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Unit Cohesion Among the Three Soviet Women's Air Regiments During World War II

Jessica Leigh Bhuvorakul
Florida State University

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

UNIT COHESION AMONG THE THREE SOVIET WOMEN'S AIR REGIMENTS
DURING WORLD WAR II

By

JESSICA LEIGH BHUVASORAKUL

A Thesis submitted to the
Interdisciplinary Program in Russian and East European Studies
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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Jessica Leigh Bhuvorakul
defended on 25 March 2004.

Jonathan A. Grant
Professor Directing Thesis

Ljubisa S. Adamovich
Committee Member

Michael K. Launer
Committee Member

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee
members.

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TRANSLITERATION CONVENTIONS

Several English language sources were utilized in the course of this study. The various authors of the source material did not use a common transliteration system, which led to inconsistencies in the way Russian proper nouns (names and toponyms) were rendered in English. For the purposes of this study, the following conventions have been followed:

1. Direct citations from published sources retain the spelling of the original
2. Elsewhere, whenever a conventional English name or spelling exists (*e.g.*, Lydia, Crimea) that form is used regardless of other considerations
3. In all other instances, the following transliteration system, which does not conform to any of the standard systems, has been used:

а	a	т	t
б	b	у	u
в	v	ф	f
г	g	х	x
д	d	ц	ts
е	e	ч	ch
ё	e	ш	sh
ж	zh	щ	sch
з	z	ъ	---
и	i	ы	y
й	y	ь	i, zero
к	k	э	e
л	l	ю	iu, yu
м	m	я	ia, ya
н	n	ай	ai
о	o	ая	aya
п	p	ий	y
р	r	ия	ia
с	s		

ABSTRACT

The Soviet Union was unique in its use of women for combat roles, becoming the first state to use female pilots to fly combat missions. “Unit Cohesion Among the Three Soviet Women’s Air Regiments During World War II” analyzes the factors that shaped the cohesion of the three women’s regiments formed from Aviation Group No. 122. Unit cohesion is the glue that holds together a military unit through times of adversity, fear of death, and unimaginable suffering and sacrifice. Many factors affect the cohesion of a unit. The factors discussed in this study are: the effectiveness of command, the plane each regiment flew, the gender composition of the unit, and the reaction of men to the women fighting. This thesis utilized the published memoirs written by veterans of the women’s regiments along with interviews conducted years later by Anne Noggle and Reina Pennington. The study of these women presents a tremendous opportunity to straddle military history, women’s studies, and Russian history to establish precedence in contemporary debates surrounding the use of female combatants.

INTRODUCTION

June 22, 1941, marked the entrance of the Soviet Union into World War II when Nazi Germany violated the German-Soviet non-aggression pact and attacked the Soviet Union. This conflict, known as the “Great Patriotic War,” tested the will and strength of the Soviet people. In this extreme situation, the Soviets utilized all of their resources for the war effort, including assigning women to combat duty. The Soviet Union was unique in its use of women for combat roles, becoming the first state to use female pilots to fly combat missions.¹

“The Soviet woman-she is the hundreds of thousands of drivers, tractor operators, and pilots, who are ready at any moment to sit down in a combat machine and plunge into battle...Dear Sisters! The hour has come for harsh retribution! Stand in the ranks of the warriors for freedom...!”² This speech given by Major Marina Mikhailovna Raskova in September 1941 became the rallying cry for thousands of women who wanted to volunteer for Raskova’s Aviation Group No. 122. The best volunteers already had flying experience gained through Osoaviakhim (the Society for Cooperation in Defense and Aviation-Chemical Development) air clubs or military flying schools. Osoaviakhim was founded in 1927 to teach quasi-military skills to young adults. When air travel became an important means of transportation, the second five-year plan called for extensive civil aviation routes throughout the country. Women were encouraged to enter Osoaviakhim training in preparation for the increased need of pilots, but many found it difficult to obtain admission. Women found military flying schools even more difficult to enter. Although the schools could not legally deny entry to any qualified women, many found that reality was not equal to ideology. However, those who stayed the bureaucratic course became pilots.³

In October 1941, the all-women Aviation Group No. 122 was formed with Marina Raskova as its commander.⁴ The 122nd was responsible for training the entire personnel—pilots, ground crew, navigators, and mechanics—for three new regiments: the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Bomber Aviation Regiment (later the 125th M. M. Raskova Borisov Guards Bomber Regiment; hereafter referred to as the 125th), and the 588th Night Bomber Regiment (later the 46th Taman Guards Night Bomber Regiment; hereafter referred to as the 46th).

Raskova was universally admired and well-respected by the women of the three regiments. Her ability to utilize the Soviet system—with her access to high level government officials—allowed her to not only create, but also to care for, her regiments. There are numerous accounts of the love and respect that the women had toward Raskova. Tragically, she would not live to lead them into combat.

The study of these regiments presents a tremendous opportunity to straddle military history, women's studies, and Russian history to establish precedence in contemporary debates surrounding the use of female combatants. Although these Soviet pilots were neither the first nor the only women to fight in combat, the history of their participation in World War II offers an inimitable case study through which to explore the unit cohesion of the three regiments formed from Aviation Group No. 122. Accordingly, that shall be the principal focus of this study.

Unit cohesion is the glue that holds together a military unit through times of adversity, fear of death, and unimaginable suffering and sacrifice. Many factors affect the cohesion of a unit. The factors discussed in this study are: the effectiveness of command, the plane each regiment flew, the gender composition of the unit, and the reaction of men to the women fighting.

The experience of Soviet men during World War II is treated extensively in academia; however, little consideration has been given to the women in the Soviet armed forces who fought alongside their male counterparts. The demobilization of women and the need to return to normalcy seems to have obliterated the memory of the Soviet women pilots from the pages of history. This lack of information, as well as the negligible acknowledgement by the Soviet government and by historians of the role these

pilots performed during World War II, presents a substantial gap in women's studies, military history, and Russian history in general.

Russian history, of course, has been studied at length. This thesis will not be a general study of women and their role in Russian history. Rather, it will concentrate on the contribution of a very small subset of female soldiers to the Soviet war effort during World War II and on their significance in military and women's studies as a sub-specialty to Russian history.

The study of Soviet women aviators is uniquely situated between gender and military studies; it is perhaps this ambiguity that has created a void in these fields. Reina Pennington asserts that military historians neglect women's issues, while women's studies rarely address military history and Russian historians ignore both.⁵ D'Ann Campbell states that

The military is a product of history and is bound by the lessons it has 'learned' from history. The problem is that the history everyone has learned about the greatest and best-known war of all times has airbrushed out the combat roles of women.⁶

John Erickson asserts

The contribution of women and young girls of all ages in the Soviet Union to their country's great, possibly unsurpassed feat of survival was immense, yet even now it remains without its proper chronicle. The bulk of the material is either anecdotal, valuable in its own way, or else statistical, great clusters of numbers and figures which are not without significance but which are bereft of social meaning.⁷

Pennington presents a comprehensive historiography of the treatment of women's participation in military history. She argues that military historians have assumed the role of women in military history has been trivial or even nonexistent. She contends that a Western bias, which dismisses foreign experience, and a gender bias among male historians are probable reasons for the paucity of information regarding the contribution of women combatants.⁸

There also exists a significant gap regarding female combatants within the discipline of women's studies. The main areas of study concerning women focus on the public and private spheres of their lives and on their role in the work force and family. The recent push in the West to study the system that was touted as having "solved the woman question" is the impetus behind the exploration of women's issues in Russian

history. Although early sources were plagued by the political atmosphere of the Cold War, subsequent writings have enjoyed considerable latitude in exploring both Western and Russian sources while building on earlier studies in the field. The main issues regarding Russian women in earlier studies revolve around their emancipation, the level of their equality, the ideology of motherhood, and the greater question of the Soviet government's loyalty to the original socialist vision regarding family policy. Contemporary studies relate to the transition of the command economy to capitalism and its economic and political effect on women.

