

Foreword

Woman has always played a role in war. She has defended her home and children from invading forces, nursed wounded soldiers at the front, and disguised as a male soldier, she has fought bravely in the trenches. She has spied for her country, participated in armed resistance as a partisan, a sniper, an infantryman, a combat pilot. In the history of war, woman has played patriot, killer, and savior.

The most controversial role woman has played throughout history in war is that of warrior. Often driven by a desire for adventure, a love of country, and a need to break from their narrow, conventional roles in society, women have volunteered to fight alongside their countrymen, often disguised as men. In the American Revolution Deborah Sampson enlisted in Colonel Henry Jackson's Fourth Massachusetts Regiment under the name of Robert Shirliff. Fanny Campbell, disguised as a second officer on the British merchant brigantine *Constance*, sailed to Cuba to rescue her imprisoned husband and ten other jailed Americans. In the American Civil War hundreds of women fought in the Union Army disguised as men, and the number was higher for women of the Confederacy. Loreta Janeta Velazquez took on the male persona of Lieutenant Harry T. Buford and fought against the Yankees, recounting the experiences in her memoir *The Woman in Battle*.

Earlier, in 1806, Nadezhda Durova, disguised as a boy, ran away from home to fight in the Russian wars against Napoleon, where she experienced nine years of combat and was personally decorated for heroism by Tsar Alexander I. One hundred years later, in 1917, Maria Bochkareva would lead Russia's first all-female battalion in defense of the ill-fated Provisional Government.

History is peppered with the exploits of women on the battlefield. The experiences of women, however vivid, often appear only as footnotes or are explained away by historians as exceptional or insignificant. Throughout the centuries women have expressed a desire to not only care for soldiers wounded in battle, as has been their traditional role, but to be soldiers themselves. In the twentieth century with the advent of aviation, women proved that they could fly as well as men, and the early women pioneers of flight paved the way for women to become military pilots.

As women's confidence grew in the air, they saw for themselves an important role alongside their male counterparts when war threatened their country. World War I signified the first armed conflict to utilize air power. Despite their skill and experience in the cockpit, women were not allowed by

their governments to fly in combat. Although they did fly in different capacities throughout the war, it would not be until two decades later when women would be permitted to pilot military aircraft in wartime.

On June 22, 1941 the German *blitzkrieg* invaded the Soviet Union in the form of Hitler's Operation Barbarossa. Six months later in the early morning hours of December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, thus inciting the United States to join its European allies in World War II. As a result of these two events, thousands of Soviet and American men and women, fueled by patriotism, eagerly volunteered for the armed forces.

That same year American aviatrix Jacqueline Cochran and Soviet pilot Marina Raskova would inspire firsts in both their countries. Cochran convinced President Franklin D. Roosevelt that women should fly military aircraft as ferrying pilots and organized the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program. Raskova, with Stalin's blessing, formed the world's first all-female air regiments which would carry out combat missions along the Eastern Front.

To understand the significance of these American and Soviet women pilots' accomplishments in World War II, it is necessary to look back in history at women's early involvement in the area of aviation. Whether they disguised themselves as men or fought as women, the history of war is interspersed with the accounts of female soldiers. While women have proved themselves useful in war, they often appear a dangerous threat to the social order after it. War provided new opportunities for women to break down the gender barrier—if only temporarily. Even after proving their capabilities to their country, the Soviet women pilots found themselves in the awkward position of being cautioned to discount their experiences. When Stalin praised the work of women in the war on November 6, 1944, he did not mention that they had fought in combat. After the war Soviet President Kalinin warned his country's female veterans, "Do not speak of the services you rendered."

Since the days of the early balloon flights in the eighteenth century women have been involved in all aspects of aviation and have piloted everything from balloons to space vehicles. For women aviators, the country of origin for many firsts was France. Madame Elisabeth Thible became the first woman to fly in an untethered balloon as a passenger, watched by the King of Sweden in May 1784. According to accounts, Madame Thible flew a mile high, elegantly attired in a lace-trimmed dress and a feathered hat. Although she did not repeat the experience, she apparently enjoyed it so much that she burst into song.

