 1933 she became the first woman in the Soviet Union to become a navigator.³⁷ At the age of 22, she began teaching navigation at the Zhukovsky Air Academy as the first female instructor while she was training to be a pilot at the Moscow Center Air Club. She set aviation world records, including first woman's cross-country flight in a sport plane, flying from Leningrad to Moscow. In 1938, she flew from Sevastopol in Crimea to Arkhangelsk in the Soviet Arctic with Polina Osipenko and Vera Lomako, two other famous Soviet female pilots.³⁸ After this flight came one that guaranteed her position in history.

³⁷ Pennington, 11; Vinogradova 26.

³⁸ Pennington, 11; Vinogradova 26-7.

The Flight of the *Rodina*

In September of 1938, Raskova navigated a flight with the pilots Polina Osipenko and Valentina Grizodubova in a Tupolev ANT-37.³⁹ The ANT-37, named *Rodina*, was designed with two cockpits: a pilot's cockpit built to be operated by two pilots, and a cockpit in the back for the navigator. Their goal was to set the women's long-distance record by flying 6,500 miles from Moscow to Komsomolsk-on-Amur in the Far East.⁴⁰ Sixty kilometers after takeoff, the aviatrixes lost all sight of the ground due to cloud cover, making navigation difficult. That first night, they experienced strong turbulence, forcing them to fly higher in the sky. Because of the high elevation, the transmitter froze; they had lost all contact with the outside world in the first ten hours of flight. To make matters worse, by dawn, the fuel light signaled that they would run out of gas within half an hour.⁴¹ Visibility had not improved, and they were unable to locate any airfields, so Osipenko ordered Raskova to bail out of the plane. It was fortunate that Osipenko had told her to bail then; when the *Rodina* made its crash landing in the Siberian taiga, the navigator's cockpit was crushed. Had Raskova decided not to jump, she could have been killed. However, Osipenko and Grizodubova now had a new problem: they had no idea where Raskova had landed. While Osipenko and Grizodubova were safe from the elements in the aircraft wreckage, Raskova was alone in the cold wilderness. Armed with only a pistol, a compass, a pocket knife, matches, and 1 ½ bars of chocolate, Raskova wandered the Siberian taiga for ten days until search and rescue crews finally found her. Osipenko and Grizodubova had been found three days earlier. Despite the difficulties, they had set the women's long-distance record, beating the previous record by more than 1,000 miles.

³⁹ Also known as the DB-2.

⁴⁰ Pennington 14; Vinogradova 27.

⁴¹ It is postulated that this is because in the final practice before the flight, the fuel had not been topped off.

For their bravery, these pilots became the first women to win the Hero of the Soviet Union award.⁴² A parade was given in their honor, and Raskova sat next to Stalin at a dinner. The three pilots became national heroines, and more importantly, close personal friends with Stalin; when Osipenko died in 1939, Stalin was a pall-bearer at her funeral. This was the beginning of Raskova's journey to become a household name. Though the other two pilots certainly became famous, it was Raskova's journey in the taiga that received the most press. Raskova made the front page of *Pravda* and published a memoir about her journey called *Notes of a Navigator*. She was also featured on a stamp in 1939. Cultural Historian of World War II Olga Kucherenko said this about Raskova and other Soviet heroes of the time:

Soviet educators endeavored to prevent youngsters from choosing some random celebrity as a life coach, and instead provided a set of 'correct' role models like Chkalov, Papanin, Schmidt, Raskova, Kirov, Bauman, and Stalin himself... Heroic biographies, in both literature and film, acquired immense popularity and became very powerful stimulants for young people's patriotic impulses. Like other outstanding figures around the world, Soviet heroes of the 1930s played a significant part in the formation of popular attitudes. They forged ideals, introduced new standards, fueled aspirations, and created stereotypes.⁴³

Raskova's fame served both her and the State. First, her flight setting a distance record had double propaganda value. In a speech about their flight, Stalin said, "Today these three women have avenged the heavy centuries of the oppression of women."⁴⁴ Both the aviation feat and the advertised gender equality served to show the Soviet Union as an enlightened, innovative nation full of capable pilots and capable women. Likewise, this flight further enforced the image

⁴² Vinogradova 26-9; Pennington 13-16.

⁴³ Kucherenko 42.

⁴⁴ Pennington 17.

of the New Soviet Woman.⁴⁵ Press coverage of the flight of the *Rodina* included biographical information about the lives of the three women. Articles on Raskova and Grizodubova mentioned their young children, underscoring how the New Soviet Woman was one who could care for her child but still be successful. She was both a worker and a mother.⁴⁶ Even the name of the plane, *Rodina* (motherland), harkened back to this mother in the Motherland idea. The propaganda was effective: Raskova's adventure served as the inspiration for many women in the USSR who decided to learn to fly. Second, Raskova's fame allowed for her to have access to important people such as Stalin, who were absolutely necessary in the formation of the female air regiments. Marina Raskova's fame had helped create the generation of women pilots who would one day fill her aviation regiments.⁴⁷

There is one more aspect of Raskova that requires attention, as it is a significant reason for her success. Contemporary and modern sources mention Raskova's beautiful face and calming voice, but very few talk about her secret career as an NKVD officer. According to Lyuba Vinogradova, Soviet research historian, Raskova started her career in Lubyanka as a staff consultant but was a full officer in the NKVD by 1939. At her job at the Air Force Academy, she made friends with many pilots and aircraft designers. Just as her career was beginning in navigation, many aircraft designers and factory managers were becoming victims of the purges. Grizodubova, the pilot of *Rodina*, said this many years after the end of the war:

I have no idea how Marina gained her Navigator's license. Neither do I know what other work she did in parallel, but I have no doubt that many people suffered because of her. You could say she and I worked in tandem: she put people in prison and I ran around all the offices and tried to get them back out. If Polina Osipenko was a top-rate pilot, Marina

⁴⁵ Vinogradova 31; Pennington 13; Nikonova 6.

⁴⁶ Krylova 80.

⁴⁷ Pennington 19.

Raskova had no specialist training as a navigator and had clocked up a total of only thirty or so flying hours. She knew absolutely nothing about flying in extreme weather conditions, let alone at night. She was a member of our crew only because she had been “recommended” to us.⁴⁸

The validity of Grizodubova’s testimony is questionable. As this was the secret police, there are not a lot of records supporting the claim Raskova was in the NKVD; in fact, Vinogradova is the only English source where it is even discussed. Secondly, Grizodubova is the only contemporary source that has said anything negative about Raskova. Most the women recruited for the regiments saw Raskova as their role model, and have always sung her praises.⁴⁹ Also, Raskova died in January 1943, shortly after her regiments were deployed, so she cannot substantiate any of the information.

There are however, a number of reasons why her statement should be considered. It is clear that Grizodubova did not have a liking for Raskova, but that would not explain why she would bother to fabricate a lie about her so many years after her death. As discussed in the beginning of this paper, time has allowed for many truths about the war to become known, and perhaps this is one of them. Also, as the propaganda implications of this flight were enormous, so many important Soviet leaders were included in the selection of the aircraft and the flight path.⁵⁰ According to Vinogradova, any flight of this magnitude had to have an NKVD officer join their crew, and if that is true, Raskova was the only female capable of filling this position.⁵¹ Raskova’s position in this secret branch of the Ministry of Internal Affairs certainly would have

⁴⁸ Vinogradova 31.

⁴⁹ If Raskova was in the NKVD, it would make sense that the members of her regiment would not talk about it. All of the women were very proud to be in “Raskova’s regiments,” and publishing this information would taint her image. The women took great pride in their service, and no amount of time would be enough for them to want to talk about this shame.

⁵⁰ Pennington 14

⁵¹ Vinogradova 26, 30-1.

earned her connections and praise by Party members, which could have played a significant role in the regimental formation.

Operation Barbarossa

The most important event that allowed for the inclusion of women in the military was, of course, the war. On June 22 1941, Hitler began an invasion of the Soviet Union entitled Operation Barbarossa. The invasion was a surprise because in 1939 the Soviet Union signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, or the Soviet-German Non-Aggression pact, in which the two countries agreed to not attack each other for ten years. Stalin had signed the pact instead of forming an alliance with Britain or France, because he believed an alliance with Germany would keep him out of war for a few more years. The Soviet Union needed more time because despite being prepared to go to war ideologically, they had made little progress in physically preparing for one. Their unpreparedness was made most apparent in the disaster of the Winter War with Finland, where 126,875 Soviets died in a few months, mostly of frostbite and hunger.⁵²

The USSR's unpreparedness was exacerbated by the loss of many of its commanders in the purges. At the time of the German invasion, more than 91% of the Aviation Formation Commanders had been in their position less than six months, and 65% of commanders at all levels had been in their positions for less than a year.⁵³ Out of the 85 senior officers of the Military Council, 71 were dead by 1941, and only 9 escaped the Purges entirely.⁵⁴ According to military sociologist Shelley Saywell, "The military cadres that survived the purges were ill

⁵² Richard J. Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 42, 54, 56.

⁵³ David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 190.

⁵⁴ Overy 29.

equipped to provide sound leadership on the battlefields of World War II. Many of the early losses sustained by the Soviets were due, in part, to ineffective command.”⁵⁵ Stalin believed he would have peace until 1942, allowing them time to finish reorganizing the Air Force and to train new commanders to replace ones lost in the purges.⁵⁶

Because Stalin was convinced the Soviet Union had more time to prepare, he refused to believe the numerous intelligence reports indicating a German attack. The fact that Barbarossa was delayed from May to mid-June supported his view.⁵⁷ So, Stalin dragged his feet in building fortifications and forming new air regiments, meaning that despite increased military-mindedness, the Soviets were not prepared to be attacked. The lack of readiness cost the Soviet Union dearly. In the first day of attacks, Germans struck 66 airfields several times, crippling the Air Force on the western border of the USSR’s territory. By noon of the first day, the Soviet Union lost nearly 1,200 aircraft, 800 sitting on the ground. By nightfall, the total had risen to 1,811 of which 1,489 had been destroyed on the ground. The Luftwaffe destroyed over 4,000 aircraft in those first few days, constituting nearly three-fourths of Soviet Aircraft. While most of these aircraft were obsolete models, the Germans made sure to destroy all the new Soviet fighter aircraft, like the Soviet MiG-3 and the Yak-1. In comparison, the Germans had only lost 35 planes during this same time.⁵⁸ Despite the Soviet Union having many experienced pilots, Soviet fighters were just no match for German bombers, and the country lost many of its best pilots in

⁵⁵ Shelley Saywell, *Women in War* (United States of America: Viking, 1985), 80.

⁵⁶ Overy, 59.

⁵⁷ Alexander Hill, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-45: A Documentary Reader*, Soviet (Russian) Study of War: 20 (London ; New York : Routledge, 2009), 35-6.

⁵⁸ The Ministry of Defense of the USSR, *The Soviet Air Force in World War II: The Official History*, trans. Leland Feltzer, ed. Ray Wagner, (New York: Doubleday, 1973). 35, 38; Alexander Boyd, *The Soviet Air Force since 1918*, (London: Macdonald and Jane's 1977),110-1; Von Hardesty and Ilya Grinberg, *Red Phoenix Rising: The Soviet Air Force in World War II*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).5, 9; Micheal Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500-2000* (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland, 2002), 449.

the first few months of the war.⁵⁹ When Soviet pilots ran out of ammunition, they rammed enemy planes; those who did were praised by the state and were often awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union award posthumously.⁶⁰ Combat losses overall were very high in 1941, with the highest estimate of Soviet dead totaling 4.3 million; nearly a million Soviet citizens died each month between June and December 1941.⁶¹

Hitler said in regard to invading the Soviet Union, “We only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down.”⁶² He certainly came very close during Barbarossa: from the German positions in Poland, it only took him four months to reach the gates of Moscow. The Soviet people however, were not as easily defeated as Hitler had hoped. Luckily for the USSR, the Germans had not destroyed the factories to build the aircraft, nor had they killed many of the pilots.⁶³ Despite demoralizing losses, supply shortages, outdated equipment, and lack of seasoned leadership, the Soviet Air Force (VVS) was still able to put up a fight.⁶⁴ That first day, the VVS flew more than 1,800 sorties, and in the first 18 days of the war, they had flown more than 47,000 sorties against the Luftwaffe. Altogether, the VVS flew 73,000 sorties in July 1941 alone, despite almost no tactical organization.

Outside of the Air Force, civilians were ready to join the battle as well— including women. This was what they had been told they were preparing for: a war that would require every man and woman to defend the Motherland against its enemies.⁶⁵ It is estimated that in

⁵⁹ Vinogradova 122.

⁶⁰ The Ministry of Defense of the USSR 38.

⁶¹ Coldfelter 450-1. This includes Soviets who died in German POW camps.

⁶² Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 21.

⁶³ Boyd 123.

⁶⁴ Robert A. Kilmarx, *A History of Soviet Air Power*, (New York: Praeger 1962), 187.

⁶⁵ Nikonova 3.

some enlistment locations, women constituted 50% of the applicants. Though men were enlisted, women were told they were needed on the home front, not in battle.⁶⁶ In particular, women pilots were told to stay in the rear to serve as instructors at the air clubs and train inexperienced males for the front. Nevertheless, many of these women were determined to enlist. In the first week of the war, Komsomol members received 20,000 petitions from women who had tried to enlist and were turned down. Thousands of Soviet women flyers also sent letters to Marina Raskova begging her to help them get to the front.⁶⁷ In their minds, the identity of womanhood had already been stretched to encompass physical labor, and now it was time for them to stop being worker-mothers and to start being soldier-mothers.⁶⁸

The desire to join the fight was intensified by the brutality of the Germans. On the Eastern front, the Soviets lost so many men in a short amount of time. Within a matter of days, the country had been forced into horrible circumstances. The Germans cut a swathe through the countryside, killing men but also women and children, all of whom they considered to be less than humans. The Germans did not want to invade the USSR, they wanted to annihilate it. As Russian historians Griesse and Stites say in *Russia: Revolution and War*, “Rarely in modern times have enemy forces visit such wholesale destruction on a civilian population as did the Germans in Russia.”⁶⁹ The Soviet newspapers placed a great deal of emphasis on the atrocities committed by the Germans—the burning of people and their villages, the rape and mutilation of peasant women—but many Soviets were able to witness the savagery for themselves.⁷⁰ One of

⁶⁶ Cardona 36; Vinogradova 115.

