



## Russian Female Combat Pilots: World War II

Aircraft combat pilots are a separate and distinct group of pilots belonging to a club of their own. Rarely does a conversation of combat pilots ever center on female pilots with this distinction attached to their description as a pilot. The reason for this lack of attention is due to the fact that “combat aviation” has always been considered a male vocation since its inception during World War I. Aviation combat began during the First World War in the skies of France and Germany when pilots were used to observe troop activity on the ground and report troop movement and ground positions. When enemy pilots, during World War I began to encounter each other in the air, they started to fire hand-held weapons at each other and these actions eventually led to an increasing technology in tactics to get the upper hand on their fellow pilots.

Rolland Garros was a seasoned pilot when World War I started. He is most noted for being the first pilot of the war during World War I to fire a machine gun at another airplane and shoot it down. Garros made a forced landing behind German lines and he and his airplane was captured in tact by the Germans. With this “good luck”, the German Air Force was able to improve on his idea and invented a device that allowed a machine gun to fire through a propeller’s arch without damage to the propeller or the pilot from bullets striking the propeller and becoming deflected back through his wind screen and face.

Although there were female combat pilots during World War I, there were pilots with astonishing combat records during World War II. A Very limited amount of information has been written about these female pilots and those who ferried airplanes during World War II, but were not combat pilots. The concept that females had the ability to compete with male pilots in the air on an equal basis was not considered a practical conclusion. Generally this idea was accepted in principal in the countries of the United States of North America, Great Britain and Russia during World War II. Adolph Hitler of Germany never considered using women in combat roles and, in particular, the German Air Force.

In 1942 the United States Army realized that it was faced with a shortage of pilots. To combat this situation, it started a program to train women to fly military aircraft in non-combat situations in order to help increase the pool of available male combat pilots. More than 1,100 women were trained to fly as ferry pilots. They learned to fly almost every type of military airplane that was available.

Their services were terminated after only two years of flying airplanes for the Army Air Force. During their two years as Ferry Pilots, they were not considered military... as an example; one female pilot killed in an accident was sent home by her fellow pilots who took up a collection to ship her remains back home. The Army’s point of view simply stated, “As a civilian, her status did not merit the consideration of sending her remains home at government expense.”

In addition to this particular point of view, there was opposition to Women flying airplanes in competition with men. This opposition to a large degree seems to be prevalent in all of the powers that



participated in World War II. By 1944 the outcome of the war had become evident ... the Axis Powers would soon be defeated... which led Army Air Force General Hap Arnold to announce the disbandment of the group. It was not until the 1970's that women were integrated in the United States Air Force as Pilots.

The Royal Air Force of England also used women in limited roles in its Air Force as civilians during World War II. Women in England and Great Britain were also unappreciated as pilots to eventually the same degree as in the United States of America. As an example, an English Aviation magazine editor made comments with regards to Female Pilots in the Air Transport Auxiliary that they did not have the ability to properly clean hospital floors and that they were a menace in the air.

Unlike the United States, England or Germany as a major participant in World War II, Russia had combat Fighter and Bomber Pilots who actively participated in combat. They were very aggressive and shot down German airplanes in combat while in the air and dropped bombs on enemy positions on the ground.

One of these combat pilots was an ace with 12 kills in the air. Many other pilots shot down German airplanes in the air and dropped bombs on enemy positions. Thousands of Russian women volunteered to fight for their country in the Russian Air Force in three flying Regiments: 586 Women's Fighter Regiment, 587 Day Bomber Regiment and the 588 Night Bomber Regiment, which was better known as the "Night Witches."

On June 22, 1941 Adolph Hitler launched operation Barbarossa and by November the Germans were only nineteen miles from Moscow. A large portion of the Russian Army had been wiped out and millions of Russians had become prisoners of the German Army. During this period of time, the Russian Air Force had been grounded. In the summer of 1941, the 588 Night Bomber was organized by Russian Aviatix, Marina Raskova. This unit was composed completely of women, which included mechanics, navigators, pilots and officers. By January 1943, the Regiment had flown 500 night raids on German positions. As a consequence of their actions, they were given the Name "Night Witches" by the Germans who were occupying their country. Katya Ryabova and Nadya Popava are two individuals who were examples of the contributions these women were making as pilots...they each flew 18 sorties into enemy territory on a single night. This particular unit was the Soviet Union's highest decorated unit during the war. This unit participated from the battle of Stalingrad to the fall of Berlin. During that time period, the Regiment made 24,000 combat flights and dropped 23,000 tons of bombs.

Although Russian women were allowed to participate in combat as pilots, they were not always given recognition by their fellow male pilots. Sexism was at a high point in the Russian Air Force during World War II. Many Russian male pilots refused to fly with women as a "wing man" or fly planes serviced by female ground crews. The units that contained women-only could not only match their skills and talents with their male counterparts as equal, but in some cases as superior. As an example, Marina Raskova, who was thought of as the Russian Amelia Earhart, earned respect as a navigator and Pilot in the 1930's before World War II began. She is credited with using her influence with Joseph Starling to form three



combat Regiments for women and supervised these units, which were highly decorated by the end of World War II.

During World War II, Russian military record attests to the competence of Females in the Armed Forces ...800,000 who served, 200,000, decorated and 89 received the highest military award given by the Soviet Union. Soviet women were comparable to the English Royal Air Force pilots who defended their homeland during the battle of Britain. During a speech to the House of Commons on August 20, 1940, Sir Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of England was prompted to say this concerning the actions of its Royal Air Force combat pilots, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed to so few by so many." When the tide of "Operation Barbarossa" had been turned during the invasion of Russia, Joseph Stalin could have made the same case for the Female Combat pilots who flew for Russia during its invasion by German forces during World War II.

It seems important to me that when stories about combat pilots are written and told the story of all combat pilots should include the details, respect and credit they deserve...Female Combat pilots should not become an exception.