In 1805 Madeleine Sophie Blanchard, wife of the famous balloonist Jean Pierre Blanchard, became the first woman aeronaut in her own right. She gained such a reputation in her lifetime that Napoleon made her Official Aeronaut of the Empire. She was killed in July 1817 during an aerial fire-

works display at the Tivoli Gardens in Paris when her balloon caught on fire and she fell onto a roof and died of a broken neck.

In Châlons, France on October 22, 1909, Raymonde de Laroche became the first woman in the world to drive a heavier-than-air machine into the air alone. Five months later she was issued license No. 36 by the Aero Club of France, joining the growing number of men licensed in Europe and the United States. Other women pilots were soon to be added to the list, including Harriet Quimby in the United States and Lydia Zvereva in Russia in 1911, becoming the first licensed women pilots in their respective countries. The next year Quimby would go on to become the first woman to fly solo across the English Channel.

Although aviation developed more slowly in Russia than in the West, there were a small number of women who flew in the Imperial period. Born into a military family in St. Petersburg in 1890 and educated at the Tsar Nicholas I Institute for Girls, Lydia Zvereva proved that she was just as skilled on the ground as a mechanic as she was in the sky as a pilot. She would use this talent many times when her male mechanic could not figure out the problem with her airplane. After receiving her pilot's license on August 22, 1911 at the Russian Aviation Association Flying School at Gatchina, Zvereva entered several flying contests, but found to her dismay that many of the men did not welcome female pilots. The Aero Club demanded such a high security deposit for the race at Tsarskoe Selo that she had to bow out. As her reputation grew as a skilled flyer, she became the object of sabotage when a competitor put iron filings in the motor of her Farman airplane.

During an air show in May 1914 Zvereva became the first woman pilot in the world to perform a loop in an airplane. When war broke out that same year she continued to produce planes in the airplane manufacturing plant in Riga and St. Petersburg that she had started with her husband and former flight instructor, Vladimir V. Slyusarenko. Zvereva died on May 1, 1916 from typhoid fever and was buried in Alexander Nevsky Monastery while an aerial formation flew over the cemetery in her honor.

The second Russian woman to earn a pilot's license was Eudocie V. Anatra, who on October 3, 1911, received certificate No. 54 at Gatchina airfield. She opened a flying school in 1912, and one of her best-known students was Eugenie Shakhovskaya, a princess born in St. Petersburg in 1889, and the third woman to take to the skies. Flying was becoming more acceptable for women now, and Shakhovskaya's aristocratic background freed her from worry about respectability. On August 16, 1912 she received her pilot's license in Berlin. That same year when war broke out in Italy, Shakhovskaya proposed to fly as an aerial reconnaissance pilot for the Italian government, but the Italians refused her offer. Despite the refusal, Shakhovskaya did not give up her desire to fly for the war effort, and was later hailed as the "first military airwoman" in the world when she became an air scout for the Russian Army in the First World War. Princess Shakhovskaya reportedly obtained the

tsar's permission to serve as a reconnaissance pilot, although she did not hold military rank or participate in combat.

Lyubov Golanchikova, a former dancer-singer known as Molly Moret, became a popular pilot in Russia after she broke the altitude record at Johannisthal airfield near Berlin on November 21, 1912 with a flight of 2,200 meters. Well known for her skill in exhibition flying, it is reported that Lyuba, as she was later called, is believed to have gone on to fly for the Red Air Fleet when the Russian Revolution began in 1917. She reportedly flew several missions for the revolutionary forces during the civil war, but details are sketchy.

Nadezhda Degtereva, who is said to have disguised herself as a boy and entered military air service in 1914, also flew reconnaissance missions. It was not until after she was wounded while flying over enemy lines on the Austrian front in Galicia that her true sex was discovered. Her valor earned her a promotion to the rank of sergeant and the Cross of Saint George, Fourth Class. Degtereva holds the distinction of being the first woman pilot to be wounded in combat. Princess Sophie Alexandrovna Dolgorukaya is also reported to have flown for the Air Service in 1917 after Alexander Kerensky, the leader of the Provisional Government in Russia, opened military service to women.