⁶⁷ Krylova 89-90, 115; Kazimiera Janina Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers* (Nepean, Canada: New Military Pub., 1998), XVIII-XIX; Vinogradova 31; Pennington 21-2.

⁶⁸ Krylova 15.

⁶⁹ Griesse and Stites, 76-7.

⁷⁰ Nathalie Moine and John Angell, “Defining ‘War Crimes against Humanity’ in the Soviet Union. Nazi Arson of Soviet Villages and the Soviet Narrative on Jewish and Non-Jewish Soviet War Victims, 1941-1947,” in *Cahiers Du*

the pilots, Dusya Nosal, lost her newborn baby after the hospital they were in was bombed by the Germans.⁷¹ In light of the ruthlessness of the Germans, it is no wonder that both men and women were spurred by anger to want to fight. Those with special skills however, must have felt this calling even more, as they knew they could do more for the war effort. It seems reasonable that “thousands of Soviet girls [were] bursting to go to the front, arms in hand, to defend the Motherland,” but how they got to those frontlines requires further examination.⁷²

Why allow women to serve?

Russia’s history is checkered with examples of women combatants. According to ancient sources, the historic home of the Amazons is the harsh Russian terrain. During the Napoleonic Wars, Nadezhda Durova pretended to be a man and became a decorated soldier. When she was discovered as a woman, she was allowed to continue to fight and became the first woman to win St. George’s Cross.⁷³ During the First World War, around 5,000 women fought alongside their peasant comrades, and between 66,000 and 80,000 women fought in the Russian Civil War; sixty percent were in a non-medical capacity.⁷⁴ In 1917 the Women's Shock Battalion or ‘Battalion of Death’ was formed by Maria Bochkareva. Allowing women to fight was seen as an affront to their masculinity, so the Battalion of Death was formed to shame men who deserted the army. This is the first instance of women being used in all-female fighting units, and nearly 2,000

Monde Russe. Russie - Empire Russe - Union Soviétique et États Indépendants 52, no. 52/2-3 (November 15, 2011): 441–73.

⁷¹ Irina Rakobolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2014.

⁷² Raskova in Cardona 87.

⁷³ Pennington, *Wings Women and War*, 4-5.

⁷⁴ Griesse and Stites 65, 67; Sawyell 99.

women volunteers joined. Many women were killed in action, and a number of them were killed by the Russian deserters.⁷⁵

During World War II, the Soviet Union continued its legacy of combatant women. According to Soviet women military historian Kazimiera Cottam, more than 800,000 women served in the Soviet Armed Forces during World War II, making them about eight percent of the Soviet military personnel by 1943.⁷⁶ This work will focus on women in the 46th, but the importance of women in other theatres of the war should not be ignored. Women served in every part of the military that men did; this included the interesting positions of pilots and snipers, but also positions as medics and signalers where they were absolutely indispensable.⁷⁷ Approximately 120,000 women were in combat as snipers, junior commanders of the armed forces, machine gunners, motor operators, frontline combat engineers, anti-aircraft field fighters, artillery women, pilots, tankers, and junior combat officers.⁷⁸ The Komsomol trained around 222,000 women to be mortar operators, snipers, signalers, and heavy, light, and submachine gun operators.⁷⁹ The highest concentration of women was in the Soviet Air Defense Forces,⁸⁰ where they made up about thirty percent by 1943. In the spring of 1942, women fully replaced men in the handling of barrage balloons, a job that requires lots of physical strength, skill, and endurance. Until the summer of 1944, German aviation considered Moscow the number one target in the east, but because of the tireless work of these balloon operators, Moscow was probably the only European capital city that could not be properly penetrated by aerial

⁷⁵ Griesse and Stites 64; Saywell 98.

⁷⁶ Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, XX.

⁷⁷ Erickson, 68.

⁷⁸ Krylova 168-9; Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, XX.

⁷⁹ Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, XII.

⁸⁰ This is the PVO, not the Soviet Air Force, the VVS. This encompasses women in anti-aircraft units and those who operated barrage balloons.

bombing.⁸¹ Women gained awards and promotions for their skill and valor, and, in spite of military policies, often were decorated and promoted more than the men in their regiments. More than 100,000 women were to receive one or more military decorations, with 650 of them being decorated by foreign governments. Eighty-six women became Gold Star Heroes of the Soviet Union, and four gained the Order of Glory First Class; these are the two highest Soviet military honors, given for acts of heroism in extremely dangerous circumstances.⁸² Nearly every woman who served was a volunteer for service.⁸³

The Soviet Union's reasons for the inclusion of women into their military varied by specialty and happened at different times during the war. Understanding *when* the women's regiments were recruited is key in understanding *why* they were recruited. In 1941, any woman who had medical skills was immediately drafted to join medical units to care for the mass casualties. In 1942, the Komsomol began the mass recruitment of women into the Red Army or the Soviet Air Defense Forces. According to historian of the women's regiments Reina Pennington, when women were recruited for these branches, this was to serve three purposes. First, this was to allow women who wanted to fight the chance to do so. Second, women recruited for non-combat positions could free up men to fight. Third, women recruited for combat positions allowed men to come off the front lines for a time and rest. The recruitment for the women's regiment seems to fit in this third category, but it does not fit this pattern for two reasons. First, the women's regiments were not freeing men from combat, but rather were allowing the women to join them on the frontlines.⁸⁴ Second, the mass recruitment of women

⁸¹ Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, XX-XXI

⁸² Cottam, *Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground/Air Defense Forces*, XXI, 117-119.

⁸³ I say nearly because any women who had prior medical training before the war would most likely be forced to serve. Also, this includes any women who felt they had to go to the Front due to pressure from the Komsomol.

⁸⁴ Pennington 56-8.

into combat by the Komsomol did not begin until after the female aviation regiments were already on the frontlines. Therefore, the recruitment of the women in the air regiments must be understood separately from the recruitment in other specialties of the war.

To understand why women were included in the VVS, one has to look closer at the time in the war in which the order was issued. On October 8th 1941, The Soviet High Command issued GKO 0099, authorizing the formation of the 122nd Composite Air Group, consisting of the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Day Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment. They would be formed by December 1st 1941, would perform combat work, and would be staffed by female personnel. While both the Komsomol and Marina Raskova received a number of letters from women wishing to go to the front, sources differ on how the information was taken to Stalin. Stalin must have played some role in the process, though it is unclear why he did not take credit for their formation, especially after the regiments performed so successfully. It is possible that high officials in the Komsomol approached Stalin for permission, and then Stalin asked Raskova to lead these regiments. It is also possible that Raskova used her relationship with the Leader of the Soviet People to gain permission to form the regiments, and then the Komsomol was used to recruit them. What role the VVS or Defense Ministry played in their formation is also unresolved, and perhaps may never become known. Nevertheless, it is clear the Komsomol, Raskova, and Stalin collaborated in some way to form these regiments.⁸⁵

One of the most common justifications for the inclusion of women is that they had value as propaganda. As stated above, the Women's Battalion of Death was created to inspire or shame

⁸⁵ Pennington, 22-3, 31.

men to fight harder. During the Second World War, images of women were used more than ever to symbolize patriotism and the Motherland. Scores of women were praised in newspapers and war propaganda posters for driving tractors, participating in civil defense and partisan units, and caring for injured soldiers. In a country where everything seemed to serve a propagandistic purpose, it is easy to write off the inclusion of women in the Air Force as simply that. However, a close analysis of these regiments does not suggest that they were formed for propaganda purposes. As will be further supported in later chapters, the women's commendations and awards were not given to sensationalize their work but were in fact earned for exceptional combat service in difficult circumstances. Even in light of their success, if it was not for the dedicated work of the veterans, very little would be known about these women. They are never mentioned in Stalin's speeches, the most important source of propaganda in the Soviet State.⁸⁶ Though there are a few articles praising the work of one or two women pilots, there are very few news articles that talk about the regiments as a whole. In fact, some Soviet sources internationally went to so far as to deny the participation of women in combat. When Raskova died in January 1943, her obituary published in *Rabotnitsa* did not mention her forming three aviation regiments. Even its publication in the United States, which mentions that she was the commander of an air regiment, does not mention that this regiment was female.⁸⁷

The lack of data to support the claim that these regiments were for propaganda is equally supported by the lack of reasons the state had to create one. There is no evidence that these regiments were planned, made clear by the fact that the Soviet military was not able to provide

⁸⁶ Pennington 60.

⁸⁷ Ilic 5; Susanne Conze and Beate Fieseler, "Soviet Women as Comrades-in-Arms: A Blind Spot in the History of the War," *The People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*, ed. Robert Thurston, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 211–34; Wireless to The New York Times, State Funeral Held for Major Raskova: Russian Woman Flier's Ashes Put in Wall of Kremlin, *New York Times*, Jan 13, 1943.

women's uniforms until 1942.⁸⁸ If this was about showing the emancipation of women, there was plenty of pre-war propaganda to support that. Creating a propaganda regiment would not persuade men to believe that women were their equals; in the highly masculine culture of the military, men still resented women who participated in combat. This also refutes the claim that these women were sent to the front to boost the morale of men. Morale in the Soviet military was at an all-time low at the time of the formation of the regiments; it would make very little sense for the government to solve this problem by attacking the men's pride. To suggest that the women in the air force were supposed to shame men into fighting harder, is equally improbable. At a time when the government was severely lacking supplies and money, it would be completely impractical for Stalin to put his scant resources towards a propaganda regiment, especially because that might have no military advantage.⁸⁹ Also, veterans throughout the war attest to the fact that a good majority of the men they fought alongside did not even know that there were female pilots. Serafima Amosova-Taranenko, Deputy Commanding Officer of the Regiment, said "After we returned to home base [following an operational sortie], we received a radiogram from a unit of Marines in the battle zone. It read: 'Thank you, Brothers, for your air support.' They were unaware that 'sisters' flew alongside the 'brothers.'"⁹⁰ The fact that the 46th was stationed on the frontlines and not in the rear also points to the idea that they were not for show; it made no sense to put them in real danger. When asked about this, Polina Gelman, Navigator of the 46th, said "After all, girls were killed—how could this have been for propaganda?"⁹¹

⁸⁸ Pennington 56; Cardona 101.

⁸⁹ Pennington 65; Cardona 85; Susanne Conze and Beate Fieseler 221-2.

⁹⁰ Kazimiera Janina Cottam et al., *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*, (New Military Publishing, 1997), 143.

⁹¹ Pennington 69.

Another possible reason for the inclusion of women in the VVS is the high casualties of the first months of the war, but even this is hard to support. The Soviet Union had been attacked on a greater scale than Great Britain and the US, and the hardships suffered on the Eastern front could have rationalized the inclusion of women in combat. As indicated above, when the regiments were formed, the Soviets were facing enormous casualties—four million had died in four months. In the early part of October of 1941, as the women were being recruited, the Germans had breached the defense line and were at the gates of Moscow. On October 17, the women recruits boarded the train to go to Engels Air Force Base to train; two days later, the State Defense Committee declared a siege of the state capital.⁹² It would make sense if Stalin was beginning to feel distressed, but it does not seem that this order was signed out of desperation. Though four million is a huge casualty rate, the Soviet Union was one of the largest nations in the world by 1941; it is impossible to say if the Soviet government really ‘felt’ their loss. Also, despite these catastrophic losses, the Soviets were able to recruit another four million soldiers by December 1941 without targeting women.⁹³ Pennington believes that even if there was a perceived shortage of men, there should have been a larger scale of recruitment on a long-term basis, as male casualties would only increase during the war.⁹⁴ However, it could be argued, that the Soviets would not have engaged in long term recruitment of women because they believed the war would soon be over. Regardless, it is impossible to just write off high casualty rates as the reason for the inclusion of women.

⁹² Krylova 124, 133. Kazarinova, Chief of Staff of Dive Bomber Regiment, in K. Jean Cottam, *Sky above the Front: A Collection of Memoirs of Soviet Air Women Participants in the Great Patriotic War*, (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1984), 2.

⁹³ Krylova 115.

⁹⁴ Pennington 58.

Another reason to be skeptical about sources who use casualty data to justify the inclusion of women in the Air Force is that their casualty data does not distinguish between Red Army casualties and Red Air Force casualties. Furthermore, historians of these regiments have argued that there was an abundance of Soviet pilots, and a shortage of aircraft.⁹⁵ Before the invasion, the Soviet Air Force was the largest in the world, with 19,533 combat aircraft. By 1940, 40% of the Soviet military budget was dedicated to the Air Force, and 75% of the aircraft factories were new facilities.⁹⁶ Following Barbarossa, three-fourths of Soviet aircraft were destroyed, and most of the aircraft production plants had to be evacuated to the interior of the USSR. By mid 1942, they had produced 10,000 aircraft, putting them at only half of their initial strength. If the majority of Soviet casualties in 1941 were in the Red Army, this would mean that there were too many pilots and not enough aircraft. It would not make sense for the government to give aircraft to the women, when so many men were without planes.⁹⁷ Furthermore, when the women's regiments were formed, only the 46th was given outdated aircraft, the Po-2. The other two regiments were given two of the best aircraft the Soviet Union had to offer, the Pe-2 and the Yak-1.⁹⁸ Therefore, it seems that the necessity for trained militants did not apply to the Red Air Force.

There are a number of explanations for why these regiments were formed that do seem reasonable, most of which have been talked about above. The convincing nature of Marina Raskova, with her fame and connections to Stalin and other influential leaders, together with the Komsomol and its patriotic enthusiasm, are probably the most influential reasons for their

⁹⁵ Krylova 123.

⁹⁶ Glantz 184.

⁹⁷ Krylova 126.