Soviet sources are naturally the starting point for any study regarding the women pilots. Most documents pertaining to the women's regiments are located in the Central Archive of the United Armed Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States in Podolsk (Tsentralny arkhiv Obedinennykh vooruzhennykh sil Soyuza Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv, or TsAOVS-SNG; formerly the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense, or TsAMO-SSSR), commonly referred to as TsAMO.⁹ In addition, there exist a limited number of published sources pertaining to the women pilots. The official history of the Soviet Air Forces mentions the participation of women in specific battles, but does not cover the formation of the women's regiments. The English translation of this book contains a brief history of the women's regiments as a footnote to their participation in the Crimean Offensive.¹⁰ Although consistent with the scope of the book, it seemingly treats the women's participation as nothing extraordinary. However, the language describing the women and their participation belies this clinical approach to the topic. "The daring women pilots of the 46th Guards Night Bomber Regiment (commanded by Major Yefdokia D. Bershanskaya) were especially active."¹¹ Later, in reference to an attack on nine PE-2's of the 125th Guards Bomber Air Regiment: "In this difficult situation the women of the crews showed great courage and self-possession."¹²

Among the limited published sources, Vera Semenovna Murmantseva stands out. This Soviet scholar has published at least two books, as well as articles in *Voprosy istorii* and *Voенно-istoricheskyy zhurnal*, about women soldiers, including Soviet airwomen.¹³ In *Sovetskie zhenschiny v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine (Soviet Women in the Great Patriotic War)*, Murmantseva reviews the history of women in combat during World War II. She provides statistical data regarding the number of women that volunteered, where

they were from, and how many perished during the conflict. She states the legal precedent set by the Soviet Union to allow women to fight in combat and the overwhelming response from women to fight after Germany's invasion. Although a valuable source regarding the participation of women, and particularly airwomen, in combat, Murmantseva's use of socialist and patriotic language, typical of the period in which she wrote, detracts from her arguments and statistical data regarding the participation of women in the war.¹⁴

Interestingly, Soviet women pilots were not absent from the media during the war. Soviet newspapers such as *Pravda* and *Krasnaya zvezda* ran articles and photographs of the women. Wartime film footage includes the women pilots, and a movie has been made about the night bombers.¹⁵

However, the most important Russian sources are the memoirs written by veterans of the women's regiments. Originally published in 1962 with a second edition published in 1971, the two editions of *V nebe frontovom* provide vivid descriptions that offer insight into the experiences of the airwomen.¹⁶ Dedicated to "The Glorious Memory of Comrades-in-Arms Who Had Fallen While Defending the Homeland," the purpose of these memoirs was to immortalize the accomplishments of the women and their fallen comrades.¹⁷ Cottam notes that Soviet war memoirs in general "are ascribed a military-patriotic purpose" and "are duty bound to appeal to the young people so that the new generation born since the war—the majority in the country—would be made aware of the destruction and suffering caused in the USSR by the Nazis, with a view to preventing the recurrence of similar suffering and destruction in the future." However, the women's memoirs differ in that they strive for accuracy with the express purpose "to immortalize the deeds of their comrades, cherishing the memory of those who had perished in particular."¹⁸ They do not seem to be a product of Soviet propaganda, but rather a source to eternalize the accomplishments of fallen warriors. Both editions of the memoirs have been translated into English by Kazimiera J. Cottam. Pennington notes that there were significant changes between the first and second editions, with a number of articles added or deleted. She further notes the controversy surrounding the credibility of the chief editor, Militzia Aleksandrovna Kazarinova. Pennington states that some veterans have questioned the motivations of Kazarinova and that Kazarinova censored material,

particularly regarding the 586th Air Regiment, to glorify her sister Tamara at the expense of other veterans. Pennington supports this argument by pointing out that “the work of Aleksandr Gridnev, who commanded the 586th for two and a half years, is omitted, whereas Tamara Kazarinova, who commanded the regiment for only six months (and was the sister of Militsia), receives a great deal of attention.”¹⁹ Despite the controversy, however, the memoirs represent an extremely valuable source regarding the experiences of the women fliers.

Limited sources are available in English. During the war, some articles about the Soviet airwomen were published in Western newspapers and magazines. In her article “How Women Flyers Fight Russia’s Air War” for *Aviation*, Madelin Blitzstein focuses on the biographies of the most famous Soviet airwomen of the time, Valentina Grizodubova, Polina Osipenko, and Marina Raskova.²⁰

Elsewhere, factual references list particular women or their accomplishments. *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History* has an entry on Marina Raskova, and Hans Seidl’s *Stalin’s Eagles: An Illustrated Study of the Soviet Aces of WWII and Korea* includes an entry on Lydia Litvak, one of two women aces.²¹

Most of the English sources regarding the Soviet Air Force and general military history during World War II mention women either in passing or not at all. Robert Kilmarx states that the manpower of the air force in 1941 had risen to about 1,250,000 including many women.²² Kilmarx does not elaborate in what capacity the women served, but only that they existed. Boris Kuban offers a snapshot view of life in the Soviet Air Force. Sandwiched between the preference of the air force regiments for brass bands and the problem of prostitution is a very brief paragraph about the important role women played during the war. Kuban mentions the fact that although many of the women became Heroes of the Soviet Union, their units were subsequently disbanded after the war, with most leaving military service altogether. He unintentionally touches on an important issue regarding the demobilization of women after the war with this matter of fact statement: “After the war, these units were disbanded, and there were very few women in the air force.”²³ Other books, notably *Russian Aircraft Since 1940* by Jean Alexander, *The Soviet Air Force Since 1918* by Alexander Boyd, and *Red Phoenix: The Rise of Soviet Air Power, 1941-1945* by Von Hardesty, mention the participation of the

women in relation to specific battles. Although the issues relating to the women's regiments were not within the scope of these works, the authors acknowledge the contribution made by women to the war effort. Boyd, in particular, provides statistics on the awards for gallantry earned by the women and, in a footnote, directs his readers to the memoirs of the airwomen.²⁴

A number of books and articles have been written about women combatants in general. These works encompass the women pilots; however they are broad surveys of women and their roles in combat. D'Ann Campbell's article "Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union" in the *Journal of Military History*, John Erickson's article "Soviet Women at War" in *World War II and the Soviet People: Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies*, *Women Aloft* by Valerie Moolman, and *Women in War* by Shelley Saywell all examine the role of Soviet women pilots as a subset of women in combat.²⁵ Each source provides a brief overview of the creation of the women's regiments and their service during World War II, while touching on issues regarding female combatants. Moolman is the only author mentioned above who does not discuss gender issues within the context of the women pilots. She states the facts of the formation of the regiments, highlighting the famous pilots of the period. Moolman also recounts a few celebrated stories, but does not cite her sources. Saywell, in her chapter concerning Soviet women, offers a poignant rendition of the experiences of women on the Eastern Front. Using a combination of historical research and interviews she conducted, Saywell examines not only a bomber pilot, but also an army nurse and a marine. Her focus is the reason the women volunteered, men's attitudes toward the women, and sexuality on the front. Erickson focuses on all levels of women's participation in the war effort. His section on airwomen is brief, citing only factual listings of the regiments and the planes they flew. Erickson's analysis of women in combat revolves around their integration into predominantly male units and the lack of provisions for the women in accommodations, sanitary arrangements, or medical care.²⁶

The best-known English source is Bruce Myles' *Night Witches: The Untold Story of Soviet Women in Combat*.²⁷ Based on interviews, Myles attempts to recreate the experiences of the women of the 46th Night Bomber Regiment. Although it was one of

the first Western sources about the women pilots—and remains to this day one of the best known—*Night Witches* has been heavily criticized. Anne Noggle, author of *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, dispels the myth surrounding the application of roses on the fuselage of Lily Litvak’s plane for each kill she scored, supposedly resulting in the appellation ‘White Rose of Stalingrad’. Noggle also calls into question the accuracy of the details surrounding Litvak’s transfer to an otherwise all-male regiment.²⁸ Cottam, the leading scholar on the subject, gives Myles credit for being the first to introduce the West to the topic. However, she notes that Myles hastily wrote the book based on contemporary interviews by the author and a Soviet interpreter. She asserts that the book “turned out to be highly inaccurate and misleading.”²⁹ Pennington offers the most critical review of Myles’ book. She states that Myles’ unfamiliarity with Soviet sources, and his reliance on interviews within that context, generated many factual errors. Pennington further backs her criticism with comments from veterans she interviewed. Several veterans reported that “he used unknown names” and “mixed up the facts.” One veteran, Polina Gelman, stated, “I saw a copy of *Night Witches* in English.... It is a falsification. Everything that is written in it is a forgery. Different names, different events.”³⁰ Pennington summarizes her review, “In short, Myles’s book can be regarded as little better than fiction; indeed, it is worse because of the confusion it creates by masquerading as historical fact.”³¹ In the opinion of these scholars, *Night Witches* is not much more than a collection of romanticized anecdotes about the women of the 46th Regiment that in this author’s opinion reads like a popular novel. Myles attempts to supplement the stories with statistical data regarding the war; however he does not cite any sources. His intention of telling the story of the women is admirable, but his careless treatment of the topic is a disservice to all of the women who served in the Soviet Air Force.