The first American woman to make a solo flight was Blanche Stuart Scott on September 2, 1910, but according to Ann Hodgman and Rudy Djabbaroff in their book *Sky Stars: The History of Women in Aviation*, it may have been unintentional. According to the authors, Scott was sitting in the plane while her instructor, famed aviator and airplane designer Glenn Curtiss, gave her a lesson. As she began to practice driving the plane back and forth across the field, a "sudden gust of wind lifted the plane into the air." Because the engine was on at the time and the plane was light, Scott was soon forty feet in the air. She managed to maintain her composure and landed the aircraft safely.

Bessica Faith Raiche was also learning how to fly at the same time as Scott. Two weeks after Scott soloed so did Raiche. Because Scott's flight may have been caused by a trick of the wind, it was Raiche who was given the distinction by the Aeronautical Society on October 13, 1910, as being the "first woman aviator of America." Her failing health later forced Raiche to give up flying, and she went on to study medicine and became a practicing physician.

Despite women's early successes in aviation, it was difficult for them to find jobs other than in exhibition flying performing for crowds. The public viewed women flyers more as a novelty than serious pilots. Opportunities to teach flying or work for the government as aviators were still a distant dream for most women. The advent of World War I saw the birth of air power and American women began to offer their services to a reluctant nation.

As many women did at the outbreak of the war, pilot Ruth Law wanted to get involved. Like most female flyers during this period, she accumulated her flight hours performing in air shows around the country. Law offered herself to the United States government as a fighter. "I could drive a machine

with a gun and gunner and go into actual battle," she said at the time. "That's what I'd like to do more than anything—get right into the fight!" Not surprisingly her offer was turned down. Law went on to fly for the benefit of the Red Cross and Liberty Bond drives, setting a new women's altitude record of 14,700 feet. In November 1917 she sent a petition to the War Department requesting that she be allowed to fly military aircraft for the war effort. Again Law was turned down. She was allowed however to do recruiting work for the Army and Navy, and for that work she was given an Army officer's uniform.

Since the Soviet Union had the distinction of being the first country in the world to proclaim legal equality for women in 1917, the military flying schools and Osoaviakhim (the Society for Cooperation in Defense and Aviation-Chemical Development) could not legally refuse entry to qualified women. It was through Osoaviakhim, a paramilitary organization, that most Soviet women received flight training. Founded in 1927 to train teenagers and young adults in quasi-military skills such as defense and chemical warfare, marksmanship, and parachuting, by the 1930s it began developing a network of air clubs to provide flight training in light aircraft. The Soviet government emphasized the importance of aviation and air travel, which was seen as the most promising means of transportation, especially since the vast expanses of Soviet territory were still not linked by roads or railroads.

Officially young Soviet women were encouraged to participate in all facets of Osoaviakhim training. However, many women encountered obstacles when attempting to get into flight training. Marina Chechneva (who subsequently became a night bomber pilot and a Hero of the Soviet Union in the Second World War) described the manner in which her male flying club instructor discouraged her from seeking a career as a pilot as being typical of the time:

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 in their groups 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 air club.

Nevertheless many Soviet women persevered and learned to fly. By 1941, 100 to 150 air clubs had been established; one out of every three or four pilots was a woman. The purpose for the training (for the men anyway) was to prepare them for either active or reserve military duty. The men who received flight training at the air clubs were registered in the military reserve forces,

but women were not. No provisions were made for women pilots to play a military role—at least not yet.

Arguably the most celebrated woman pilot in American history was Amelia Earhart. Although her flying career lasted less than ten years, her accomplishments and personality beguiled a nation and helped to extend the possibilities of women in aviation. A setter of many aviation records, she is probably best known for being the first woman to pilot a transatlantic flight, the first solo crossing for a woman, and the fastest crossing by anyone. In 1937 Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan set out on a round the world flight at the Equator that had never been done before. It was on this flight that she and Noonan disappeared. The United States organized the largest air and sea search in its history (at that time), combing an area of 265,000 square miles for sixteen days, but no trace of the pilots or their plane was ever found. Earhart remarked just before her final flight: “I want to do it because I want to do it. Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be a challenge to others.”