⁹⁸ Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, XIX.

formation. While there may have been plenty of pilots in 1941, it seems that perhaps there were not many *skilled* pilots on the frontlines. Some male pilots entered frontline combat with less than 100 hours of flying time.⁹⁹ In contrast, the women recruited to fly in the VVS were instructors at air clubs, indicating that they had plenty of training and could fly planes with great efficiency. These women had a skill and they were willing to use it, so perhaps the state saw the merit in their inclusion. None of this would have been possible if the Soviet people and its government did not find it feasible that a woman could equal men in this field. Other countries, despite desperate circumstances, did not mobilize women, so it cannot just be the circumstances of the war or the charm of Raskova that motivated the Party. Desperation, skill, and necessity would mean nothing without an ideology that would support the inclusion of women.¹⁰⁰

There are some other explanations worthy of some merit. First, it could be the sheer amount of pressure placed on the government by the women that spurred to them to form the regiments. Polina Gelman said, “They didn't recruit us. We besiege them with requests, demanded. It was only because of the great pressure from us that we were taken.”¹⁰¹ The women recruited for the air regiments were young women from Moscow, working in factories, going to universities, and flying in the air clubs. They were at the very heart of Soviet propaganda surrounding the duty of the New Soviet Woman. When war broke out, it is no surprise they felt they needed to leave their work and join the army—this was just another job for the state. There are reports of women trying to steal planes, so they could join the front, so clearly, they had a deep desire to defend their homeland. As stated before, the mass casualties and destruction at the beginning of the war contribute to an all-time low in morale for the Red Army. While these

⁹⁹ Lee 59.

¹⁰⁰ Krylova 123.

¹⁰¹ Pennington 25.

women would not inspire the men, perhaps Stalin was encouraged by their true patriotic drive and love for the homeland and agreed to let them fight. If it was not their patriotism and skill that inspired him, then maybe Stalin just saw them as another means by which he could win the war. The USSR was a collectivist state; the individual did not matter as much as the society it fought for, so both men and women in some instances were “just ‘cannon fodder’ in a war of attrition and starvation.”¹⁰² Also, sending women to the frontlines did not always mean they had to travel far. In fact, in many cases, the frontlines were one street removed. In truth, their options were working in factories, starving in the cities, or being slaves to the German invaders.¹⁰³ These women were certainly more useful to the state when they were using the skills they learned in air clubs and factories on the frontlines.

Whether they liked it or not, the Soviet Union had created a generation of warrior women with the skills to fight, and the Germans had given them a reason to use those skills. With the connections, charisma, and notoriety of Marina Raskova, three air regiments were formed by women, “born After the Revolution, who reached adolescence in the 1930s, who benefited from the crash industrialization and urbanization brought by the Draconian Stalinist state, whose world was gripped by Soviet ideals—patriotism, socialism, equality of the sexes—and would kill to defend them.”¹⁰⁴ A generation of warrior women was created in the Stalinist State, who were focused on patriotism and hard work, which they would take with them to the frontlines.

¹⁰² Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22; Glantz, 56.

¹⁰³ John Erickson, “Soviet Women at War” in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, ed. By John Gordon Garrad and Carol Garrard, (New York: St. Martin’s Press in association with the International Council for Soviet and East European Studies, 1992), 51-2, 59.

¹⁰⁴ Cardona 116.

Chapter 2: The 46th Taman Guards and their Service on the Eastern Front

Understanding the women of the 46th's journey through war—the missions they flew, the battles they fought in, and the hardships they endured—shows the strength of the women in this regiment. Through their recruitment and training, they had a very short amount of time to adjust to life in the military. The women of 46th were stationed at the center of a lot of the action on the Eastern Front. They survived unimaginable conditions, terrifying and dangerous flights, and, unlike other women, they had no men to help them through the difficulties. They faced some struggles because they were soldiers, and some because they were women. This chapter will focus on the military service of this regiment, conveying what these women had to overcome on their path to victory.

What makes the 46th So Special?

The remainder of this work will be about the women of the air regiments; in particular, most of the analysis will focus on the women of the 46th Taman Guards Aviation Regiment. The women of the air regiments' experiences in the military was distinctive for many reasons. Compared to women in Great Britain and the United States, these women were in a combat regiment, sometimes less than 30 km from the frontlines. The United States and Britain had been attacked, but the Soviet Union had been invaded; the Soviet women must have felt more urgency to join the action than the British and American women. The women's regiments did work alongside the men's regiments, while the women in Great Britain and the US were segregated. Like the Women Air Force Service Pilots and the Air Transport Auxiliary, these women often had to prove themselves to their male counterparts, who felt they were not up to the task. The

women's regiments, on the other hand, often gained the consideration and respect of their male commanders and comrades after the men witnessed their skill in combat. While the US and Great Britain had all female groups of pilots, they were quite different from their Soviet counterparts.

Even women who served in the Soviet military did not see frontline action as closely as the women of the air regiments. The majority of Soviet women served in auxiliary or defensive posts in the rear, and only those women who actually fought or served in medical units saw the frontlines. Because of the differences in warfare though, the air regiments had a different experience of combat. Being in the air creates a different relationship to carnage and death than what is experienced on the ground. Also, compared to women who served in other aspects of the war, the pilots had more sophisticated and expensive equipment given to them; it costs a lot more to make a plane than it does to build a rifle. Also, all of the pilots had flight training before the war, and the female mechanics and armorers came from backgrounds that helped in their jobs. Their recruitment was different because not only were these women skilled in a very particular job, but unlike partisans, snipers, and anti-aircraft gunners, theirs was not a skill that can be taught in a few months. Furthermore, while most women who served in the military were in integrated regiments, the air regiments were all-female when they were formed.

Even when compared to the other two regiments, the 46th Taman Guards Aviation Regiment stands alone as unique. It is impossible to truly compare the three female regiments, as they flew different planes, served on different parts of the front, flew different missions, and, in the case of the 586th, which was transferred from the VVS to the PVO, served in different branches of the military. For these reasons this analysis will focus solely on the 46th, the night bomber regiment, drawing comparisons between the other female regiments only when

necessary. Just about every history compiled about aviation on the Eastern front mentions the 46th Regiment and its success.

Unlike the 586th and the 125th¹⁰⁵, which took on male personnel during the war, the 46th remained all female throughout the conflict. Their unique situation allowed them to be isolated from the issues faced by mixed-gender regiments. The commanders of the three regiments also had some influence on the differences between the regiments. The 46th had one commander for the whole war, Yevdokiya Davydovna Bershanskaya, while the other two regiments changed commanders. When Marina Raskova died in January 1943, Major Valentin Markov replaced her as the Commander of the Dive Bomber Regiment. Major Tamara Aleksandrovna Kazarinova was the commander of the 586th, until scandal resulted in her replacement with Major Alexandr Gridnev, a man with a disreputable past.¹⁰⁶ How these differences played into their success will be further explored later.

Recruitment and Training

To understand this success, one has to look at the kind of woman who was recruited for these regiments. In early October 1941, the Komsomol sent out messages to its district committees, and the district committees carried out recruitment by word of mouth.¹⁰⁷ Their recruitment, like most of the mobilizations in the early part of the war, was carried out in secret,¹⁰⁸ so the majority of women were from in and around Moscow. As a minimum of 500

¹⁰⁵ The 587th gained the Guards distinction in September 1943, becoming the 125th.

¹⁰⁶ For more information on Gridnev and Kazarinova, consult chapter 5 of *Wings, Women, and War*.

¹⁰⁷ Tait 37, 45; Pennington 31.

¹⁰⁸ The regiment was so secret that in the official documents the names of the women are in the masculine forms.

flying hours was required, the pilots enlisted were air club instructors, women working in civilian aviation, or women already serving in the military.¹⁰⁹ For those who were to fly fighter aircraft, experience in large civilian planes was indispensable. The women recruited to be navigators were either pilots with too few flying hours or those from universities with a background in mathematics.¹¹⁰ The ranks included women physics, chemistry, geography, and even history undergraduate and postgraduate students from Moscow University and teacher training colleges. Though few had any practical experience in working with aircraft, women with education backgrounds in technical skills could be trained as mechanics. Women from factories made up the class of armorers, as a good amount of physical stamina was necessary to load bombs. With the exception of the women who were at universities, most of the female recruits were working class women who were already accustomed to hardships.¹¹¹

The first stage of recruitment was carried out by the Komsomol, whose members interviewed the women at Zhukovsky Air Force Academy.¹¹² As described by Antonina Milkhaïlovna Berezniskaya, Head of the Administration and Personnel Branch of the Dive Bomber Regiment, the Komsomol committee tried to dissuade the women from enlisting: “I was warned that the conditions at the front would be very difficult. Possibly one would have to live in dugouts and some of us might not come back...It was suggested to me that I think the matter over carefully, and should withdraw if I had any doubts as to my ability to withstand the hardships.”¹¹³ The Komsomol scrutinized the women, looking for any hesitation, such as fear of

¹⁰⁹ Some women who were already serving in the military were against the idea of being transferred into female regiments, possibly because they were already happy in their current unit, they did not wish to be retrained, or because they did not wish to serve with women.

¹¹⁰ Knowledge of mathematics was indispensable for navigators, as the navigator had to be able to do calculations with wind speed indicators and plot flight direction.

¹¹¹ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 3, Tait 48.

¹¹² Krylova 131; Pennington 31.

¹¹³ Cottam, *Sky Above the Front* 15.

death or fear of leaving one's family and home. The majority of those selected were unmarried women, but those who had children were expected to pass on parental responsibilities to their parents or other family members.¹¹⁴ The second stage of recruitment was an interview with Raskova, who also meticulously screened the applicants while also noting what personalities would be best in each regiment.¹¹⁵

Once selected, the women began some training in Moscow. It consisted of teaching them military drills and protocols, such as saluting and performing guard duty. Then, they began their journey to Engels Airforce Base, where they received three years of military flight training condensed into a few months. On October 17 1941, the more than four hundred personnel began their journey to the frontlines on board a train. They were separated by occupation, either *de facto* or *de jure*: pilots were in the front of the train, then students, then factory workers and technicians.¹¹⁶ On the train to Engels, the women faced the hardships that the rest of the military had been facing since June, namely supply shortages and transportation issues. On the journey they ate gray bread, herring, and millet porridge, their rations until the Soviet Union's Western allies could fully engage the Germans on the Western front.¹¹⁷ It was -4° Fahrenheit when they got on the train, and because it was a freight train and not a passenger one, the women must have spent most of the journey freezing.¹¹⁸ The train stopped often to let other more important trains pass on the tracks, and on more than one occasion they had to "wander beneath the trains" to keep moving.¹¹⁹ They had received men's uniforms at this time, consisting of giant overcoats and "an empty pistol holder, a flask, and various useless items that the bureaucracy evidently

¹¹⁴ Krylova 132; Pennington 35. Raskova herself put her daughter Tanya in the care of her Mother.

¹¹⁵ Tait 38; Krylova 133; Pennington 38.

¹¹⁶ Tait 39, 48; Pennington 39-40.

¹¹⁷ Tait 48; Pennington 41.

¹¹⁸ Pennington 40-1.

¹¹⁹ Pennington 40-41; Kazarinova in Cottam *Sky Above the Front*, 8.

considered essential equipment.” Their boots in particular, were way too large, and many women reported getting blisters from trying to walk in them. Their army soldier escorts made fun of them on the train, saying no man would want to date a girl who’s “in a greatcoat and boots.”¹²⁰ So, on the journey, they tailored their clothes, sang songs, and slept when they could.

Perhaps, according to Kazarinova, they should have spent more time learning the rules of military discipline:

Soon I learned how well-trained our recruits really were. An order was given to us to get ready for boarding a train. Our things had already been sent to the station... I went to inspect the sentries. I found the NCO [Katya Budanova] in charge of reliefs with difficulty, for she was peacefully asleep with the next relief. It was she who accompanied me on inspection. It was dark all around...we made the rounds of every post and haven’t found a single guard....Our voices began to be heard. And suddenly, somewhere in the vicinity, a whistle blew. Heads begin to emerge from the pile of mattresses. So we found our sentries. It turned out that they took shelter from the cold and relieved each other in not only guarding our property but also... looking out for the “inspectors. ‘And these girls were are supposed to be soldiers,’ I thought sighing. I reported to Raskova about the missing sentries. She laughed, ‘Do you, Captain, expect them to become soldiers overnight? It’s not that easy.’ And then she became serious, ‘We must ensure that they know the regulations. We shall teach them immediately.’¹²¹

These women, having no experience in the military prior to this, had a hard time adjusting to its rules.

Finally, after eight days of traveling in the cold, they arrived at Engels to begin their training. At Engels, Raskova was joined by other women who helped her train the recruits. Vera Lomako was an unflinching and unquestionably professional aviatrix. She had been one of the

¹²⁰ Tait 38-9.

¹²¹ Kazarinova in Cottam *Sky Above the Front* 4.

pilots on the first nonstop flight from the Black Sea to the White Sea on which Raskova had been a navigator.¹²² She and Raskova would ultimately make all the decisions on assignments.

Yedokia Rachevich was the Senior Commissar of the units, and first woman to graduate from the Military Political Academy in Moscow. She was very motherly and loving, but was concerned with the purity of the women in the regiment, making her disliked by the girls for her sometimes strict and eccentric attitude. She would not allow the girls to join the men's activities, and she enforced a strict curfew.¹²³ Major Yevdokia Davydovna Bershanskaya was a military commander before the war, and Raskova appointed her to be the commander of the Night Bomber Regiment. Major Tamara Aleksandrovna Kazarniova, a member of the Order of Lenin, also joined them, and she was appointed to be the commander of the fighter regiment.

Engels was an ideal location for training. Located near Saratov about 1.5km from the city of Engels, it was full of flat land, had more flying days than most of Russia, and at the time was far from the frontlines. The recruits were billeted in the gym of the Red Army House and each was given a grey flannel blanket and a straw mattress. They were not housed in the barracks because male soldiers were being trained at Engels as well, and they wanted to keep the women separate. Their conditions in the makeshift dorm were not much different than what the women were used to in their homes or factory quarters. Raskova had been given her own room with a nice bed and a carpet, but she demanded it be removed because the girls did not have those things. She also insisted that she and Kazarinova share a room. When it got very cold, though, they had to sleep in the girl's dormitory anyways.¹²⁴

¹²² Tait 67.