Anne Noggle conducted numerous interviews for her book *A Dance with Death*. A photographer, Noggle wrote *A Dance with Death* as an account of life in combat; thus, the book was not intended to be a history of the Soviet airwomen. Noggle has received criticism for her methodology regarding the interviews of the women, her lack of citations, and her lack of analysis of larger state and social issues.³² Although these are valid concerns, the reviewers failed to take into account the purpose of the book. Cottam

notes that the reliance of contemporary interviews without a solid historical background creates a need for a more scholarly approach to the subject.³³ Pennington criticizes the lack of consistency, failure to cross check dates, and lack of an index. She further notes that the book “does not stand alone as a historical source.” Pennington does, however, recognize the value of Noggle’s service to history by interviewing many veterans before their stories were lost altogether.³⁴

The most significant contribution to the study of Soviet airwomen has been made by Cottam. Through happenstance, Cottam came across a biography of a female navigator in a Soviet periodical. Having no idea that women had served in combat roles during World War II, she became intrigued with the topic and embarked on a research mission that would result in perhaps the largest Western contribution to the field. In 1983, Cottam published *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*. This book contains a history of the women’s regiments, a biography of Lily Litvak, and a translation of the memoir of a navigator.³⁵ Also that year, she published *The Golden Tressed Soldier*, a collection of translated memoirs of women soldiers that included a chapter on a pilot from the 46th Night Bomber Regiment.³⁶ In 1984, Cottam translated the first edition, originally published in 1962, of the memoirs written by the veterans of the women’s regiments.³⁷ In 1997, she translated the second edition of the memoirs, originally published in 1971.³⁸ Her latest contribution is *Women in War and Resistance*, which is an excellent study of female Heroes of the Soviet Union.³⁹ Cottam intended for her work to pioneer investigation into the subject. She did not aim to do a complete academic study, but rather hoped that her book would serve as a starting point for further examination of the topic.⁴⁰ The translation into English of the memoirs written by these women veterans is perhaps the most important contribution to the field in that it provides an excellent primary source for Western researchers. Pennington states, “Cottam deserves credit for almost single-handedly keeping alive interest in this much-neglected field.”⁴¹

The latest work in the subject is Pennington’s *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*. Utilizing the resources mentioned above, additional research, and personal interviews, Pennington offers the most complete study of the female pilots to date. While most sources are merely biographical sketches or factual reports of the existence of the women’s regiments, Pennington methodically examines the

topic from before the war through the post-war experiences of the women. What sets Pennington's book apart from other studies is the extent to which she considers broader social issues regarding the use of women as combat pilots and her interpretation of the implications of this historical fact on Soviet society, in general, and specifically on the role of women in the military. Written objectively without any hyperbole, yet conveying the deeply moving experiences of the women, *Wings, Women, and War* achieves a significant depth of examination into a topic that previously had been ignored in Russian, military, and women's history. Her book can serve as an excellent resource for further study into the issues that are germane to these disciplines.

The Soviet Union was unique in its use of women for combat roles, becoming the first state to use female pilots to fly combat missions. World War II was the last time that women were used on any real scale in combat. While there is seemingly a great deal of information regarding the use of Soviet women as combat pilots during World War II, the subsequent demobilization of women and the need to return to normalcy seemed to obliterate the memory of the women's regiments from the pages of history. Most Russian and Western sources dedicate a paragraph or less to the role these women played in the Great Patriotic War or, in the case of Myles, are inaccurate and misleading in their representation of the women. The memoirs written by the veterans of the women's regiments are naturally the most important sources regarding the experiences of these women. Cottam's translation of these memoirs uncovered a wealth of primary source material for Western researchers. Subsequently, Noggle and Pennington used the memoirs along with personal interviews to offer the first comprehensive studies into the field. After the many decades that have passed since the end of World War II, the examination of how these women contributed to the Soviet victory is slowly coming to the forefront to take its rightful place in the annals of Russian, military, and women's history.

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 discusses the factors that shaped the cohesion and the controversies of the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment. Next, Chapter 2 discusses the factors that shaped the strong cohesion of the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment. Finally, Chapter 3 examines the cohesion of the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment.

ENDNOTES FOR INTRODUCTION

¹ Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, & War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 1. Although the Soviet Union adopted a seemingly progressive attitude in its use of women pilots in combat, World War II was the last time that women were used on any real scale in combat.

² Galina I. Markova, *Vzlet: O Geroe Sovetskogo Soyuzu M. M. Raskovoi* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1986), quoted in Pennington, 29.

³ Pennington, 8-33.

⁴ Raskova was a prominent figure in the formation of the women's regiments. It is not clear exactly how the decision was made, but Raskova had a strong connection with Joseph Stalin. Whether Stalin backed her directly is not known, but her connection to him certainly gave her influence. For information on Raskova's role in the formation of Aviation Group No. 122, see Pennington, 22-28.

⁵ Pennington, 214.

⁶ D'Ann Campbell, "Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Military History* 57, no. 2 (1993): 323.

⁷ John Erickson, "Soviet Women at War." In *World War II and the Soviet People: Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies Harrogate, 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1993), 70.

⁸ Pennington, 214.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 217. The author of this thesis has not had the opportunity to view these sources directly.

¹⁰ Ray Wagner, ed. *The Soviet Air Force in World War II: The Official History, Originally Published by the Ministry of Defense of the USSR*, trans. Leland Fetzer (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973), 156n.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³ See the references cited in Pennington, 218.

¹⁴ Vera Semenova Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhenshiny v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine* (Moscow: Mysl', 1974)

¹⁵ Pennington, 218. The movie is called *Night Witches in the Sky*; it was directed by Evgenia Zhigulenko in 1981.

¹⁶ M. A. Kazarinova and A. A. Poliantseva, eds., *V nebe frontovom: sbornik vospominanii sovetskikh letchits-uchastnits Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, 1st ed. (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardia, 1962); M. A. Kazarinova, N. F. Kravtsova, and A. A. Poliantseva, eds., 2nd ed. (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardia, 1971).

¹⁷ Kazimiera J. Cottam, ed. and trans. *In the Sky Above the Front: A Collection of Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen Participants in the Great Patriotic War* (Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, 1984), vii.

¹⁸ Kazimiera J. Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II* (Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, 1983), x.

¹⁹ Pennington, 219.

²⁰ Madelin Blitzstein, "How Women Flyers Fight Russia's Air War," *Aviation*, July 1944.

²¹ *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History*, s.v. "Raskova."; Hans D. Seidl, *Stalin's Eagles: An Illustrated Study of the Soviet Aces of WWII and Korea* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1998), 134-136.

²² Robert A. Kilmarx, *A History of Soviet Air Power* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1962), 175.

²³ Boris Kuban, "Daily Life in the Soviet Air Force," in *The Soviet Air Force and Rocket Forces*, Asher Lee, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1959), 228.

²⁴ Jean Alexander, *Russian Aircraft Since 1940* (London: Putnam and Co. Ltd., 1975), 436; Alexander Boyd, *The Soviet Air Force Since 1918* (London: McDonald and Jane's, 1977), 165n-166; Von Hardesty, *Red Phoenix: The Rise of Soviet Air Power, 1941-1945* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 192.

²⁵ Valerie Moolman, *Women Aloft* (Alexandria: Time Life Books, 1981) 157-160; Shelley Saywell, *Women in War* (Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985) 130-158; Erickson, 50-76; Campbell, 301-323.

²⁶ Erickson, 67.

²⁷ Bruce Myles, *Night Witches: The Untold Story of Soviet Women in Combat* (Navato, CA: Presidio Press, 1981).

²⁸ Anne Noggle, *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994).