In 1929 the first national air race for women took place in Santa Monica, California. Nineteen women took part in the race, including Amelia Earhart. The first Women’s Air Derby became known as the “Powder Puff Derby.” The derby made the women who flew in it realize how much they could benefit from organizing themselves. Four pilots—Margery Brown, Fay Gillis, Frances Harrell, and Neva Paris—sat down together and wrote a letter that they sent to all licensed women pilots in the United States. On November 2, 1929, twenty-six women gathered at Curtiss Airport in New York to make plans for forming the world’s first all-women aviation organization. It was Amelia Earhart who suggested the organization be named for the number of charter members who joined it. This idea was immediately accepted. Earhart was made president of the new group, and after all the members were counted, the organization became the “Ninety-Nines.” The group remains in existence today with more than 5,500 active members in 35 countries.

In the 1930s an American by the name of Jacqueline Cochran began to be known for her achievements as a pilot. Cochran would go on to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program a decade later, which would give American women the unprecedented opportunity to fly military aircraft during World War II. Born into poverty with a tremendous drive to succeed, she started out in the cosmetics business. Thinking that learning how to fly might help promote her new company, Cochran (with the financial backing of her millionaire husband Floyd Odlum) earned her pilot’s license after only two-and-a-half weeks. In her 1954 autobiography *Stars at Noon*, Cochran described her first flying lesson in 1932: “I showed up at Roosevelt Field, Long Island, at the flying school,” she wrote. “At that moment, when I paid for my first lesson, a beauty operator ceased to exist and an aviator was born.”

In December Cochran set a new national transcontinental record—beating Howard Hughes' earlier one—by racing from New York City to Miami in only four hours and twelve minutes. The flight was a dangerous one, but taking risks became Cochran's hallmark. That same year the International League of Aviators voted Cochran the world's outstanding pilot, an award that she would win for three consecutive years.

In March 1939 Cochran was awarded her second Harmon Trophy, the highest award given to any aviator in America. The day before the Harmon Award was announced, she had broken a women's altitude record by climbing to 33,000 feet above sea level. Over the next few months Cochran broke two women's and two national speed records, and one intercity record—between Burbank and San Francisco. On each of her record-breaking flights, sustained only with a half-filled bottle of Coca-Cola (a full one would explode at high altitudes) and a fistful of lollypops for "dry mouth," she tested new types of oxygen masks, engine superchargers, sparkplugs and airplane fuel and wing designs which would appear in the airplanes soon to become America's air arsenal.

That same year the Civil Aeronautics Administration began a program of pilot cadet training in American colleges and many young women eagerly signed up for flying lessons. In 1941, however, women were dropped to make room for more men. Cochran sensed early in the war, however, that women would be needed as pilots, and she eagerly sought out the opportunity to bring female aviators into the war effort. She recalled in her autobiography: "The pressure on our man power during World War II and the increasing use of war power made it certain that eventually there would be a need for women pilots. All my war work up until the time General Arnold called me home from England (where she was assisting with the Air Transport Auxiliary) had been in preparation for this time of need."

Thousands of miles away another accomplished flyer was preparing to organize a group of young female pilots to fly in defense of Soviet Russia. Marina Raskova, one of the most venerated and best-loved women aviators of the USSR, is largely unknown in the West. Raskova was admired for her achievements in aviation in the same way Amelia Earhart was in the United States.

Founder of the world's first all-female air regiments during World War II, Raskova, who rose to the rank of major, would become the first woman navigator in the Soviet Union and commanding officer of the 587th Dive Bomber Regiment, subsequently renamed the 125th M. M. Raskova *Borisov* Guards Dive Bomber Regiment after her death in 1943. One of the first women to earn the coveted title Hero of the Soviet Union, Raskova served as a role model for her fellow aviators, male and female, for not only her tremendous skill and personal courage, but her ability to make decisions and lead her regiment under severe and often very difficult circumstances.