¹²³ Tait 78. After the war, Rachevich would travel to all the territories they served in to find the crash sites of every mission airwoman from her regiment.

¹²⁴ Tait 63-4; Pennington 42.

After seeing a little bit of their ability in the field, Raskova doled out the regimental assignments. It was no surprise that most of the women wanted to be in the fighter regiment, as fighter pilots controlled the skies and had the most notoriety. Raskova believed “A real fighter pilot could be recognized immediately from the boldness of her signature in the air, the skill with which to maneuver the aircraft and control the speed.”¹²⁵ Good fighter pilots had to have good reflexes, improvisation skills, and no fear; a fighter pilot was alone in the cockpit, and the only person she could rely on was herself. Therefore, only the very best and most experienced pilots were drafted into the fighter regiment. After choosing those for the fighter regiment, the second-best flyers, consisting of mostly flying club instructors and women from civilian aviation, were drafted to fly the heavy bombers. Those that remained were sent to the fly in the night bomber regiment, making this regiment full of the least qualified flyers of the three regiments.¹²⁶ Women who did not get the positions they hoped for were devastated, especially those who were assigned to non-combat duties. Commander Bershanskaya herself was disappointed that she was assigned to command the night bombers and not the fighters.¹²⁷

After their assignment, they received their aircraft. During this time, Raskova had not only supervised all training activities, but had used her various connections to obtain some of the best equipment for her regiments. Raskova was apparently close friends with I. S. Levin, the director of the Saratov Aviation Factory. She used this connection to get brand new Yak-1 Fighters for the 586th. While male regiments had 5 pilots to one old plane, each of the 24 women each got her own brand-new plane from the best engineer in Russia. The Yak-1 was the pride of

¹²⁵ Tait 67.

¹²⁶ Tait 66. It should be noted that though the women of the night bomber regiment were the least experienced of the three regiments, they were still among the best female pilots in the Soviet Union because they had been recruited.

¹²⁷ Pennington 47.

the Air Force, and a worthy opponent to the German Messerschmitt. Every Yak-1 had a radio in it, which was also remarkable because radios were not found in the majority of aircraft until after Stalingrad.¹²⁸

The Dive Bomber Regiment was supposed to fly the Su-2, but Raskova did not find the aircraft suitable. The Su-2 smoked and leaked, giving the smell of the castor oil it ran on. It was slow, burned like a match, and could tip over during landings. Also, the Su-2 was supposed to be taken out of production, making part replacement nearly impossible later in the war. So, Raskova managed to procure 20 Pe-2s, the newest and most complicated bomber the Air Force had.¹²⁹ The dive bomber pilots had many obstacles in using this aircraft, but were proud to have been trusted with such a difficult machine.¹³⁰ The Pe-2 had speed almost as great as that of a fighter jet and had the latest equipment and weapons systems. It however, required more personnel than an Su-2. Each plane needed one more person in the cockpit to be a radio gunner, and four more people in the ground crew. This meant that if Raskova was going to go to the frontlines by the end of 1942, she had to recruit male personnel. So, the 125th integrated with male personnel before leaving for the frontlines.

The night bomber regiment was assigned to fly the Po-2. The Po-2 was a plane that most of the pilots were familiar with as it was used as a training aircraft in air clubs. Called the U-2 until 1944 when the designer Nikolai Polikarpov died, the Po-2 was the oldest plane used in

¹²⁸ Pennington 44, 49-51.

¹²⁹ Tait 81; Pennington 51-3.

¹³⁰ Pennington, 52-3. This plane was difficult to adjust to for many reasons. First, the cockpit was designed for pilots who are taller than most of the women, so the pilots struggled to reach the rudders and other instruments. Pilots had a hard time taking off with a full bomb load, and it was nearly impossible to fly on one engine. The control stick was very heavy and hard to manipulate during takeoff when the aircraft was heavily loaded. Pilots had to operate the throttles with their left hand, leaving only their right hand to pull the stick back and get the nose up. Navigators would sometimes assist the pilot in pulling the stick or would brace the pilot's back during takeoff. The Pe-2 also required high speeds during landing, which was a problem on rough wartime airfields.

World War II, known for its slow speed (max 85mph) its wooden body, and its percale-covered wings. It was so fragile, “if you jab your finger at the wing, you'd make a hole in it.”¹³¹ It had two cockpits, one for the pilot and one for the navigator, and was known by the Russians as “Coffee grinder” “Corncrake” “Kitchen-gardener” “flying bookcase,” or “Swallow” for its noisy engine and swooping flight patterns. During the war, it was modified to be used as reconnaissance, ambulance and liaison aircraft, but the 46th used the Po-2 as a short range light night bomber.¹³² Flying at a height of only 4,000 meters, the Po-2 was a “wood and canvas open-cockpit relic from the 1930s,” and was not equipped with radios, armor, navigation equipment, or machine guns. It had no official bomb racks until 1943, and no parachutes until August 1944.¹³³ In nearly every history, the women express their amazement that they had to fly such a primitive aircraft in the rough conditions at the front.

Despite their complaints over assignments, the women carried out their learning in their intensive courses. The women were initially trained by the male personnel at Engels, but when the women needed to learn diving and bombing techniques, veteran combat pilots and instructors from the Lipetsk School were sent to teach them.¹³⁴ All the female personnel had ten hours of training, with two hours of drills per day. They also had night drills, where they had to get dressed and get in formation in less than 5 minutes. For girls who attempted to cheat in night drills by sleeping in their overcoats, they were made to run around the airfield in their nightshirts.

¹³¹ Irina Rakobolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2014.

¹³² Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* by Cottam, XI, 16.

¹³³ Tait 99; Pennington 75; Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 18. Until the planes had official bomb racks, the 46th had to create their own bomb racks. There are a few reasons why parachutes were deemed unnecessary. First, the Po-2 was a plane that was easy to fly and easy to land. In case of an emergency, it seemed that the Po-2 could be brought down easily. Also, many soldiers felt that it was better to be killed in your plane than to be captured by the Germans. It was also seen that the weight of the parachutes was better put toward adding more bombs to the plane. After a tragic accident in 1943, in which a pilot and navigator died in the 46th, the VVS finally equipped them with parachutes; parachutes saved the life of one navigator in the 46th.

¹³⁴ Kazarinova in Cottam, *Women in Air War* 9.

Navigators had an additional hour of courses for Morse code. Pilots had to complete 500 more hours of flight. The pilots and navigators assigned to the night bomber regiment had to learn to fly and drop bombs accurately at night. Mechanics worked 15 hours a day to gain the experience they needed, as many of them had no familiarity with aircraft.

Training was much harder for the students from university than those who came from the air clubs, though it was not particularly easy for any of them.¹³⁵ As stated before, men are taught when they are young to learn how to be soldiers, but women are not. This led to many difficulties in adjusting to the military rigor. The women had trouble learning military courtesies like when to salute and proper forms of address. Male instructors found it hard to adapt to teaching women, as their swearing offended the women or cause them to cry.¹³⁶ Women were not used to being yelled at, and they did not like to rest on formalities. Throughout the war, they preferred less formal and more personal interactions, and favor commanders who doled out quiet discipline.

In addition to the difficulty adjusting to military command, they also lost access to some of their feminine habits. Most of the women only had one change of underwear, and because they were unable to shower on the train to Engels, the women's permed hair became dirty and tangled.¹³⁷ When they arrived at Engels with their curls in disarray, Raskova ordered the women to all get short boy-like cuts. Many of the women were devastated about losing the beautiful hair they had been growing their whole lives.

To make matters worse, the male instructors made fun of the women, and the wives of these instructors considered the female recruits to be homewreckers and mistresses. This was a

¹³⁵ Tait 76, 99; Pennington 42-3.

¹³⁶ Pennington 44.

¹³⁷ Tait 48; Pennington 41.

common belief of women who served in the Soviet military; women on the home front believed that other women only enlisted to steal a commander from his wife. Once, when Raskova was reporting to her commander, Colonel Bagaev, he confronted her about the wives' complaints. Raskova replied "You're the Garrison chief. You're the last person I'd expect to interest himself in women's gossip."¹³⁸

Nevertheless, the women completed their training, and on November 7, 1941, the anniversary of the October Revolution, the women took their military oaths. In the speech congratulating the women on their induction, Raskova said:

History remembers those women who participated in battles... But all of these women... 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 Motherland. So, let us vow once more, together, to stand to our last breath in defense of our beloved Homeland.¹³⁹

That night, after much complaining about Commissar Rachevich's rules, the women were allowed join the men of the garrison in the anniversary celebrations.¹⁴⁰

On December 1 1941, the 587th was assigned to the 8th Air Army on the western front. The 586th was assigned to the Fighter Aviation of the Air Defense Force (IA/PVO) rather than the VVS, where they were to protect Saratov's factories, rail junctions, and other targets from enemy bombers. The 46th on the other hand, suffered a setback that delayed their departure to the front to May 23 1942. In early March 1942, four members of the 46th were killed during a

¹³⁸ Pennington 43-4.

¹³⁹ Raskova in Pennington 42-3.

¹⁴⁰ Tait 76-7.

training flight. A snow storm had come up, and it was so harsh, the pilots and navigators “couldn't tell where the sky was and where the ground was.”¹⁴¹ Crews became disoriented, and two of them crashed into one another. Because of this tragedy, the 46th was held back two months for more training. When they were deemed ready, the 46th joined the 4th Air Army on the southern front of the Donbas region.¹⁴²

On the Frontlines: Purpose and Position

An understanding of the military history of this regiment is necessary. A careful look at their position on the front is important to understanding the hardships they overcame to be successful. The 4th Air Army, commanded by Konstantin Vershinin, was a major player on the Eastern front, and as such the 46th participated in many of the major battles on the Eastern front. When the 46th joined the war in the summer of 1942, Hitler was beginning an offensive with the intent to gain access to the oil fields in the Caucasus mountains. The Red Army was concentrated in the areas surrounding the mountains, and because the Soviet Union carried out tactical instead of strategic bombing, most of these sorties flown were in support of Soviet ground troops. As a night bombing regiment, flying the LNB¹⁴³ the Po-2, their purpose was to attack ‘light’ targets such as bridges, river crossings, vehicles, and other targets that disrupted troop and supply movements. They also bombed enemy headquarters, airfields, fuel depots, canteens, retreating troops and supply repositories.¹⁴⁴ Night bombing also served the purpose of tirelessly debilitating the

¹⁴¹ Nina Raspopova, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, November 16, 2000, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090245/nina-raspopova.htm>

¹⁴² Pennington 49, 55, 92, 76; Tait 118-9; Krylova 139-40.

¹⁴³ LNB=Light Night Bomber, as opposed to heavy bombers.

¹⁴⁴ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 16.

enemy, destroying his morale and effecting his performance on the battlefield. The ground troops were grateful when the the women of the 46th bombed the night before the battle, because then the Germans would not fight as hard.¹⁴⁵

The 46th was assigned to the 218th Night Bomber Aviation Division commanded by Dimitrii D. Popov. The 46th first saw combat in June 1942, where they were stationed northeast of the Sea of Azov. They bombed the crossings of the Mius and Don rivers and participated in the Battle of Stavropol.¹⁴⁶ At that time, the Germans had captured the city of Voronezh and the upper basin of the Don River, and the Red Army was in retreat. On July 28th 1942 after the fall of Rostov on the Don on the 25th, Stalin issued GKO Order Number 227, known as the “not one step back” order, which was read to the Troops of the southern front.¹⁴⁷ In August through December 1942 the 46th flew in defense of the Transcaucasus. The conditions on the newly formed north Caucasus front were terrible. The air jets above the mountains created dangerous up and down drafts, and the wind shear could effortlessly crash an airplane. Mist and fog were constant hazards to flying and bombing, as it was equally possible to hit a mountain instead of the target.¹⁴⁸ Sometimes, the women pilots returned from a flight with blisters on their hands, resulting from trying to control the aircraft.¹⁴⁹ Pilot Marina Chechneva said this about the conditions: “In the Caucasus...it was difficult to distinguish reference points on the ground. Sometimes, the return flight was more difficult and complex than the mission itself. We might leave in nice weather and by the time we returned, the field was fog-bound, and we had only

¹⁴⁵ Major Mariya Smirnova, in Noggle 31; Chief of Staff Irina Vyacheslavovna Rakobolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, November 18, 2000, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090134/irina-rakobolskaya.htm>.

¹⁴⁶ Pennington 73.

¹⁴⁷ Tait 149.

¹⁴⁸ Pennington 79; Nina Raspopova, Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

¹⁴⁹ Nina Raspopova, Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

flares at our disposal to indicate the landing area.”¹⁵⁰ Also, supplies were difficult to obtain as road conditions deteriorated in the autumn rain. Germans had significant advantage in bombers and airfields even though supremacy of airpower had yet to be decided.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, the 46th bombed crossings, bridges, ammunition and fuel depots, and carried out other missions to deprive the Germans of their reinforcements and supplies. While stationed near Mozdok on the Terek river, they flew missions to bomb the HQ of the German Staff, which apparently had the most blinding searchlights they had ever seen. The girl’s planes came back looking “like a sieve” because of the anti-aircraft guns.¹⁵² Around this same time, the north Caucasus front had finally stabilized, and by January 2 1943 the Soviets were on the offensive in the Caucasus.¹⁵³

The 46th was then stationed near Krasnodar and participated in battles in Stavropol and on the Kuban River. From March through September 1943, they bombed the Taman Peninsula for the liberation of the Blue Line. The Blue Line was a boundary of German strongholds stretching from Novorossiysk to the Azov Sea. It “was firmly backed by strong anti-aircraft defenses, and the whole territory was networked by searchlights, anti-aircraft batteries, and machine guns.”¹⁵⁴ Almost all the summits and large towns had been captured by the Germans and turned into defense points.¹⁵⁵ Weather was extreme, demanding and hazardous, but the women had gained a lot of experience in the Caucasus.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, flying by the sea presented new dangers: “The wind was so strong on the Taman Peninsula, that one night after taking off an inexperienced

¹⁵⁰ Cottam, *Women in Air War* 128.