²⁹ Kazimiera J. Cottam ed. and trans., *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*. (Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1997), xv.

³⁰ Pennington, 219.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Greta Bucher, review of *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, by Anne Noggle. *Russian Review* 54 (July 1995): 477-478; Denise J. Youngblood, review of *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, by Anne Noggle. *Journal of Military History* 60 (January 1996): 179-181.

³³ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, xvi.

³⁴ Pennington, 220.

³⁵ Kazimiera J. Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II* (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 1983).

³⁶ Kazimiera J. Cottam ed. and trans., *The Golden-Tressed Soldier* (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 1983).

³⁷ Cottam, *In the Sky Above the Front*.

³⁸ Cottam, *Women in Air War*.

³⁹ Kazimiera J. Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers* (Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1998).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴¹ Pennington, 220.

CHAPTER 1

THE 586TH FIGHTER AVIATION REGIMENT

Of the three regiments, the 586th was the least cohesive and the one most steeped in conflict. The controversies and resulting lack of cohesion of the regiment center on the command and subsequent dismissal of the first commander, Major Tamara Aleksandrovna Kazarinova. Her command split the loyalties of the women, with the most vocal dissenters being reassigned to Stalingrad. The appointment of Major Aleksandr Vasilievich Gridnev, who succeeded Kazarinova as commander of the unit in October 1942, seems to foreshadow the future difficulties of the regiment.

There is very little information about Gridnev in the published sources—most of what is known about him was revealed in interviews conducted years after the war had ended. It is apparent that Gridnev was a successful commander who garnered the respect of the women. However, he is convinced that Kazarinova particularly opposed him and purposefully had a negative impact on the success of the regiment.

The addition of a squadron of male pilots and ground crew after Kazarinova's departure does not seem to have had a negative effect on its cohesion; rather, it illustrates that the cohesion which existed seems to have been based on job function within the regiment rather than on gender issues. Although the regiment as a whole was integrated, the male and female pilots were segregated from one another, whereas the ground crew were not. Relations between the pilots seem to be insubstantial, and the male pilots are not acknowledged in published sources or in interviews conducted years later. Male ground crew, however, are recognized in several memoirs.

The controversies surrounding Tamara Kazarinova call into question the integrity of the published sources. The memoirs must be read with caution since Kazarinova's

sister, Militsia, was the editor. It is plausible that she purposefully omitted negative references to her sister Tamara. Furthermore, it is strange that there is not a memoir about Gridnev and very little mention of him. As commander of the regiment for over two and a half years, he certainly played a larger command role than Kazarinova, who was in command only for a little over six months. According to Pennington, some veterans have questioned the motivations and credibility of Militsia Kazarinova. However, on the whole, the memoirs are a reliable source regarding the experiences of the women in combat.¹

The 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment was the first regiment of the 122nd Aviation Group to enter active service. The regiment's dates of wartime service were from April 1942 to May 1945; it was formally disbanded a few months after the war ended.² The regiment flew 4,419 combat missions and is credited with 38 enemy aircraft destroyed in 125 air battles. The regiment initially was equipped with the Yakovlev (Yak-1) fighter, but later flew the Yak-7b and Yak-9 fighters. The 586th began the war with two all-female squadrons, but added a third squadron of male pilots and male ground crew in the fall of 1942. Early in the war, eight women pilots and accompanying ground crew from the first squadron were temporarily assigned to Stalingrad to support all-male fighter regiments. The primary areas of operation of the 586th were Saratov, Voronezh, Kostornaya, Kursk, Kiev, Zhitomir, Kotovsk, Beltsy, Debrecen, and Budapest, Hungary. A defense regiment, the 586th's primary duty entailed protecting important targets such as airfields, cities, bridges, and transportation nodes from enemy attack. They also escorted aircraft of important personnel. The 586th is the least recognized and decorated regiment of the three. It did not receive any honorary designations and no members of the regiment were awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.³

The first commander of the 586th was Major Tamara Aleksandrovna Kazarinova. Aleksandra Makunina, Chief of Staff, describes her in detail, "she was of average height; her black leather raglan, navy blue beret, and boxcalf boots fitted her well and made it obvious that she was accustomed to wearing a military uniform. Her black, piercing eyes and the little furrow-like wrinkle across the bridge of her nose underlined her strong-willed character."⁴ Kazarinova was tough on the women. Makunina notes that Kazarinova was anxious to develop excellent flying and fighting skills in the regiment

and was concerned that the women perform better than adjoining units. Kazarinova insisted “because we are women, we must never allow ourselves to become negligent. Otherwise, it would be very difficult for us to regain good reputation.” Makunina further states, “she combined strictness and high standards with tactfulness in dealing with the girls.”⁵ Overall, Kazarinova was seen as a strict and severe person. Most women in the regiment found her to be distant. Many women state in their memoirs that she did not praise them and was particularly hard on them. When Valeria Khomiakova shot down a Nazi Junker Ju88, becoming the first woman in the world to shoot down an enemy aircraft at night, Kazarinova’s response to her was “your very first kill—that’s good! But it would be more difficult to keep up the good work. You should be demanding more of yourself and your subordinates. You’ll be expected to perform even better, as befits a true combat pilot!”⁶ Not all of the women shared this point of view. In a 1993 interview with Reina Pennington, Mechanic Elena Karakorskaya related that Kazarinova was “strict and severe in appearance, but nobody knew how sweet she was. She knew every girl in the regiment and she spoke so well about everyone.” In the same interview Chief of Chemical Services Nina Slovokhotova disagreed, stating she felt Kazarinova was too strict. Slovokhotova further speculated that Kazarinova was strict because she was not a Party member and that the commissar of the regiment, Kulikova, hated her.⁷

Kazarinova was not well liked in the regiment. As seen above, many of the women thought she was too severe and distant, but more importantly, she was not able to earn the unswerving devotion of her subordinates. One possible reason for this is the fact that she did not fly the aircraft of the regiment. The regiment initially flew the Yak-1 fighter, but later flew the Yak-7b and Yak-9. Ekaterina Budanova describes the Yak as a “demanding machine. This meant that the machine would not tolerate any inaccuracy in the pilot’s coordination and any careless handling... after all, a fighter pilot had to fight the enemy as well as fly. The pilot had to achieve a tremendous organic unity with their machine, in order to simultaneously track the enemy, coordinate her actions with those of the leader, and fire accurately. This was not easy.”⁸ Published sources state that Kazarinova was unable to fly fighter aircraft because of a leg injury. In her memoir, Makunina notes the slight limp in Kazarinova’s left leg when she came to the regimental headquarters. Makunina later states that she learned Kazarinova had been injured during

an air raid in Grozny. In the fall of 1942, Kazarinova's health declined; she began to limp more and stopped flying.⁹ In a 1993 interview with Pennington, Makunina supports her published account that Kazarinova's leg was indeed injured, which prevented her from flying.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the pilots of the regiment were undoubtedly uncomfortable taking orders and critiques from a person who had little knowledge about the aircraft they flew. Some of the women were very vocal regarding their dissatisfaction with Kazarinova. According to Gridnev it was the most experienced pilots who had a problem with Kazarinova. "Prokhorova, Beliaeva, and Khomiakova... immediately became enemies with the commander, who didn't know how to fly a fighter. They clashed, and those three pilots demanded that the commander be changed."¹¹ He further asserts that the division commander, Colonel Starostenko, became involved and attempted to reconcile the situation. The loyalties of the women pilots were split at this point. Evgenia Prokhorova claims that supporters of Kazarinova were only loyal for self-protection. The pilots of the first squadron and the commander and deputy commander of the second squadron were particularly anxious for Kazarinova to be dismissed. Starostenko failed at reconciling the women. Because he did not have the authority to remove Kazarinova, she remained in command. On 10 September 1942, eight pilots from the first squadron of the 586th were transferred to Stalingrad as replacements for male regiments. Gridnev alleges that General Osipenko, commander of the Fighter Aviation of the Air Defense Force, was behind the transfers. Gridnev held a very poor opinion of both Kazarinova and Osipenko. In a letter to Pennington, Gridnev wrote:

Fighter Aviation of PVO [Air Defense Force] was headed by General Osipenko, who was illiterate in all regards, especially in respect to tactical flying questions, as he did not fly fighter aircraft himself. He had, however, received the Order of Lenin in 1937. And when the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment was formed, Osipenko placed Tamara Kazarinova in command of this regiment, who was completely ignorant regarding tactical flying and did not fly fighters, but who had also been awarded, in 1937, just like Osipenko, the Order of Lenin. For what were such high honors given? After all, there weren't any real accomplishments in aviation in 1937. They awarded it only for denunciations, for the exposure of "enemies of the people."¹²

Gridnev asserts that when Osipenko read the reports concerning Kazarinova, he found a way to remedy the situation under the guise of supporting Stalingrad. By sending the most vocal opposition away, he theoretically solved the problem.