Like Cochran, Raskova did not set out early in her life to become a pilot. She aspired to be an opera singer, but a middle-ear infection at the age of fifteen pushed her life down another path. Raskova chose instead to study chemistry and engineering, and later mastered the theory of air navigation. She became the first woman in the USSR to earn the diploma of professional air navigator, going on to become an instructor at N. Ye. Zhukovsky Air Force Engineering Academy in Moscow.

As an instructor Raskova taught military navigation to male officers, who although initially skeptical of her knowledge and abilities, would later admit that they were now convinced, based on her performance, of women's capabilities in aviation. The Academy rewarded Raskova by sending her to the Central Flying Club at Tushino, near Moscow, for flying lessons, which she completed in August 1935. After her training Raskova became an instrument flying instructor and taught advanced navigation for command personnel.

By the mid-1930s Raskova became involved in a greater number of important aviation-related events, and in August 1935 she took part in her first independent flight as a pilot. In July 1936, Raskova began probationary navigator training in the 23rd Heavy Air Brigade. In the meantime she continued instructing at the Academy. In June 1937 Raskova participated as navigator in an air race from Moscow to Sevastopol and back to Moscow, flying the same plane as in the 1935 flight but this time with additional fuel tanks. She was the fourth to arrive in Sevastopol and the sixth to return to Moscow, completing the journey within twenty-four hours. That same year Raskova met pilot Valentina Grizodubova, who proposed to her that they fly together in a Yak-12 to establish a long distance record. On October 24, 1937 they set a new women's record when they covered approximately 1,443 kilometers from Moscow to Aktyubinsk, Kazakhstan.

On July 2, 1938 Raskova again established a new women's long distance record when she flew (as navigator) with pilot Polina Osipenko and co-pilot Vera Lomako in an MP-1 non-stop from the Black Sea to the White Sea, having taken off in Sevastopol and landed in the vicinity of Arkhangelsk on Lake Kholmovskoye. The route lay across four different air masses: tropical, continental, polar, and arctic, and required tremendous skills by the crew. The aviators set an international women's straight-line distance record when they flew 5,947 kilometers. As a result of this record-setting flight, senior lieutenants Osipenko and Lomako as well as lieutenant Raskova (who became a career officer in 1938) were each awarded the Order of Lenin.

Not long after this flight, Grizodubova, with Stalin's support, arranged for an aircraft to be assigned to them for their proposed flight to the Far East (with Osipenko as co-pilot). It was an ANT-37 (a converted long-range DB-2 bomber) nicknamed *Rodina* ("Motherland") by Grizodubova. In addition to flight training, the three women practiced firing rifles and pistols. The flight was delayed after Raskova developed appendicitis, and in September 1938 a state commission cancelled the flight due to the lateness in the year and anti-

culated bad weather. Stalin, however, overruled the decision and the *Rodina* took off on September 24, 1938 at 8:16 a.m.

During the course of this mission, overcast skies completely obscured all visual landmarks, leaving radio signals as the only means of orientation. When the radio station ceased transmitting, there was nothing to do but continue on, eventually running out of fuel. Raskova's crew position in the nose of the aircraft was hazardous for a crash landing, so she was ordered to parachute from the plane over the *taiga*, a dense, swampy, forested area of Siberia. Raskova landed in the swamp and it was not until ten days later that she finally came upon her aircraft and was reunited with Osipenko and Grizodubova. The story of Raskova's flight was widely publicized, and her courage and stamina caught the imagination of the Soviet people.

Raskova spent several months recovering from the injuries to her legs she sustained as a result of the historic flight. Not only had Raskova proven her courage but she was also intelligent and beautiful, and at the age of twenty-six she was a national celebrity, a recipient of the second Order of Lenin, as well as the Gold Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. Raskova, along with Grizodubova and Osipenko, became the first women to receive the country's highest honor, and the only women to receive it before the war. The flyers were elevated to the equivalent status of American movie idols in the USSR and they received significant attention from the press. Stalin toasted the pilots in a banquet held in their honor at the Kremlin in a speech about the ancient times of matriarchy in Russia. He concluded by saying, "today these three women have avenged the heavy centuries of the oppression of women."