¹⁵¹ Wagner and Feltzer, 150.

¹⁵² Lt. Polina Gelman in Noggle 40.

¹⁵³ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 20-1.

¹⁵⁴ Major Mariya Smirnova, in Noggle 33.

¹⁵⁵ Wagner and Feltzer 147.

¹⁵⁶ Pennington 83; Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 23.

aircrew was unable to combat the wind enough to get back to shore, and ran out of fuel and perished in the sea of Azov.”¹⁵⁷

Sorties in the Taman were flown in support of the 56th Army, and attacks made by night bombers were extremely important, as they were able to destroy enemy aircraft on the ground. In one night, a regiment could take out between five and ten German planes. According to the official history and the testimony of German pilot POWs, from April 17th to April 29 1943, the 4th Air army, including the 46th, began to target rear positions, including German naval installments, ships, bridges, ports, and supply stations. These locations had previously been impervious to Soviet bombers, and this action forced the Germans to evacuate some of their airfields and build up their air defense. Both activities were time consuming and costly for the Germans. On the evening of April 28th, as the Soviets prepared to go on the offensive, German fighters began to attack Soviet troops. In response, the VVS flew 379 sorties and dropped 210 tons of bombs on artillery positions. After two hours, German anti-aircraft units gave up and the Soviets suffered no losses.¹⁵⁸ In the official history of the Red Army, the 46th gained this accolade: “[On April 28th 1943] The daring women pilots of the 46th Guards Night Bomber Regiment commanded by Major Yevdokiya D. Bershanskaya were especially active. Its crews in Po-2s made effective strikes against artillery positions on the Northern edge of Krymsk.”¹⁵⁹ Novorossiysk was freed by Sept 16 1943, and by October the Germans had been pushed out of the Taman. Their contribution to this victory was why they were renamed the 46th Taman Guards.

¹⁵⁷ Major Mariya Smirnova, in Noggle 36.

¹⁵⁸ Wagner and Feltzer 150, 154-5; Von Hardesty 191.

¹⁵⁹ Wagner and Feltzer, 155-6.

From October 31 to December 11 1943, the 46th participated in one of the largest amphibious Soviet operations of the war: The Kerch Eltigen Operation. This massive operation involved the Red Army from the 4th Ukrainian front, the Black Sea fleet, the Azov Flotilla, and the VVS on the north Caucasus front. The Soviet landing parties were surrounded by German ground troops on three sides and a German blockade of the sea sealed the fourth. The Soviets had no radios, no food, and no ammunition. The 4th Air Army bombed German anti-aircraft guns and searchlights to allow the landing parties to reach the shore. The ladies of the 46th in particular dropped food, medications, mail, and ammunition to the Soviet Troops. In the midst of rain, wind, and ships firing at them, they had to have impeccable accuracy to make sure the supplies did not fall into German hands.¹⁶⁰ The women often shouted down to the troops, and on one occasion, Chief of Staff Irina Rakobolskaya received a letter from a male commander saying that one of the 46th's pilots had shouted down, "You're bloody useless! Here we are flying, dropping bombs and there you are, just staying put and not advancing!". The commander then asked if Rakobolskaya would thank this pilot on his behalf, as her words had inspired his men to attack.¹⁶¹ After the success at the Strait, four men of the landing party happened to come into the women's mess, and "they began embracing us and telling us over and over again that we had saved them."¹⁶² From November 1943 through May 1944, the 46th remained in Crimea on the Kerch strait and in Sevastopol, where the 4th and 8th Air Armies flew more than 50,000 sorties in the liberation of Crimea.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 25.

¹⁶¹ Irina Vyacheslavovna Rakobolskaya, Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

¹⁶² Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 26.

¹⁶³ Wagner and Feltzer 246.

Now that the Soviets were on the offensive, the 46th flew in Belorussia in Mogilev, Minsk, and other locations in June through July of 1944 as a part of the Belorussian offensive.¹⁶⁴ By August, the regiment was in Poland. In September, the women of the 46th had some downtime as the Germans were retreating. By October, the fighting picked up again and aircrews flew in rain or fog, bombing through the clouds for 10 hours straight. In January 1945, the 46th had reached Prussia, and was delivering ammunition and other supplies to the ground force units. In March, they flew near the Triple City of Danzig-Gdansk, Gdynia, and Sopot on the Baltic coast. Even though the war was coming to a close, the 46th continued to fly many sorties in the fog and rain. Entering Germany, they finished their service in April through May 1945 on the Oder River, bombing troop transport in the port of Swinemunde.¹⁶⁵

A Typical Night on the Frontlines

The Po-2, despite its drawbacks, had many advantages when it came to night bombing. The plane had very few requirements and used little fuel. It was easy to operate and could fly well even with the engine stalled. The Po-2 was “was very sturdy and forgave many a novice’s errors.”¹⁶⁶ It also could land almost anywhere, making it particularly useful on the rough airfields the 46th was forced to occupy. The slow speed and low flying altitude allowed for it to drop bombs more accurately than any other Soviet aircraft. When flown by capable pilots like those of the 46th, the Po-2 could destroy its targets with one hit.

¹⁶⁴ Pennington 83.

¹⁶⁵ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 28-29

¹⁶⁶ Nina Raspopova, Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

A typical mission for a light night bomber like the Po-2 began at an airfield close to the frontlines, due to the Po-2's limited range. Irina Rakobolskaya describes a standard sortie in this way:

The Po-2 aircraft always flew alone on missions. They never flew in pairs. But they cooperated over the target. The time of flight from one crew to the next varied by 3 to 5 minutes. When each following crew approached the target, the crew flying before them was just circling the target for bombing. Usually the searchlights picked them up as the anti-aircraft guns were firing. Then the second crew bombed searchlights, and the first—the target. It was necessary to take into consideration that usually the aircraft went to the target at altitudes of 1,000 to 1300 meters, cut the gas above the target, and approached at a glide, so the noise of the engine was not audible, and the aircraft identification lights were not lit. They bombed from a lower altitude, but no lower than 400 meters, otherwise fragments from your own bomb might hit the aircraft; the speed was slow, so the aircraft simply was not able to get away from them [the bomb fragments]. Prior to bombing, they threw out illuminating flares, which hung from parachutes illuminating the target. After releasing the bombs, the pilot could descend and leave a target at a very low altitude.”¹⁶⁷

A mission took between 45 minutes and an hour. Each crew could fly 5 to 10 missions a night, with as many as 15 missions each night. They could fly more on the long winter nights. This amounted to 80-90 sorties for the regiment a night. The 46th's personal best was a record 325 sorties performed on one long winter night.¹⁶⁸ The two main obstacles upon reaching the target were searchlights and anti-aircraft guns. After spending the majority of the sortie in the dark, the searchlights blinded the pilot and navigator, making the bomb drop more difficult. Sometimes it could take 5-15 minutes to escape the lights. The searchlights also allowed for the Po-2 to be seen by anti-aircraft gunners. The flak from the guns could not only burn the plane quickly, but the guns released a smoke that choked and blinded those caught in it. Also, the

¹⁶⁷ Rakobolskaya in Pennington 86.

¹⁶⁸ Pennington 79.

boom caused by the gun's firing was deafening and caused the aircraft to shake. To avoid the guns, one plane drew the searchlights and fire, while another cut its engine, swoop over the target, and drop a flare to illuminate the target. Once the target was illuminated, the navigator released the bombs. If the bomb became stuck in the carrier, the navigator had to climb onto the wing to loosen it. After dropping the bomb, the pilot reactivated the engine to fly home to the airfield.¹⁶⁹

The weather on the flight home could be quite different from the weather when they left, so navigators had to be keen in their guidance. The area could also be scattered with anti-aircraft batteries, which could hear the engine of the Po-2, so they had to be careful.¹⁷⁰ The airfield was not fully illuminated, because then it could attract the attention of German bombers. So, the pilot landed by the light of three little kerosene lamps called flying mice. They provided so little light that the pilots complained, "soon we'll be expected to land by the light of our commander's cigarette."¹⁷¹ Between the sorties, the pilot remained in the aircraft while the armorers loaded the bombs and the mechanics refueled and repaired the plane as needed. The navigator would leave the craft to report to the Chief of Staff on the results of the sortie and if there were any obstacles.¹⁷²

After completing the night's missions, the pilots sent their reports, ate, and rested. Adjusting to daytime sleep was difficult, so each woman was given 100g of Vodka to help her rest.¹⁷³ As Sr. Lt. Nina Raspopova describes, the experience of being shot at was quite rattling, and could make it hard to sleep: "After bombing and having escaped the enemy's fire, I couldn't

¹⁶⁹ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 19; Irina Rakobolskaya in Noggle 29.

¹⁷⁰ Marina Chechneva in Cottam *In the Sky Above the Front* 106.

¹⁷¹ Irina Rakobolskaya 118 in Cottam *Women in Air War*

¹⁷² Marina Chechneva, in Cottam *In the Sky Above the Front* 106-7.

¹⁷³ Rufina Sergeevna Gasheva, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, September 27, 2000, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090746/rufina-sergeevna-gasheva.htm>

pull myself together for 10 or 15 minutes. I was shivering, my teeth were chattering, my feet and hands were shaking, and I always felt an overwhelming striving for life. I didn't want to die.”¹⁷⁴ If any daytime missions needed to be completed, like reconnaissance or supply deliveries, some pilots and navigators continued to fly. Also, new personnel had to be trained during the day. This meant that pilots sometimes only got 2-4 hours of sleep before they were expected to fly again. The mechanics carried out major aircraft repairs during the day, so it is unclear when they had time to rest.¹⁷⁵ If the pilots and navigators were not able to rest, they were given stimulants nicknamed “Coca-Cola” to help her fly. Also, sometimes on flights, the pilots and navigator would fly the plane in shifts. If the pilot was particularly exhausted, the navigator took control of the plane on the way to the target. On the way back, the pilot would fly it home, allowing the navigator to rest.¹⁷⁶

Hardships on the Front

When it came to the conditions on the frontlines, “Nobody made any allowances for our youth or sex. They demanded from us nothing less than from a men's regiment.”¹⁷⁷ This meant that these women were based right in the middle of the action from the very beginning. Hitler’s armies were advancing fast towards the Caucasus oil fields and Stalingrad, and in the Summer of 1942 the frontlines were constantly moving. No one knew what villages were occupied by Germans and which ones were under Soviet control. The Germans sometimes advanced so quickly that the regiments did not have time to get maps of the locations they were retreating to,

¹⁷⁴ Sr. Lt. Nina Raspopova pilot, flight Commander in Noggle 26.

¹⁷⁵ Tait 106.

¹⁷⁶ Larisa Litvinova-Rozanova in Pennington, 82.

¹⁷⁷ Rakobolskaya in Pennington 89.

and supply deliveries had a hard time keeping up.¹⁷⁸ When the fighting was particularly fierce, the aviation service battalion could not deliver food and water. After the Germans recaptured Rostov at the end of June, there were high casualties.¹⁷⁹ At the beginning of the war, the 4th Air Army had been decimated, and Popov “had no Personnel left at all.”¹⁸⁰ The 46th, when they joined in May, was constantly moving with the changing frontlines. Flying at night and retreating during the day meant many sleepless nights. Assignments often came to them, and after the planes had taken off on the mission, the regiment received the order to retreat.¹⁸¹ Irina Rakabolskaya described the situation in the beginning of the war like this:

The conditions for operational flying were the most difficult when our troops were retreating towards the foothills of the Caucasus. We were plagued by constant transfers, inadequate supply, and powerful air currents in the mountains that tossed our light machines hundreds of meters upward and downward. Here is a typical scenario during our operational flying in the mountains: a fog would suddenly develop while our machines were situated over a target and the visibility would be nil. Not provided with radio navigation equipment, we were dependent on ground reference points. At times an airfield was shrouded by fog and all the pilot could see was a white, blurred spot of a flare. So, it is not surprising that, on some occasions, aircrews not only lost their bearings but also could not orient themselves in relation to the ground.¹⁸²

Even as the war progressed, the conditions on the frontlines could still be harsh. The women sometimes had to sleep on any surface they could find—in sheds, billeted in local’s homes, on the ground, in dugouts, on haystacks, or even the wings of their planes.¹⁸³ The

¹⁷⁸ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 20; Tait 150; Sr. Lt. Nina Raspopova pilot in Noggle 23.

¹⁷⁹ During the recapture of Rostov, a Soviet anti-aircraft battery operated by women was killed. When the Germans realized they were women, they helped the Soviets bury the bodies. Recall this is when the “not one step back” order was issued.

¹⁸⁰ Chief of Staff Irina Vyacheslavovna Rakabolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2014. Note that these high casualties happened in 1942, not 1941 when the regiment was formed.

¹⁸¹ Cardona 96; Tait 156.

¹⁸² Cottam, *Women in Air War* 117.

¹⁸³ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 20.

airfields also could be anywhere, and the regiment never constructed aerodromes. While stationed at the Cossack village of Assinovskaya, the airfield was in an apple orchard, so, “By the time you've finished taxing to your stand, the cockpit was full of apples.”¹⁸⁴ In Poland, it was so muddy that they constructed wooden platforms from old fences so the Po-2's could take off. Fuel trucks could not move in the mud either, so mechanics had to refuel the plane using jerry cans. The regiment flew over 300 combat missions this way.¹⁸⁵ In the forests of Belorussia, runways were not very long, and they were surrounded by forests. To make sure the pilot had enough power to take off, the mechanics held the plane in place while the pilot raced the engine. Once it had gained enough power, the mechanics let go, and the pilot had to hope the plane had gained enough power to get over the treetops.¹⁸⁶

The conditions on the frontlines were hard not only because of the war, but because men did not see the value of the female pilots. At the beginning, the women had to constantly prove themselves. Natal'ya Kravtsova, HSU, 46th said, “Our first few days of the front were not easy. We encountered the very difficulties we did not expect. We were prepared for almost anything—sleeping in damp dugouts, the ceaseless rumble of the cannonade, and experiencing hunger and cold...But...we never, for a moment, expected that we might be mistrusted.”¹⁸⁷ When the women were first assigned to the 218th Division, their Commander, Popov, was less than enthused. He is reported to have said “What have we done to deserve this? Why are we being sent reinforcements of this variety?” and to have called General Vershinin on the phone to say, “I've received 112 little princesses. Just what am I supposed to do with them?”¹⁸⁸ He did not

¹⁸⁴ Natalya Kravtsova in Cottam, *The Golden Tressed Soldier* 6

¹⁸⁵ Irina Rakobolskaya, in Noggle 28.