Pennington raises several questions regarding the transfer of the women to Stalingrad. Why would half of a brand new women's regiment be sent away? She points out that Raskova was still alive and always wanted the women to remain together.¹³ In support of her position, Pennington remarks that these pilots were sent from an air defense unit to support front-line regiments and in some cases into aircraft that they were not trained to fly.¹⁴ Nevertheless, eight women were transferred from the 586th and split from one another into various male regiments. Of the eight, only four came back to the 586th. According to Maria Kuznetsova, the women who returned to the 586th did so reluctantly. In the summer of 1943, the fighting at Stalingrad had slowed down and the Germans had ceased sending combat planes into the area. General Osipenko ordered the women to return to the 586th. Some of the women refused to obey his order and expressed their desire to remain in the male regiments. Osipenko ordered the regimental commander of one of the units to put the women to a military tribunal. Instead, the commander supported and protected the women, encouraging them to stay; but the women ultimately decided to return to the 586th.¹⁵

The four women who did not return to the 586th remained in their male regiments, but were killed in combat over Stalingrad in the summer of 1943. Some of these women, particularly Lily Litvak and Ekaterina Budanova became very famous fighter pilots, achieving ace status. Litvak became the first woman in the world to shoot down an enemy aircraft and went on to achieve twelve kills and three shared kills. She was posthumously awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union. The fame and recognition that these women achieved was not credited to the 586th. It is likely the women opposed going back to the 586th because of the conflict with Kazarinova, even though she was no longer in command, coupled with the success they encountered outside of the 586th. The transfer to Stalingrad gave the women opportunities that they never would have had if they had remained in the 586th. The success of a regiment and its pilots is measured in part by the number of enemy aircraft shot down. Since the 586th was a defense regiment whose primary duty involved protecting important targets from the enemy, there were not as

many opportunities for scoring enemy kills as there were at the front. When the 586th turned back an enemy aircraft, they did not pursue it. On the other hand, the intense fighting over Stalingrad, along with the offensive tactics that were employed, allowed many more opportunities to shoot down enemy aircraft. The better pilots would actively seek out German aircraft and engage them. This was known as “free hunting”—both Litvak and Budanova were promoted to this duty while serving at the front, which is a factor in their success as pilots.

The new opportunities and the conflict with Kazarinova were not the only reasons the women did not want to return to the 586th. The women developed strong ties to their regiments. Klavdia Blinova states that when the women gained the trust of the male pilots, the squadron grew stronger everyday. “The squadron became like a family to me and its commander like my father.”¹⁶

Not all of the women who opposed Kazarinova were transferred to Stalingrad. Valeria Khomiakova, deputy commander of the second squadron, remained with the 586th. It is the circumstances surrounding her death that are at the center of the controversy regarding the dismissal of Kazarinova. Khomiakova was the first woman to shoot down an enemy aircraft at night and the first to score a kill for the 586th. The details surrounding her death remained unclear until several veterans agreed to discuss them in interviews with Pennington in 1993. Khomiakova was sent to Moscow to receive recognition for her achievement. When she arrived back to the regiment, she was tired from her long journey. Nevertheless, she was assigned to night alert duty. Kazarinova put the mechanic in the plane and told Khomiakova to rest in the dugout. When the signal came to take off, someone woke up Khomiakova and she ran into the plane and took off. Her vision had not adapted to the darkness and there were no guidance lights, so she took off blindly, crashing into an obstacle.¹⁷ The veterans agreed with the above facts and asserted that Kazarinova had used poor judgment. Still, at the time of the accident, Prokhorova was the only pilot to demand that Kazarinova take responsibility for Khomiakova’s death. The accident was written up as a combat loss, and Kazarinova was not investigated.

However, General Gromadin, the commander of the Air Defense Force and Osipenko’s superior, removed Kazarinova from command and ordered Osipenko to

investigate her. According to Gridnev, Osipenko did not investigate her, but instead put her on his staff at headquarters.¹⁸ The memoirs directly conflict with these facts. Makunina, for example, states that the reason Kazarinova left the 586th was because she was recalled to headquarters due to her declining health.¹⁹ As mentioned above, however, the memoirs should be read with caution here—particularly regarding the dismissal of Kazarinova.

Major Aleksandr Vasilievich Gridnev was appointed the second commander of the 586th on 14 October 1942. The appointment of Gridnev seems to foreshadow the future of the regiment. As shown above, it is clear that General Osipenko favored Kazarinova. Moreover, as much as he favored Kazarinova, he disliked Gridnev even more. Prior to joining the 586th, Gridnev was the commander of the 82nd Fighter Aviation Regiment. His removal from command of the 82nd was a direct result of charges leveled against him by Osipenko that he purposefully endangered the life of NKVD chief, Lavrenty Beria. Osipenko had ordered Gridnev to escort a special transport plane carrying Beria to Mayak Island in the Caspian Sea. As Gridnev and his pilots waited for the transport, a dust storm blew up. With visibility very low, Gridnev felt that the fighters were sure to collide, endangering the transport aircraft. Gridnev decided to fly solo to avoid a collision, but as he taxied to take off, the garrison commander ran out and forbade him to fly. The transport plane did not wait for the transport and continued on its route. The garrison chief read Gridnev an order signed by Stalin forbidding flights during these kinds of conditions. Nonetheless, when Gridnev returned to his regiment, he was immediately arrested and jailed for three months. General Gromadin supported Gridnev and released him on probation, assigning him the command of the 586th.²⁰

Although there is very little mention of Gridnev in the memoirs, there do not seem to have been any problems with his command. Makunina, Kazarinova's strongest supporter, states, "Batia, he was the real commander of the regiment. He was only ordinary-looking, but he was very funny...he's an excellent storyteller, with a great sense of humor. It was very pleasant to be in his company. He tried to appear very serious but his eyes were smiling. I have only good memories of Gridnev."²¹ Gridnev tried to instill a sense of teamwork in the regiment. He adopted the philosophy "the stronger helped the less strong always, in everything, on the ground and in the air."²² Gridnev cared for his

pilots. Vera Tikhomirova recounts in her memoir one occasion when the fighters were covering a regiment of bombers. One of the bombers fell out of formation because of engine trouble. Zoya Pozhidaeva covered the tail of the bomber. The male pilot of the bomber feared she was too close to his plane and began to swear at her. When they landed, Gridnev asked if the mission was successful. Pozhidaeva reported that it was, but that they would never fly with the men again because the men swore at them and called them bad names. Gridnev immediately phoned the other commander and told him that the women would not fly with his pilots because of their rude behavior. That commander assembled his regiment and reprimanded them for treating the women so badly. The male pilot flew to the women's regiment and apologized for his behavior.²³

Gridnev cared for the regiment and wanted it to succeed. He felt that he was opposed by Kazarinova. He states, "from my first steps I met her influence. She always tried to harm the regiment; she didn't want it to be better than when she was commander."²⁴ Although Kazarinova had been removed from command of the 586th, according to Gridnev she still had influence over the success of the regiment. The 586th did not reach Guards status and none of the women was awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union. Gridnev is convinced that Kazarinova was the reason that the regiment did not receive any honors. He asserts that she came to pick up the Guards materials and take them back to Moscow. A photographer came to take photos of the regiment, and a week after Kazarinova left the Guards clothing arrived; but the regiment still did not get official notification of their Guards status.²⁵ Gridnev believes that Kazarinova destroyed the materials. A friend of Gridnev's working on the staff of the Air Defense Force confirmed that the materials never reached the staff, although it was known that Kazarinova brought them to Moscow.²⁶