Raskova would come to inspire hundreds of young women to fly for the Soviet Union when the time came to defend it. In Reina Pennington's book *Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*, pilot Yevgeniya Zhigulenko recalled Raskova before the war: "Marina Raskova was an exceptional person. A famous pilot and Hero of the Soviet Union, she was still a simple, kind woman. She helped many young women who wanted to fly." Raskova became the idol of many, including Soviet fighter ace Liliya Litvyak, who would become the first woman in history to shoot down an enemy aircraft. She reportedly kept pictures of Raskova in her notebook. The aircrew of the *Rodina* met for the last time on March 8, 1939 at the Pilots' Club on International Women's Day. Osipenko would be killed only two months later in a plane crash. Stalin himself would be one of the pallbearers.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Raskova, who was working as a civil defense volunteer at the time, began receiving hundreds of letters from women pilots eager to utilize their flying skills in the war. In October, after getting the full support of Stalin, Raskova set in motion a voluntary recruitment of women flyers and the Aviation Group 122 was born. Three women combat aviation regiments would be formed under its auspices: the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment (Yak-1 fighters), 587th Dive Bomber Aviation Regiment (Pe-2 bombers), which would be renamed the

125th Guards Dive Bomber Aviation Regiment after Raskova's death, and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment (U-2 biplanes, renamed Po-2 in 1944). In February 1943 the 588th would be renamed the 46th *Taman* Guards Night Bomber Regiment in recognition of its outstanding achievements in combat.

A little over one thousand women flew a combined total of more than thirty thousand combat sorties, producing at least thirty Heroes of the Soviet Union. Included in their ranks were two fighter aces. More than thirty women pilots are believed to have been killed in action.

The 46th was the only one of the three original regiments that remained exclusively female throughout the war (the other two regiments incorporated some men.) The regiment flew a total of 24,000 combat missions and was the most decorated of the women's regiments with twenty-three of its members being awarded the Gold Star of the Soviet Union (by 1990), five of them posthumously. The women pilots were nicknamed *Nachthexen* (Night Witches) by their German counterparts, who came to fear their successful aerial tactics in the wooden Po-2 planes they flew on night missions.

Soviet women pilots, navigators, and gunners also served in male regiments during the war. Women flew in dive-bomber, reconnaissance, and ground attack regiments, while others like Liliya Litvyak and Katya Budanova flew in the 296th Fighter Regiment, later renamed the 73rd Guards Fighter Regiment. Needless to say the female pilots had a tougher time integrating into the male regiments than they did in Raskova's regiments. The women pilots had to work hard to overcome the prejudices of the male aircrews that were openly hostile to the idea of women flying in combat. It did not take long, however, for the airwomen to earn their comrades' respect in flight.

In the United States the women's air program formed by Jacqueline Cochran proved a success, despite its losses. Of the 1,074 American pilots who graduated as Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) from 1942-44, thirty-eight were killed in service. Stationed at 120 Army air bases throughout the United States, the aviators flew more than sixty million miles in every type of aircraft and on every type of mission the Army Air Force had except combat. On December 20, 1944, the WASP program was officially disbanded, and it would not be until November 23, 1977 when the women flyers would be officially recognized as veterans.

The women military pilots of the Second World War proved to the world that women could not only accept the challenge, but also make the ultimate sacrifice during one of history's darkest hours. These female warriors answered their countries' call to duty and paved the way for future generations of women in aviation.

Anna Timofeyeva-Yegorova's courageous life story will at once astound and humble the reader. One will come away from the experience of reading her memoir with a greater appreciation for the Soviet experience and the immense sacrifices made by our allies in the Great Patriotic War. If a person still

exists on this planet that harbors any doubt that a woman can distinguish herself in aerial combat, I challenge him to read on.

Amy Goodpaster Strebe
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The American and Soviet Women Military Pilots of World War II*