¹⁸⁶ Natalya Kravtsova in Cottam, *The Golden Tressed Soldier* 40-1; Antonina Vakhromeyeva, Squadron Mechanic, in Cottam *Women in Air War* 150.

¹⁸⁷ Cottam *Golden Tressed Soldier* 1.

¹⁸⁸ Tait 129; Pennington 77.

think they had enough training to fly in combat conditions, to avoid searchlights and dodge anti-aircraft fire.

Popov's opinion was not helped by the 46th's performance on the first day. After leaving Engels, they were told to fly to the village of Trud Gorniak in the Donbas region. When the women of the 46th were ten minutes away from landing, fighter aircraft appeared in the air. These fighters were not in a friendly formation, but flew around the Po-2s in a strange manner. The women, thinking they were being attacked, abandoned their formation and flew away frantically. When they landed, they learned that those fighters were male VVS pilots were trying to play a trick on them. They mocked the women, saying, "Hey spineless, can't you tell a star from a swastika?"¹⁸⁹ Popov took this as an indicator of their unpreparedness, but Vershinin suggested that he be patient and train them as needed, reminding Popov that it was a "historic privilege" to have women pilots.¹⁹⁰ Popov did not assign them to any missions for a few weeks, and observed their practice in things the pilots felt they had "learned long ago."¹⁹¹

Even after watching them train, Popov was still incredulous. Division commanders like Popov rarely visited regiments, but for their first few missions he showed up to determine their readiness.¹⁹² He was probably not impressed with their initial performance. On June 9th 1942, three aircraft, flown by the Regimental and Squadron Commanders took off on the 46th's first sortie. Popov had assigned them to bomb a "blank target"; a location that was poorly defended, making it easy to attack.¹⁹³ While the sortie was a success, Squadron Commander Lyuba Ol'khovskaya and Navigator Vera Tarasova never returned from the mission. In 1965, the

¹⁸⁹ Pennington 76.

¹⁹⁰ Tait 129; Krylova 233.

¹⁹¹ Natalya Kravtsova, in Cottam, *The Golden Tressed Soldier* 1.

¹⁹² Krylova 240.

¹⁹³ Irina Rakobolskaya interview by the Flying Heritage Museum 2014.

women of the regiment learned what had happened. Lyuba Ol'khovskaya's village in the Ukraine had been burned to the ground by Nazis, and she wanted to be a fighter pilot, to look the enemy in the face as she avenged her people.¹⁹⁴ Resenting being put in the night bomber regiment and not being able to fly 'real' missions, Ol'khovskaya had abandoned the mission and tried to attack a railway junction. Ground fire damaged their plane, and though Ol'khovskaya managed to land the plane, both women died. Local villagers buried her and Tarasova.¹⁹⁵ After their death, the mood of the whole regiment was "onerous and heart rendering"¹⁹⁶ The women had realized that death could take even the best of their pilots.

Combat Losses and Survival

Tarasova and Ol'khovskaya were the first, but not the last, of their combat losses. Throughout their three years on the frontlines, the 46th lost only 33 people, amounting to approximately 27% of flying personnel.¹⁹⁷ This is a surprisingly low number considering their proximity to the action, but nevertheless their losses were intensely felt by the whole regiment. There are a few instances in particular that stand out in the records. In describing their service, nearly every veteran mentions at least one of these incidents, indicating how great the impact was. The first was the loss of Dusya Nosal. Nosal was in the hospital during Operation Barbarossa, because she had just given birth. The hospital she was in was bombed, and her baby died. Nosal flew to avenge her child's death, and was one of the best pilots in the regiment. One

¹⁹⁴ Natalya Kravtsova in Cottam *Golden Tressed Soldier*, 4.

¹⁹⁵ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII*, 19; Pennington 78.

¹⁹⁶ Cardona 96.

¹⁹⁷ Pennington 87.

night, while Nosal was flying with newly-qualified navigator Irina Kashirina, their plane was attacked by a German night fighter. Nosal was killed, and Kashirina managed to land the plane by reaching around Nosal's body to pull the throttle.¹⁹⁸ Another notable loss was that of Zhenya Rudeneva. She was a tiny girl, known for reciting fairy tales and writing poetry. One night, she told her friends, "Girls, as long as my heart is beating I will never forget you. Even up in the air, if I can, I will shoot a rocket as my farewell salute to you." When her plane was shot down over the Kerch, "there were Rockets, one, then another one, then more!...This...was Zhenya Rudneva's farewell salute."¹⁹⁹

Sixteen of the 33 regimental deaths were in Kuban and the Taman peninsula in the summer and fall of 1943.²⁰⁰ Half of those deaths occurred on a single night. On July 31st 1943, while flying over Krymskaya in the Kuban, the women encountered night fighters with deadly consequences, as recounted by Squadron Commander Maria Smirnova:

On this flight the anti-aircraft guns were silent. I sensed something very uncommon about that and then thought of the only reason for the silence—German fighter aircraft! We had not been attacked in this way before; we had not developed tactics to counter the attack of fighter planes. I had considerable experience in combat and maneuvered to escape the searchlights, for to escape the searchlights was to escape the fighter. But behind me flew young, inexperienced crews—reinforcements who did not escape. Four of the aircraft following me were shot down. The tracer bullets set their planes on fire; our planes were so vulnerable they were burning like sheets of paper. We were not equipped with parachutes at that time, so eight girls burned in the air...It is a horrible scene when a plane is burning. First it explodes; then it burns like a torch falling apart, and you can see particles of fuselage, wings, tail, and human bodies scattered in the air. The other crews

¹⁹⁸ Natalya Kravtsova, in Cottam *The Golden Tressed Soldier* 21-3. Kashirina had learned to fly a few months before the war, but had been assigned to be an armorer. Eventually she was promoted to navigator.

¹⁹⁹ Anastasia Nadezhda Vasilevna Popova, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, October 3, 2000, accessed April 2, 2018,

<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090240/anastasiia-nadezhda-vasil-evna-popova.htm>

²⁰⁰ Pennington 85.

who were in the air at that moment witnessed that tragedy. I saw it with my own eyes as I returned from the mission.”²⁰¹

As a result of the silent night fighter, eight girls were dead in ten minutes. Only those who were experienced enough to avoid the searchlights survived, and even then, it was quite close. Those who managed to drop their bombs that night had to do so from such a low altitude that the blast nearly destroyed their own planes. Because they cut their engines to avoid enemy detection, they also were at risk of crashing into the ground before their engine had kicked back on. There were no more missions flown that night, and the next evening the squadrons received fighter escorts for the first time.²⁰² They had accomplished their mission, “But the pain, the bereavement we experience, caused by the loss of our dear friends, the full measure of horror we felt during these few minutes, continue to haunt us.”²⁰³

From training to the front, the 46th had many obstacles in the way of its success. They had to let go of their civilian life and learn military discipline and the challenging maneuvers of night bombing in a short span of time. The women of the 46th were not the finest women pilots the VVS could boast, as the best had been assigned to the fighter and day bomber regiment. Their initial performance made it easy for the men they came in contact with, including their very own commander, to doubt their ability as women to perform and underestimate their talents. Nevertheless, as a part of the 4th Air Army, they were a part of many major operations of the war, bombing relentlessly from dusk to dawn in their fragile biplanes. They faced every obstacle possible on the Eastern front, from supply shortages to difficult flying conditions, to watching

²⁰¹ Major Maria Smirnova, in Noggle 33-4.

²⁰² Pennington 85, Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII*, 24

²⁰³ Larissa Rozanova in Cottom *In the Sky Above the Front* 123.

friends burn in the air. The 46th could have crumbled under these hardships and been forgotten as a failed experiment of the Soviet military. However, as will become apparent in the next chapter, they not only survived the war, but thrived in the chaos that the frontlines brought them. Soviet society had made a way for them to join the military, and once they were there, they had a choice: to fly or die.

Photo Courtesy of Markwick and Cardona

Map 3 "Night Witches" regiment: flight paths, October 1941-May 1945



Chapter 3: The Motivations and Success of the 46th Taman Guards

The 46th Taman Guards went through hell on the Eastern front. They could have faded into obscurity, successful but not exceptional, and yet their name is remembered because they pushed the limits. The veterans attest that “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...even despite the protests of the doctor returned to the regiment and continue to fight even to perish.”²⁰⁴ At the start of the war, these women listened to the voice in their hearts that told them to go to the front. They begged to be let into the service, and despite the hardships, they always found a reason to keep fighting. They flew out of a patriotic yearning to liberate their homeland, and a strong desire to prove how capable they were. As war progressed and losses mounted, they flew to avenge their comrades. Also, by viewing combat as just another job, they were motivated to come up with ways to fly more missions efficiently and safely. Before the war, they had learned how to balance femininity and work. United in a common goal, they could depend on one another for support in the air and on the ground, leading to a more effective unit overall.

Successes

Despite the losses and the hardships, the 46th was one of the top performing Po-2 Light Night Bomber Regiments in the Soviet Air Force. In terms of effectiveness, the 46th was always “among the first” in the 4th Air Army for their accuracy of bombing hits verified by ground and aerial reconnaissance.²⁰⁵ Every woman the 46th was decorated in some capacity by the end of the

²⁰⁴ Polina Gelman in Pennington 81.

²⁰⁵ Gelman in Pennington, 88.

war. Eighteen of their pilots and six navigators constituted 24 of the 89 female Heroes of the Soviet Union.²⁰⁶ Only one regiment, comprised of male fighters, had more HSUs than them.²⁰⁷ Other regiments averaged one to three HSUs, because in order to receive the HSU award in a LNB regiment, a pilot or navigator had to fly more than 500 successful combat missions. In the 46th, the pilots and navigators were not even recommended until they had completed 700 flights. A. I. Sebrova, a female pilot of the 46th, broke the regiment's personal record when she flew 1,008 successful sorties.²⁰⁸ In August 1943, Chief of Staff Rakoboskaya had to put in a request for new planes, because many of them had flown over 450 combat missions and were beginning to fall apart.²⁰⁹

After only three months on the frontlines, the Division Commissar A.S.Gorbunov told Bershanskaya her regiment had the best record in the division. After four months, their incredulous commander D.D. Popov and Commander Vershinin considered many of them worthy of decorations and promotions.²¹⁰ In February 1943, after only nine months on the frontlines, the regiment gained the Guards designation. This elite status was hard to earn even in war, and they achieved it for their above average flight record. They, "firmly held first place among all in the Air Force for number of flights,"²¹¹ flying 24,000 of the 30,000 missions accomplished by the three female regiments in their three years on the frontlines.²¹² Altogether, the 46th dropped 3,000,000 kg of bombs. Throughout most of the war, the 46th was stationed with

²⁰⁶ Tatyana Nikolayevna Sumarokova received the Hero of the Russian Federation in 1995, not the HSU.

²⁰⁷ Tait, 202.

²⁰⁸ Rakobolskaya in Pennington, 83-4; Cardona 113-4.

²⁰⁹ Cardona, 97.

²¹⁰ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII*, 22, 29.

²¹¹ Polina Gelman in Pennington 88.

²¹² Pennington 2, 75, 88; Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII*, 16, 29.

a male regiment of Po-2 LNPs that flew night missions. They had “the same missions, the same aircraft, and the same targets”, yet that regiment never received the Guards distinction.²¹³

At some point before the end of 1942, the Germans figured out that women were flying because their voices carried to the ground when they cut their engines to bomb. The Germans began to call them *Natchexen*, or Night Witches. There are two possible reasons for this epithet: one, because the swooping noise made by the Po-2 sounded like a witch’s broomstick, or two, because the Germans assumed they had magic that prevented them from being shot down. POWs claimed the Night Witches wore them down physically and mentally, and even bombed their bathhouses. Any German who shot down a Night Witch was given the Iron Cross, the highest German military honor. There was a wartime rumor that a Po-2 plane flown by a male pilot was captured by the Germans and they made him strip naked to prove he was a man and not a Night Witch.²¹⁴ For a unit whose missions were supposed to annoy, not neutralize the enemy, their achievements speak volumes.

Motivations

The first clue to understanding how these women coped with the fear and loss of war to exceed expectations is in their socialization. Though these women came from different technical backgrounds, and different parts of Russia, they all had a lot in common: they were young, all lived around Moscow at the time of the war’s outbreak, and were in some way connected to bureaucratic organizations, like air clubs or the Komsomol. This meant that they were at the center of the culture, the *Lichnost*, that taught them to be patriotic and self-sacrificial.²¹⁵

²¹³ Serafima Amosova-Taranenko in Pennington, 88; 83. In a twist of fate, the commander of the 46th, Bershanskaya, married the commander of this male regiment.

²¹⁴ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 18, 21-22; Tait 251.

²¹⁵ Kucherenko 28; Rufina Sergeevna Gasheva, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

Angelika Irlina, a mechanic for the 46th, was worried her Jewish heritage might be a problem, but it turns out, “When we were at the front, all that time nobody thought what nationality. We were all brothers in arms, and people valued for their work.”²¹⁶ Despite their differences, they were all receiving the same message: defend the homeland. In a radio address in Moscow on July 3rd 1941, Stalin said, “The issue is one of life or death for the Soviet state, for the people of the USSR; the issue is whether the peoples of the Soviet Union shall remain free or fall into slavery. The Soviet people must realize this and abandon all heedlessness, they must mobilize themselves and reorganize all their work on new, wartime basis, when there can be no mercy to the enemy.”²¹⁷ These women were determined to liberate their country, no matter the cost. To them, this meant flying as many missions as possible.²¹⁸

Patriotism motivated them to enlist, and in some ways influenced their performance throughout the war, but patriotism could not have been their only motivation. The people of the Soviet Union had also been socialized to do everything for the good of the USSR, so going from the factories to the frontlines was just a change in workplace. Being on the frontlines was inherently more dangerous than the assembly line, but the women still perceived it as “doing a simple job, just a job to save our country, to liberate it from the enemy.”²¹⁹ The women went where they were needed, without considering the danger or the reward.²²⁰ Also, since it was their job, they were determined to be good at it; the pilots gained fame across the fronts for their

²¹⁶ Angelika Irlina, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, November 16, 2000, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090135/angelika-irlina.htm>

²¹⁷ Stalin, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union* (New York: International Publishers, 1945), 13.