Despite the controversy surrounding the command of the 586th and the effect it had on unit morale and cohesion, relations within the regiment contain several strata. The memoirs reveal very few strong bonds within the ranks of the women pilots. The pilots who opposed Kazarinova at the beginning of the war were seemingly the most cohesive, specifically in their discontent with Kazarinova. However, all of them were dead by mid-1943.²⁷ One memoir by an unknown author entitled "Girlfriends" reveals a strong relationship among three of the women pilots in the 586th, two of whom were among the

group sent to Stalingrad, but survived the war. However, Olga Yamschikova's memoir is particularly poignant regarding the death of her best friend Raisa Beliaeva. Gridnev noted that Beliaeva was one of the best pilots he knew and that her death affected the whole regiment. Nevertheless, most of the memoirs from the pilots are antiseptic, discussing only specific battles in which they participated. It is Pennington's interviews with Gridnev that provide some examples of cohesion among the female pilots not found in the memoirs. Gridnev specifically talks about Zhenia Prokhorova and notes that she was "the idol of all the women pilots, the technicians, in fact, the entire personnel of the regiment." In fact, he notes that they spoke of Prokhorova more than they did of Raskova.²⁸

As noted above, the regiment included two squadrons of women pilots and one squadron of male pilots. Interestingly, the memoirs completely ignore the male squadron. Gridnev notes "they fail to mention the men's squadron. It is as though it was never in the regiment at all."²⁹ Although the regiment was integrated, the squadrons were segregated, and each squadron was commanded by someone of the same gender. It is perhaps this segregation that did not allow for many close relationships to develop among the pilots. Conversely, the ground crews of the regiment were integrated, and male ground crew are mentioned in several memoirs. Agnia Poliantseva, squadron leader, wrote a particularly thoughtful memoir about mechanic Semen Grigorievich Nizin and his service to the regiment. In the end, she praises other male mechanics when she states, "we, too, shall never forget the male mechanics who joined our regiment during the difficult period of war. Fedor Lunev, Anatoly Reutsky, Aleksandr Poliakov, Nikolai Kurdin, and Lev Kurapeev, among others, have helped our female mechanics to perfect their skills, and together we all advanced on the long road that [led] to victory."³⁰

The reaction of men to the women fighting does not present itself as a major element affecting the cohesion of the regiment. Klavdia Pankratova recounts that she was flying without a wingman on a reconnaissance mission over Kursk. She met a male pilot who was also without a wingman. He radioed to her "Brother, let's fly together." She mumbled her acceptance not wanting him to know she was a woman. She ended up protecting him against a Messerschmitt and broke away when the fight was over.³¹ Her reluctance to reveal her gender is indicative of a perceived prejudice against female

pilots, but the lack of reference to negative male reaction to the 586th within both the published sources and subsequent interviews suggests that it was not an overriding problem within the regiment's experience. On the contrary, on one occasion, the women were assigned to escort the aircraft of an important passenger to the front-line. Upon their arrival, a heavy fog set in and the escort could not fly back to their airfield. The passenger, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, invited the women to accompany him to visit a camp with German prisoners of war. When the visit was concluded, he thanked the women for their excellent escort service.³²

The 586th was the least cohesive of the three regiments formed from the 122nd Aviation group. The reasons for this lack of cohesion center on the command and subsequent dismissal of the first commander, Tamara Kazarinova. The controversy surrounding Kazarinova split the loyalties of the women pilots, with the most vocal pilots being reassigned to the front. After Kazarinova left, a male squadron of pilots, male ground crew and a male commander, Aleksandr Gridnev, joined the regiment. The women do not seem to have any issues with Gridnev's command and in fact convey only positive memories of him. The integration of the unit does not appear to have had a significant effect on the women of the 586th, and this regiment does not seem to have had a problem with negative male reactions that the other regiments experienced. In fact, the cohesion seems to be based on function within the regiment rather than on gender issues. Although the regiment was integrated, the male and female pilots remained segregated while the ground crew did not. Relations between the pilots apparently were insubstantial, as the male pilots are not acknowledged in published sources or in interviews conducted years later. Male ground crew, however, are recognized in several memoirs. Even though Kazarinova left the regiment early in the war, Gridnev believes her influence over the regiment resulted in the lack of recognition and honors. None of the pilots received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, and the regiment did not attain Guards status. Although not the most cohesive of the regiments, the 586th was a successful regiment that contributed to the war effort.

The next chapter discusses the 46th Night Bomber Regiment, which was strikingly different from the 586th.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER 1

¹ Pennington, 219.

² A timeline highlighting the major events in the history of the regiment is located in Appendix 1.

³ Pennington, 104.

⁴ Aleksandra Makunina, “The First Regimental Commander,” in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 164.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷ Pennington, 107.

⁸ L. Ivanova, “A Free Lance,” in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 196-197.

⁹ Makunina, 164-168.

¹⁰ Pennington, 107.

¹¹ Aleksandr Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 108.

¹² Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 108.

¹³ Pennington argues that it is possible both the Kazarinova sisters were forced on Raskova and not chosen by her. Militia served in the 125th as Raskova’s chief of staff and later became the editor of the memoirs of the regiments. Tamara served as the first commander of the 586th. According to Galina Markova, Raskova “could not even identify a single person to whom she could entrust the fighter regiment.” Pennington, 47. Raskova had difficulty naming a commander of the regiment. The appearance of Tamara is abrupt, and it is not clear how she was chosen. Pennington asserts that it is possible that the Kazarinova sisters used their influence to go over Raskova’s head to get Tamara appointed as commander of the regiment. If this is the case, it would also explain why there is no input from Raskova regarding the transfer of the women to male regiments at Stalingrad so early in the war. Pennington, 35-48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109. In a footnote, Pennington states that Beliaeva’s group was initially sent to a regiment where there were no spare parts or tools to service the Yak fighters. 251, note 20.

¹⁵ Maria Kuznetsova, quoted in Noggle, 169-170.

¹⁶ Klavdia Blinova, “When There are Friends Nearby,” in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 238.

¹⁷ Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 110.

¹⁸ Ibid., 111.

¹⁹ Makunina, 168.

²⁰ Pennington, 111-112.

²¹ Makunina, quoted in Pennington, 113.

²² Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 115.

²³ Vera Tikhomirova, "They Joined the Party," in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 266-267. In an interview years later, Klavdia Terekhova contradicts the main facts of the story, stating that some female pilots from the 586th and some male pilots from another fighter regiment were covering a transport plane carrying a VIP passenger. She states that Pozhidaeva intentionally antagonized one of the male fighter pilots from the other regiment by flying circles around him. Regardless, Gridnev's response to the treatment of his pilots was the same in both accounts. Klavdia Terekhova-Kasatkina, quoted in Noggle, 192-193.

²⁴ Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 122.

²⁵ The regiment was transferred to the 101st Fighter Aviation Division based at Voronezh from 13 February until 16 August 1943. This is considered to be the most intense fighting that the regiment would encounter. They were expecting to receive the Guards designation for their participation at Voronezh. Pennington, 118.

²⁶ Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 122.

²⁷ Gridnev believes that Kazarinova and Osipenko were bent on vengeance against the women remaining in the regiment that initially opposed Kazarinova. He claims that Khomiakova, Beliaeva, and Prokhorova were purposefully put into dangerous situations to hasten their deaths. Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 118. For more information regarding the circumstances surrounding the death of the above mentioned women, see Pennington, 117-121.

²⁸ Gridnev, quoted in Pennington, 114.

²⁹ Ibid., 111.

³⁰ Agnia Poliantseva, "Comrade Mechanic," in *Women in Air War*, 279.

³¹ Klavdia Pankratova, quoted in Noggle, 183.

³² Nina Potapova, "Pilot Galina Burdina," in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 257.

CHAPTER 2

THE 46TH TAMAN GUARDS NIGHT BOMBER REGIMENT

Of the three regiments, the 46th (previously the 588th) was the most cohesive. The fact that the regiment remained all-female throughout the war, the effective and innovative command of the unit in conjunction with the women's admiration and respect for their commander, Evdokia Davydovna Bershanskaya¹, equally affected the cohesion of the regiment. Bershanskaya's innovative leadership enabled the 46th to become one of the top-performing Po-2 regiments in the Soviet military. Male reaction to the unit played a minor role in the women's attitudes; however the most significant factor to shape the cohesion of the 46th was the plane they flew and the conditions it required. Considered a relic from the 30's, the Po-2 became the symbol of wartime heroism for Soviet Women pilots.

The 46th Taman Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment was the second regiment of the 122nd Aviation Group to enter into active service. The regiment's dates of wartime service were from May 1942 to May 1945, operating continuously on the front. It was formally disbanded in October 1945.² The regiment flew more than 24,000 combat sorties, the most of the three regiments, in the U-2 biplane, later designated the Po-2. It initially comprised two squadrons, but later added a third squadron and a training squadron. The 46th was the only regiment to remain all-female throughout the war, with a contingent of over two hundred personnel. Its primary areas of operation were Stalingrad, Krasnodar, Novorossiisk, Kerch, Sevastopol, Minsk, Warsaw, and Berlin. Located close to the front lines, the 46th was a night-time bomber regiment whose targets included fuel depots, ammunition dumps, ground troops, support vehicles, bridges, and enemy headquarters. The 46th was the most decorated of the three regiments. It received the

honorary designation of Guards, Taman, and Orders of the Red Banner and Suvorov III class. The entire personnel were decorated, and twenty-four women were awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.³

The 46th was the only regiment created from the 122nd Aviation Group that remained all-female. The first slogan of the regiment was “You are a woman, and you should be proud of that.”⁴ The women were always conscious of their femininity—embroidering forget-me-nots on their footcloths, keeping kittens, dancing in the airfield, and crying at the least provocation. They felt very strongly that they were not “pseudo-male soldiers”.⁵ The 46th did have offers to integrate, but refused. In March 1944, Marshal K. K. Rokossovsky, commander of the 2nd Belorussian Front, and K. A. Vershinin, commander of the 4th Air Army, visited the regiment. Rokossovsky remarked to Vershinin that it was probably difficult for the women to do everything themselves. He suggested sending them some men to help with the heavy work. The women protested loudly, “We don’t need any helpers, we’re managing just fine on our own!”⁶ In fact, they were. At this point the regiment had already received the title of Guards and the appellation “Taman.” However, in mid-1943, the 46th did have a male radio mechanic assigned for a month to install air-to-ground communications. Irina Rakobolskaya recalls that he was shy and quiet, keeping to himself and even eating alone. About a week after he arrived, he was issued a set of women’s underwear. She says it was not clear whether this was accidental or on purpose, but on that day he stated that he would not remain one single day after he completed the installation. He requested a transfer to his home unit immediately, and thereafter the 46th remained without any men.⁷

Not all women were initially pleased with being in an all-female regiment. Klavdia Iliushina states that she was not happy at first. She was not used to working with women; they were noisy and sometimes ill-disciplined. Beyond the gender issue, she notes that the mechanics came from the lower strata of society while the pilots, navigators, and technical staff came from the universities. Interestingly, she asserts that they were not homogenous. However, she further says that when she got to know the women better, they all became sisters.⁸ The 46th did get replacements throughout the war. Most of the women came from male regiments and expressed the opinion that they liked the women’s regiment better because the women were nicer and more open.⁹ Olga

Erokhina-Averianova states, “It was easier to serve in the male regiment in the physical sense that the heavy duties were performed by the men. But from the point of view of human relationships, it was much better in the women’s regiment.”¹⁰

Rakobolskaya asserts that the women differed greatly from the men because the women had more spirit. The women were very competitive with each other and with other regiments. The main source of conflict amongst the women revolved around who would take off first. The crew who took off first flew the most missions that night. The women were more effective and innovative as a unit because of this competitive spirit. Throughout the war, the women flew with a male Po-2 regiment under the command of Major Bocharov. They secretly engaged in competition with them regarding both the number and effectiveness of bombing strikes.¹¹ Rakobolskaya explains that they were not happy with being just as good as the men. “Fighting alongside and on the par with the male regiments, we were not content with the status quo.” The women set out to increase the number of combat sorties flown each night by setting up a new servicing system for the aircraft. In the old system, each mechanic prepared her machine for combat missions by night as well as day. There was little time for sleep and too many people were getting into each other’s way on the airfield. Mechanics fought over access to the refueling truck or the bombs. In the new system, duty teams worked in shifts. Each mechanic was made responsible for a single operation on all aircraft. The armorers were detailed in teams of three. In this assembly-line fashion, the ground crew was able to service an aircraft in 5 minutes. On winter nights, they were able to fly as many as 12 to 14 sorties as opposed to 8 or 10 under the old system. This innovation in servicing the aircraft gave the women a victory over the men in their secret competition.¹² The women were very proud of their achievement, and Rakobolskaya persuaded the regiment’s engineer, Sofia Ozerkova, to draw up a detailed report for the division command about their “experience in technical support of Po-2 night missions.” Ozerkova was reprimanded for violating *The Technical Maintenance Manual*. The regiment ignored the reprimand and continued to operate in teams, but Rakobolskaya good humoredly states in her memoir, “may all the gods of military manuals and regulations forgive us for this transgression committed so long ago!”¹³

Not only did the 46th remain all-female, but they had a female commander throughout the war. Evdokia Bershanskaya was an experienced civilian pilot before the war. Well-loved and respected by the women, Bershanskaya proved to be a capable commander. She introduced a new “two-plane element” tactic, the aircraft servicing system, and a training program that enabled the 46th to become one of the top-performing Po-2 regiments in the Soviet military. Bershanskaya’s introduction of a new training program to replace flying personnel enabled the 46th to remain all-female while staying continuously operational on the front for over three years. The 46th started the war with two regiments, but soon added a third combat regiment plus a training regiment. Mechanics and armorers trained to become navigators, and navigators trained to be pilots. Local women volunteers were enlisted and trained as ground personnel. Bershanskaya was later designated one of twelve “remarkable air regiment commanders” in the Soviet Air Force.¹⁴

Bershanskaya was unanimously praised and admired by the women, as seen in Natalia Meklin’s very detailed description of her. Meklin states that they all tried to pretend that Bershanskaya reminded them of Marina Raskova. “Appearing severe with a sharp look in her greenish-eyes,” the commander did not resemble Raskova physically, but “they were similar in terms of their strong character and will, energy, and a manner of smiling. We had the opportunity to learn to appreciate her bravery, self-control, and ability to organize our operational flying in such a way that we felt we were being treated as equals of men in all respects. Strict, modest, and self-controlled...she was a true commanding officer...”

Meklin further states that Bershanskaya was able to foster initiative in the women and to curb behavior she felt was undesirable. “All she had to do was to give you a look, and you either felt doubly guilty if you were at fault, or our happiness doubled if you had done something right. Behind her severe look we always detected warmth, trust, and something else which made us eager not merely to execute a most difficult mission, but also fly to the ends of the earth and try to accomplish the impossible.”¹⁵ In a letter to Reina Pennington, Polina Gelman wrote “we relied on one another as if we were family. Our commander, Lt. Col. Evdokia Davydovna Bershanskaya, played a tremendous role in

this. I'm very old; I served a long time in the army, and worked in many places. I had many commanders. But I never met such a wonderful person as our commander.”¹⁶

While the women adored Bershanskaya, they were not so enamored with the male division and army commanders. Initially, the regiment was openly mistrusted in the division and army. The command personnel stated “what an exceptional case! A regiment composed solely of girls! And what’s more, these girls were eager to fight! But, after all, they were bound to become scared and cry! Besides—the crux of the matter was—could they fight?”¹⁷ When the women first arrived at the front in May 1942, an unfortunate incident occurred that called into question their ability to handle themselves in combat. Ten minutes from landing, fighter aircraft appeared in the air. At first the women thought it was an escort, but when the fighters did not take up escort formation and began flying erratically, some of the women panicked and broke formation. The fighter pilots retreated. The Po-2s were able to re-form to land, but the damage had been done. After the women landed on the field, some male pilots taunted them saying “Hey, spineless, can’t you tell a star from a swastika?”¹⁸ However, the repercussions went further than taunting. The commander of the 218th Night Bomber Aviation Division, D. D. Popov, was not enthusiastic about having the women assigned to his command. After the incident with the fighters, Popov decided that the women needed more training and should gradually be introduced to combat. Each pilot and navigator had to be certified by a male pilot before they were allowed to participate in any missions. Raskova told the women “don’t take the mistrust you’ve encountered here to heart too much. After all, you are the first female regiment that ever existed. The men are amazed by this, even though you and I see nothing special in it.”¹⁹ The women participated in their first mission in June 1942, but the mission did not end auspiciously. On their first operational night, they lost their first crew. Lyuba Olkhovskaya and Vera Tarasova, Squadron Commander and Squadron Navigator, respectively, were the first casualties of the regiment.²⁰ Rakobolskaya admits that the women experienced losses and accidents due to inexperience, but that after two to three months they were just as effective as the male regiments. She also states that they were treated differently by then. Infantrymen called them “heavenly creatures,” while male pilots called them “little sisters.” The Germans

called them “night witches,” about which Rakobolskaya said, “in a sense this, too, amounted to a recognition of our worth.”²¹