²¹⁸ John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (New York: Longman, 1991), 68-9; Sr. Lt. Yevgeniya Zhigulenko, Noggle 56.

²¹⁹ Sr. Lt. Serafima Amosova-Taranenko, Noggle 47.

²²⁰ Nina Raspopova, Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

exactness in blind flying and their accuracy in bombing.²²¹ They cared deeply about the work they were doing. Natasha Melkin (navigator and later pilot) reported that during a daytime strafing attack, her mechanic ran out of her trench in an attempt to protect the aircraft, got shot in the arm. While they were trying to care for her wounds, she insisted that she needed to get back to work, as the Germans had just made her job harder.²²²

The losses they witnessed also spurred them to fight harder. Even if they had never joined the frontlines, they saw the war in their everyday lives.²²³ Their country had been invaded. They watched people—fellow Soviets, women and children—die of famine and bullet wounds. It could be suggested that as women, they felt these atrocities more acutely than men would, making them far more motivated by the brutality. In returning from a mission at dawn, Sr. Lt. Yevgenia Zhigulenko encountered a small boy all alone in the outskirts of a Belorussia village. He said to her, “Auntie, are you going to the front?...My daddy is at the front. Find him, please. My mama is dying there in the trench. If you find him, she won't die...”²²⁴ To Zhigulenko, this was the reason that she flew—to end the suffering of her people. They were rallied not only by examples like this, but by the loss of their own comrades. On the first bombs they dropped in 1942, they had written “For the Homeland,” but after the deaths Lyuba Olkhovskaya and Vera Tarasova in the first mission, they wrote “For Luyba” and “For Vera”. When Marina Raskova died in early 1943, they honored her in the same way. The armorers continued this tradition

²²¹ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 28-9.

²²² Natalya Kravtsova, in Cottam, *The Golden Tressed Soldier* 16-7.

²²³ Popova in Saywell 149.

²²⁴ Sr. Lt. Yevgenia Zhigulenko in Noggle 58.

throughout the war, as a reminder of who it was they were fighting for.²²⁵ Even many years after the war, the veterans could remember how many missions their comrades flew before they died.

Though patriotism, work ethic, and loss must have also inspired both Red army men, the women also had unique motivations. The socialization of young boys to one day be combatants meant that joining the army was a responsibility for them. For women, this was simply a duty to their hearts. They felt the same pull to the army, but they felt that it was not something they *had* to do. Major Mariya Smirnova put it this way: “What did we all think then, the girls from the flying regiments? Was the war a woman's business? Of course not. But then we didn't think about that. We defended our fair motherland, our people whom the fascists had trampled.”²²⁶ They were willing to give their youth and their life to a cause that tugged at their heartstrings. Because these women “joined based on the voice of our soul,” they were self-motivated to become the best.²²⁷

As women, they also felt that they needed to prove themselves to the men. They needed show the men that not only could they do the same job, but that they could do it better. On May 23rd 1942, the anniversary of the Red Army, The Saratov dramatic theater staged the play *Nadezhda Durova* about the heroine of the Napoleonic Wars. After the performance, Marina Raskova told them, “Well, girls, plays will be written someday about us too... We have been provided with everything: both the right to defend the Homeland and the most lethal weapon of

²²⁵ Marina Chechneva, in Cottam *In the Sky Above the Front* 99-100; Polina Vladimirovna Gelman interview by Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, September 27, 2000, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090316/polina-vladimirovna-gel-man.htm>

²²⁶ Major Maria Smirnova, Noggle 37.

²²⁷ Chief of Staff Irina Vyacheslavovna Rakobolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum 2000; Cardona 5, Pennington 81.

all-aircraft. Well then, shall we justify the hopes the Party and the government pin on us?"²²⁸

They knew that their performance in the skies determined if future generations of women would be considered fit for combat, so they were unwilling to just fly well—they wanted to be the best.²²⁹ They were resolved to show their ability, and welcomed the dangers knowing it demonstrated their courage and abilities.²³⁰ Because they knew they had to prove themselves, it is also possible that the commanders placed more pressure on them. Where male commanders might be inclined to let some behavior slide, the commissar and Bershanskaya probably held them to a very high standard.²³¹ They also pressured each other to only pursue excellence.²³²

Their enthusiasm was so great that the only quarrels had in the regiment were who would get to take off first, as those who were first to fly would be able to complete more missions in a night. Male pilots warned the women that “the less you fly the longer you live,” but these women raced to the aircraft, as the first to get to the cockpit and start the plane was allowed to take off first.²³³ They had a common goal—to do their job, for the good of their country and for future generations.

Additional Factors in their Success

Outside of their motivations, there are also a number of reasons that this unit was successful. The first reason that they gained fame is that the veterans of the 46th, so proud of their service, has been so keen to share their unique experience in war with others. The second reason

²²⁸ Kazarinova in Cottam *Sky Above the Front* 11. In fact, plays have been written about them: <http://www.night-witches.com/>

²²⁹ Chief of Staff Irina Vyacheslavovna Rakobolskaya 2014; Polina Vladimirovna Gelman interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

²³⁰ Olga Kucherenko, 170; Cardona 101.

²³¹ Tait 103.

²³² Chief of Staff Irina Vyacheslavovna Rakobolskaya 2014.

²³³ Anastasia Nadezhda Vasilevna Popova, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2000; Gelman in Pennington 80; Irina Rakobolskaya in Noggle 28-9.

for their fame was the influence of their commanders, including Raskova and Commissar Rachkevich. Raskova had enough clout associated with her name to make them famous for simply being “Raskova’s regiments.” Rachkevich also must have had very important friends, because when she recommended personnel for awards, her requests were granted.²³⁴ However, the veterans’ stories and the commander’s influence would not have mattered if these women did not work so hard to be successful. Some of the reasons for their fame also stem from their recruitment. They had been screened so that only the best were recruited for the women’s regiments, meaning that these women had more training and flight hours than male pilots when entering the frontlines. These elements, however, does not explain why as the war progressed, the 46th gained accolades for their accomplishments while other units remained less than exceptional.

The Effective, Innovative Command of Yevdokiya Bershanskaya

The success of the 46th Taman Guards can also be explained by the unique approaches these women took to combat. These began with their Commander Yevdokiya Davydovna Bershanskaya, whose effective innovative command made her one of the twelve remarkable air regiment commanders in the VVS. She was an experienced pilot who attended the Bataisk Aviation School in 1931 and became an instructor pilot. Serving in civilian aviation before the war, she was unaccustomed to giving orders and largely unfamiliar with military discipline. Most veterans attest to the fact that Bershanskaya was a kind but firm leader. She did not raise her voice and was able to unite all these women. Bershanskaya believed it was important for each pilot to be close with her navigator, as a stronger bond meant for more effective bombing. She

²³⁴ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII* 15; Pennington 89.

dealt with conflicts of all shapes and sizes, both personal and military related and treated these women with the greatest respect. She was quite motherly. As such, she was not as authoritarian as a male commander might have been, and had a better understanding of the personnel in her regiment as a woman herself.²³⁵ Her continuity of command, as opposed to the other two regiments, also was a significant factor.²³⁶

Bershanskaya was also no stranger to innovation. She was the mastermind behind the regiment flying in the way they did, with one aircraft drawing the fire while the other bombs the target.²³⁷ In the slow Po-2 on the harshest part of the frontlines, this tactic probably saved a lot of lives. Bershanskaya was also lenient on some regulations in order for her regiment to fly more sorties. According to VVS regulations, each plane should have one mechanic and three armorers assigned to it. This was time-consuming; a mechanic would have to wait for the plane to land to be sure it was hers, and then they would have to fight for access to the refueling truck and bombs. Bershanskaya ignored this rule, and every mechanic was made responsible for one job on every plane. Armorers all worked together to lift and load the bombs, and a plane could return to the target in a matter of minutes.²³⁸ Bershanskaya's ingenious work allowed for the 46th to stay on the frontlines and fly more sorties safely.

Bershanskaya also implemented an in-house cross training system.²³⁹ At the onset, it had developed organically; a pilot, flying to a target, would teach her navigator how to operate the plane. Bershanskaya developed it further—mechanics were taught navigation, and armorers were taught mechanics. Soon, the regiment was able to create a third operational squadron, which was

²³⁵ Pennington 75; Tait 90.

²³⁶ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in WWII*, 20

²³⁷ Marina Chechneva, in Cottam, *In the Sky Above the Front* 106.

²³⁸ Rakobolskaya in Cottam, *Women in Air War* 118; Rakobolskaya in Pennington 82.

²³⁹ Some historians refer to this as a retraining system, but this is a misnomer as the personnel were not trained to do the same job differently, but were trained to do a new job.

required for the Guards distinction. A fourth squadron was also created, dedicated to training personnel to do new jobs. The 46th grew from 112 personnel in two squadrons to about 300 people in four squadrons.²⁴⁰ This meant that the 46th never had to be taken off the frontlines to be regenerated, and that they never had to take on male personnel to fill positions when there was a sudden loss; women could join from the rear and be trained accordingly.²⁴¹

The Construction of a Feminine Space

Bershanskaya's command structure allowed for a closeness to evolve among all personnel. Superior combat tactics led to lower casualty rates, which led to a higher probability of camaraderie. The women of the 46th felt united in the job they were doing, which was key to their combat effectiveness. In a collectivist state, it was common for women to form these close unions, and these sisterhoods became even more important in war. They were working towards a common goal, and that made them develop good social cohesion allowing for "female Spirit to reign supreme."²⁴² By cross training the personnel, the women were able to exclude men from their ranks, and create a women's world or *zhenstvinnost*. This woman's world was somewhat present in the other two women's regiments, but not to the extent that it was in the 46th. This isolation, the veterans believe, was a significant reason for their success: "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."²⁴³ Angelika Irlina echoed this sentiment. She had been stationed as a mechanic with a male Il-2 regiment at the beginning of

²⁴⁰ Pennington 24.

²⁴¹ Rakobolskaya in Pennington 84.

²⁴² Goldstein 195, 199; Chatterjee 56-7; Rasia Yermolayeva Aronova in Cottam *Women in War and Resistance* 39.

²⁴³ Rakobolskaya in Pennington 80.

the war. She said the men were harsh and rude with orders. When she joined the 46th, she was worried that there would be a lot of gossip, but she really felt that she had found her family there.²⁴⁴

The women of the 46th created a space where they could escape the horrors of war, allowing them to fight harder when the time came.²⁴⁵ In the cockpit, they were capable and dangerous pilots and navigators, but on the ground during their free time, they were just girls. These capable soldiers decorated their barracks with flowers and embroidered pillows. Boris Laskin, a notable war reporter, said in his journal that the decorated and talented women of the 46th all loved flowers very much.²⁴⁶ The women published literary journals and newsletters, and wrote poems. Irina Rakobolskaya said that when “There are no flights, the weather is bad, you devote yourself to embroidering forget-me-nots or other flowers. Girls would fly with kittens. We danced at night in the airfield. Zhenia Rudeneva told us fairy tales.... You know the life was such, that on the one hand—our maiden essence, our female essence, it always manifested itself, we did not become man-like warriors.”²⁴⁷ She also asserted that men would never think to dance in an airfield and sing folk songs when the weather was too dangerous to fly.²⁴⁸ They also had celebrations, especially for birthdays. When Marina Chechneva flew her 500th sortie, Bershanskaya and Rachkevich arranged for a rare treat: a watermelon, with “500” cut into it to celebrate the event.²⁴⁹

A good social environment bred a good work environment. Separated from men, the work atmosphere was warmer, and things were done more casually.²⁵⁰ Even though pilots and

²⁴⁴ Angelika Irlina, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

²⁴⁵ Cardona 102-3.

²⁴⁶ Cardona 101; Krylova 272.

²⁴⁷ Irina Rakobolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2000

²⁴⁸ Irina Rakobolskaya in Noggle 29.

²⁴⁹ Marina Chechneva in Cottam *Women in Air War* 132.

²⁵⁰ Griesse and Stites 72; Cardona 101.

armorers came from different strata of society, they all treated each other as sisters, as they had to trust each other with their lives.²⁵¹ They loved each other so much that often they would not report illness, because injuries meant that they could not fly. They wanted to be in the air to look out for one another.²⁵² Being all female meant that the “female thoroughness and sense of responsibility obviously played a role” in their success.²⁵³ Their camaraderie created an environment where everyone felt pushed to be the best at their jobs, and anyone who fell behind could expect a gentle push rather than a harsh reprimand.

With the creation of this feminine space, each woman could take on feminine roles without fear of being judged. This kept combat from making them crude and tough. Once they realized that the war would not end in a matter of months, they created a life where combat fit into their female routines. They wrote letters to potential suitors, and giggled with their friends as they read the responses. Some women curled their hair every night, so that if their plane was to land in friendly territory, a group of male pilots could be dazzled by their beauty. One night this very thing happened, and the poor navigator was distraught because she had received a head injury. She exclaimed, “Who was going to marry me with this huge bump on my forehead?”²⁵⁴ By remaining all female, the women were able to cope better with the difficulties they faced to become a more effective regiment overall.

Demobilization and Post War Experience

In 1945, the 46th Taman Guards Regiment was disbanded. In a speech to other demobilized soldiers, President Kalinin congratulated women who participated in combat for

²⁵¹ Angelika Irlina, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

²⁵² Sr. Lt. Serafima Amosova-Taranenko in Noggle 47

²⁵³ Gelman in Pennington 88.

²⁵⁴ Sr. Lt. Yevgenia Zhigulenko in Noggle 57.

their achievements but said “Do not speak of the service you rendered.” In many ways, all women who served were brushed under the rug in the post war society. Many women were mocked and accused of being harlots, and most were unable to stay in the military after the war. It seemed that despite all the talk about equality, women were only needed in the army in dire circumstances. This analysis, however, ignores the social circumstances the Soviet Union was in post-war. The USSR’s victory over Germany came at a high cost. 1,700 towns, 70,000 villages, and housing for approximately 25 million people was totally destroyed. 27 million Soviet citizens had lost their lives, and between 7 million and 12 million of these deaths were soldiers. Seventy-five percent of the military dead were men 17 to 25, and 90% of the men mobilized that were born in the year 1921 (age 20 in 1941) died in uniform. One out of every four Belarusian had been exterminated by the spring of 1944, and in Stalingrad only 12.2% of the pre-war population was left. The Soviet Union had lost more citizens in the Great Patriotic War than all nations lost in World War I.²⁵⁵ War had decimated the Soviet Union, so perhaps it is not so hard to believe that the women wanted to return to their homes, get married, and start a family. Their lives had been interrupted by combat, and they felt that their patriotic duty was to leave the military and go back to where they were needed most. To some extent, even men were encouraged to put down their weapons and settle down into families.²⁵⁶ The Soviet Union did not need soldiers; it needed civilians who could rebuild its country and its population.

Looking just at the women of the 46th, it seems that most had other dreams they wanted to pursue outside of the military. Working tirelessly on the frontlines for three years meant that

²⁵⁵ Clodfelter 464; Robert Dale, “‘Being a Real Man’: Masculinity in Soviet Russia during and after the Great Patriotic War” in C. M. Peniston-Bird and Emma Vickers, *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*, (London: Palgrave, 2017) 116, 127; Saywell 153.

²⁵⁶ Dale 128.

most of these women were not healthy enough to keep flying. Major Mariya Smirnova said that, “After the war...we all wanted to fly in civil aviation. I applied to the medical board, but I could not pass the medical examination. I had undermined my physical and mental health at the front; I was completely exhausted by the 4 years of war and combat.”²⁵⁷ Those that tried to stay in the military were usually turned away because they could not pass a health exam. Even those who did manage to remain in the VVS stayed only for a few years before retiring from military life. For many of these women, what they really wanted and needed was rest. The veterans reported having severe headaches and inability to sleep after adjusting to short daytime rest. Some had pain from injuries they were willing to ignore while at the front, but that made civilian life difficult.²⁵⁸ Some women were able to keep on flying in civilian aviation if they wanted, but others, “had had more than enough of aviation already,” and went back to their professions before the war.²⁵⁹ Most of the women married fellow soldiers from their brother regiment, and rejoiced in the peace that they had helped to secure.

The women of the 46th's skill in the skies made them the pride of the 4th Air Army and the entire VVS. Through their sufferings, they broke combat records and were awarded the honor of the Guards designation. They overcame the hardships placed before them, and far exceeded anyone's expectations for them. They were not only well decorated, capable pilots, but they bombed so ferociously that these “Night Witches” became the stuff of German's nightmares.

Despite their tenacity for aerial warfare, they never lost their femininity. They coped with the stress of the front by constantly reminding themselves of three things. First, they reminded

²⁵⁷ Major Maria Smirnova in Noggle 37.

²⁵⁸ Sr. Lt. Serafima Amosova-Taranenko in Noggle 47; Nina Raspopova, Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

²⁵⁹ Angelika Irlina, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2000.

themselves that they were the embodiment of the strong Soviet Woman: a woman who was soft but tough, and the equal to any man. In the cockpit they could be ruthless, but on the ground with each other, they could just be girls. Second, they remembered why they fought—for the liberation of their homeland, and for the people they loved and lost. Third, they remembered the women who inspired them: Raskova, whose influence led to their creation, and Bershanskaya, whose ideas made their fame possible. These women served to remind them that the 46th flew not just for themselves and for their country, but for every woman who would have to prove how capable she was.

To some, it might seem that these women were not able to accomplish their mission of achieving equality for women in the military, as they were demobilized at the end of the war.

It seems though that the women of the 46th were ready to move on to new problems, namely rebuilding their country that had been destroyed by war. They simply wished to never be forgotten, not just for the strides they made for women, but for the sacrifice they made for their country.

Conclusion

In August of 2017, Russia announced that they would allow female fighter pilots into its Air Force again for the first time since the Great Patriotic War.²⁶⁰ Through this act a new generation of warrior women was created in Russia, and the numerous articles that covered this announcement reminded readers that this is not the first time women had been in the Russian military. As A. Maresyev, HSU fighter pilot says in the introduction to *The Sky Above the Front*:

It is hardly possible to overestimate the contribution made by Soviet women to our victory over Nazism... Many of them fell on the battlefield, having discharged their Soldierly Duty honorably. They had a zest for life—they wanted to study, to raise children, and to work, but when the need arose they faced danger and died without faltering. They consciously sacrificed their young lives in the great cause... on board fighters and bombers, they fought the enemy every bit as well as men did.²⁶¹

The women who served for the Soviets in the Great Patriotic War were bred to believe in their full equality with men. They were strong, hard workers, but also beautiful and feminine mothers. Fully committed to the Soviet experiment, and inspired by heroes like Marina Raskova, many learned to fly planes and shoot rifles to prepare to defend the Motherland against all threats. When the Germans brought devastation their land, they felt the same call to arms that men did, and the Soviet government gave them the tools to avenge their homes. The women of the 122nd Air Group were tenacious, talented aviatrixes, with patriotism and indignation pushing them to be the best. It was hard, and these women faced every atrocity the Eastern front had to

²⁶⁰ Boris Egorov, “Queens of the Sky: The Girls Taking Russia’s Air Force by Storm,” October 4, 2017, <https://www.rbth.com/science-and-tech/326321-queens-of-sky-girls>. In fact, the article states that the most experienced pilot is Yekaterina Pchela, a graduate of Engels just like the women pilots that came before her.

²⁶¹ A. Maresyev, in Cottam *In the Sky Above the Front* VII.

offer. From the moment of their recruitment, they had to face the difficulties of military life, in addition to the unique issues that arose from their sex.

The women of the 46th, however, navigated their way through war and womanhood to achieve their goal of defeating the enemy. They fought in many of the major battles of the Eastern front in plywood biplanes, and accomplished more than anyone could have imagined. They gained accolades and praise for their tenacity and efficacy, including the Guards designation. By looking at their story, one is able to see the full picture of war—to remember that war is just as personal as it is belligerent. The women of the 46th remember the Great Patriotic War not for its fierce battles, but for its devastation and difficulties. They recount the little moments, the flowers and the folk songs, and serve as reminder that war is first and foremost about people—people’s whose lives are changed by the struggle to survive.

At the end of her interview with the Flying Heritage Museum, Irina Rakobolskaya remarks, “You know, they tell me that today's generation is not like us, that they never do what we did. But I don’t believe this...they are the same as us...and if what happened to us happen to them, when war was declared, it is my deepest belief that they would do the same. I believe in our young people.”²⁶² The pilots, mechanics, armorers, navigators, and personnel of this regiment took with them to war an understanding of how to be a soldier-mother. They were united in a common mission of freeing their country, but they remembered to take time to dance in the airfield. Through patriotism, hard work, and femininity, the 46th Taman Guards can be remembered as the best that the Soviets had to offer, and they stand as an inspiration to women who fight for freedoms everywhere. Maybe not every woman is fit for combat, but the women of

²⁶² Irina Rakobolskaya, interview by Flying Heritage Museum, 2014.

the 46th certainly were. If today's society stretches out the definition of femininity to include combat, then it too can produce a generation of warrior women.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Aleksievich, Svetlana. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War*. 2nd ed. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Random House, 2017.
- Cottam, K. Jean. *Sky above the Front: A Collection of Memoirs of Soviet Air Women Participants in the Great Patriotic War*, 1984.
- Gasheva, Rufina Sergeevna. By the Flying Heritage Museum. *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, September 27, 2000. Accessed April 2, 2018.
<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090746/rufina-sergeevna-gasheva.htm>
- Gelman, Polina Vladimirovna. By the Flying Heritage Museum, *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, September 27, 2000. Accessed April 2, 2018.
<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090316/polina-vladimirovna-gel-man.htm>
- Irlina, Angelika. By the Flying Heritage Museum. *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, November 16, 2000. Accessed April 2, 2018.
<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090135/angelika-irlina.htm>
- Noggle, Anne. *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994.
- Popova, Anastasia Nadezhda Vasilevna. By the Flying Heritage Museum. *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, October 3, 2000. Accessed April 2, 2018.
<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090240/anastasiia-nadezhda-vasil-evna-popova.htm>
- Rakobolskaya, Irina. By the Flying Heritage Museum. *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, November 18, 2000, accessed April 2, 2018.
<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090134/irina-rakobolskaya.htm>
- Rakobolskaya, Irina. By the Flying Heritage Museum. *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, December 18, 2014. Accessed April 2, 2018.
<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/116083477/chief-of-staff-irina-vyacheslavovna-rakobolskaya.htm>
- Raspopova, Nina By the Flying Heritage Museum. *Chronicles of Courage: Stories of Wartime and Innovation*, November 16, 2000. Accessed April 2, 2018.
<http://video.flyingheritage.com/v/117090245/nina-raspopova.htm>

Stalin, Joseph. *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union*. New York, International Publishers, [1945], 1945.

Secondary Sources

Atwood, Lynne. "Women Workers at Play: The Portrayal of Leisure in the Magazine *Rabotnitsa* in the First Two Decades of Soviet Power." In *Women in the Stalin Era*, edited by Melanie Ilic, and Karen Petrone, 29-49. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Barber, John, and Mark Harrison. *The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II*. London; New York: Longman, 1991.

Boyd, Alexander. *The Soviet Air Force since 1918*. London: Macdonald and Jane's 1977.

Cardona, Euridice Charon, and Roger D. Markwick. *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Chatterjee, Choi. "Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity 1930-1939." In *Women in the Stalin Era*, edited by Melanie Ilic, and Karen Petrone, 49-69. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Clodfelter, Micheal. *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500-2000*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2002.

Conze, Susanne and Fieseler, Beate. "Soviet Women as Comrades-in-Arms: A Blind Spot in the History of the War." In *the People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*, edited by Robert Thurston, 211-34. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Cottam, Kazimiera Janina. *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*, 1983.

-----, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Ground/Air Defense Forces." In *Women in Eastern Europe & the Soviet Union*, edited by Tova Yedlin, 115-27. New York: Praeger, 1980.

Cottam, Kazimiera Janina, Jacqueline Kruper, Lance Janda, John Davis, and Alison Rowley. *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*, 1997.

Cottam, Kazimiera Janina. *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers*. Nepean, Canada: New Military Pub., 1998.

Dale, Robert. "'Being a Real Man': Masculinity in Soviet Russia during and after the Great Patriotic War." In *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*, edited by Corinna Peniston-Bird, and Emma Vickers. London: Palgrave, 2017.

Erickson, John. "Soviet Women at War." In *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, edited by John Gordon Garrad and Carol Garrard, 50-76. New York: St. Martin's Press in association with the International Council for Soviet and East European Studies, 1993.

- Glantz, David M. *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1998.
- Goldstein, Joshua S. *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Griesse, Anne Eliot, and Richard Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War." in *Female Soldiers - Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical & Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by and Nancy Loring Goldman, 61-84. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1982.
- Hardesty, Von, and Ilya Grinberg. *Red Phoenix Rising: The Soviet Air Force in World War II*. Modern War Studies. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012.
- Heitlinger, Alena. "Marxism, Feminism, and Sex Equality." In *Women in Eastern Europe & the Soviet Union*, edited by Tova Yedlin, 9–20. New York: Praeger, 1980.
- Hill, Alexander. *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-45: A Documentary Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Holt, Alix, "Marxism and Women's Oppression: Bolshevik Theory and Practice in the 1920's." In *Women in Eastern Europe & the Soviet Union*, edited by Tova Yedlin, 87–114. New York: Praeger, 1980.
- Ilic, Melanie, and Karen Petrone. *Women in the Stalin Era*, New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Jones, Ellen. *Red Army and Society: A Sociology of the Soviet Military*. United States of America: Allen & Unwin, 1985.
- Kilmarx, Robert A. *A History of Soviet Air Power*. New York: Praeger, 1962.
- Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Kucherenko, Olga. *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Lee, Asher. *Soviet Air Force*. New York: Harper, 1950.
- The Ministry of Defense of the USSR. *The Soviet Air Force in World War II. The Official History* Translated by Leland Fetzer. Edited by Ray Wagner. London: David & Charles, 1974.
- Moine, Nathalie, and John Angell. "Defining 'War Crimes against Humanity' in the Soviet Union. Nazi Arson of Soviet Villages and the Soviet Narrative on Jewish and Non-Jewish Soviet War Victims, 1941-1947." *Cahiers Du Monde Russe. Russie - Empire Russe - Union Soviétique et États Indépendants* 52, no. 52/2-3 (November 15, 2011): 441–73.

- Nikonova, Olga. "Soviet Amazons: Women Patriots During Prewar Stalinism." *Minerva: Women & War* 2, no. 1 (January 2008): 84–99.
- Saywell, Shelley. *Women in War*. New York: Viking, 1985.
- Scheide, Carmen. "'Born in October': The Life and Thought of Aleksandra Vasil'evna Artyukhina, 1889-1969," in *Women in the Stalin Era*, edited by Melanie Ilic, and Karen Petrone, 9-29. New York: Palgrave, 2001
- Thurston, Robert W., and Bernd Bonwetsch. *The People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Van Evera, Stephen. *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999., 1999.
- Vinogradova, Lyuba. *Defending the Motherland: The Soviet Women Who Fought Hitler's Aces*. Translated by Arch Tait. London: MacLehose Press, 2015.