The 46th encountered mistrust as they moved around the war. The Black Sea Fleet pilots greeted the women with exaggerated friendliness. They put the women in nice, clean dugouts with flowers and fresh sheets on the beds. Serafima Amosova noted that the male pilots were skeptical of the fighting capabilities of the Po-2, but more so of the fact that women were flying them. She states that many of the pilots were downright contemptuous: “A broad’s regiment... Well, well...” She speculates that they resented the precision bombing assignment being given to the Po-2. When the women went on their first mission, the male pilots gathered at the hardstands. She states, “we paid no attention to the men; having grown accustomed to their barbs, we were quite willing to let them have their fun.” After the women proved themselves in battle, the men changed their opinion of the 46th. The two groups formed a “kind of cooperation” where the men would bomb during the day and the women at night. Amosova states, “the men became downright nice.” For Tanya Sumarokova’s birthday, they all showed up wearing clean uniforms and presented her with a bottle of champagne, singing songs they composed devoted to the girls, apparently forgetting about the ditties they had composed about the ‘broad’s regiment’.²²

The infantrymen in general were accepting of the women of the 46th. As noted above, they often called the women “heavenly angels.” The front-line troops witnessed the women in action and respected them and the Po-2. The women received many letters of gratitude from the ground forces.²³ The women of the 46th did not encounter the same amount of mistrust from the infantrymen when they crash landed on the front lines that the other regiments endured. This was due to the fact that the women were working in such close proximity to the front that the infantrymen knew that women pilots were operating in the area. Nina Raspopova recalls when she and her navigator, Larisa Radchikova, were shot down over neutral territory. The plane had suffered a severe anti-aircraft attack from the Germans. After the plane had been hit, Raspopova remembers her foot slipping into an empty space below her. The bottom of the aircraft had been blown away and she felt something hot streaming down her arm and leg. She was blinded by the searchlights and the fuel was spraying inside of the cockpit. She was disoriented but

landed the plane in the neutral zone. Both she and Radchikova got out of the cockpit with difficulty. Both women were injured. Raspopova had large splinters sticking out of her body and was bleeding heavily, while Radchikova had been injured in the neck. Both women walked toward the Soviet line. As they approached a bridge and hesitated to cross, a sentry came out of the darkness and questioned them. When they revealed they were Russian, he took them to a dugout and the soldiers tried to help them with their injuries. They were taken to a field hospital where they waited on a bench for their turn for treatment. Many of the male soldiers offered to let them jump ahead of them in line for surgery.²⁴

All the factors described above contributed to the cohesion of the 46th, but the most significant element in shaping the unity of the 46th was the plane in which they flew. The Polikarpov U-2 biplane, later designated the Po-2, was a tiny, slow, defenseless plane made of plywood and fabric. Designed in 1927 as a trainer, the Po-2 was not intended for combat deployment. It had an open cockpit and primitive instrument panel. There was no armor to protect the pilot and navigator, and initially it was not equipped with a machine gun, radio, or instruments for night flying. Its cruising speed was only 60 mph, making it an easy target for German fighters and anti-aircraft guns. Because of its slow speed, the Po-2 became a “night bomber” relying on the cover of darkness for protection when flying over the front-lines. The defenseless Po-2 became the symbol of heroism for Soviet women pilots.²⁵

The Po-2 presented a number of challenges to the 46th throughout the war. Because of its light weight, powerful air currents could send the plane thousands of meters up or down with tremendous force. This was particularly dangerous in mountainous regions. It was very difficult for the pilot to hold onto the control stick. Galina Bespalova wrote in her memoirs about the difficulty of flying the Po-2. She and her pilot Maguba (Marta) Syrtlanova were flying on a course over the Black Sea when their aircraft suddenly began to lose altitude. Caught in a downdraft, the Po-2 was plummeting toward the sea. Bespalova states, “The sea kept coming with every second. I broke into a cold sweat. Our total helplessness made us furious; there was nothing we could do to save ourselves.” Bespalova asked Marta to turn the aircraft toward the coast

so she could see land one last time before they crashed into the sea. Marta turned the nose of the aircraft and suddenly they began to climb in an updraft.²⁶

Another problem with the Po-2 was how easily it caught fire from anti-aircraft or machine-gun tracers. Because it was made of wood and fabric with unprotected fuel tanks, one incendiary bullet could light it like a torch. The plane and crew were almost always doomed because parachutes were not provided until summer 1944. The only solution to this situation was to land the plane. The pilots flew without parachutes voluntarily because they felt the Po-2 itself to be a parachute. Landing over Soviet territory was easy, but over enemy lines the women preferred to die rather than be taken prisoner by the Germans. Weight was also a concern. In such a light aircraft, the weight of a parachute decreased the bomb load that could be carried. However, in the summer of 1944, one of the best crews in the regiment was shot down over Soviet territory and burned up. As a result, the women were ordered to wear parachutes.²⁷ The women carried the parachutes reluctantly. Not only did they feel that they really did not need them, but they saw them as a burden. Natalia Meklin claims that they were so tired after 14 hours of flying, that getting out of the cockpit was considerably more of a burden with a parachute. Even so, Rakobolskaya notes that Rufina Gasheva and Olga Sanfirova were saved by the use of parachutes. They were shot down over neutral territory in Poland. The plane had caught fire and they both jumped, but landed in a minefield. Sanfirova stepped on a mine and was killed. A Soviet soldier witnessed this and came to Gasheva's aid by carrying her out of the minefield.²⁸

Another disconcerting aspect of the Po-2 was its sheer lack of defense. While anti-aircraft fire and machine gun tracers presented a real danger to the Po-2, enemy fighters were responsible for many casualties. The worst incident of casualties occurred when the regiment was fighting over the Kuban. Larisa Rozanova recalls "the terrible night of 31 July 1943 stands out in my memory, like a nightmare." Rozanova was the fourth to take off. Soon, she knew something was amiss when the searchlights were over the target, but the anti-aircraft guns were silent. She saw the first Po-2 to take off that night catch fire and fall to the ground. Then a second Po-2 was caught in the searchlights. They heard gunfire and realized then that an enemy fighter was airborne. The second plane caught fire and slowly fell near the first. Then the third Po-2 appeared in the

searchlights and caught fire. Rozanova decided to approach the target from a very low altitude in a glide. They were told to never drop bombs from an altitude lower than 400 meters because the plane could not withstand the explosion. They continued to glide and dropped their bombs at an altitude of less than 300 meters. “When we dropped them our plane was so shaken by the aerodynamic blow from the bombs exploding that I thought we would split into pieces.” She continued to glide until they reached an altitude of 100 meters and then started the engine once they cleared the target. Upon heading for home, she looked over her shoulder and was horrified to see a fourth plane burning and falling. This was the first time the Germans had used a combination of anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, and fighters. Four crews (eight women) were lost in a matter of ten minutes. Rozanova states, “for our whole wartime experience it was our worst, most horrible, tragic night.” For the next few nights, a Soviet fighter regiment cleared the air for the night bombers.²⁹

Despite all of its shortcomings, the Po-2 was loved by the women of the 46th and was nicknamed “our swallow.” Natalia Kravtsova states, “we like our “night bomber” even though it was so unsophisticated and unassuming. It was a bold machine and a hardworking one: it worked all night from dusk to dawn without any respite.”³⁰ The Po-2 was stable in flight and easy to control. It did not require permanent airfields and could fly at low altitude in any weather. Although it was a slow aircraft, its low speed enabled accuracy in bombing just behind enemy lines.³¹ It is precisely the attributes of the Po-2 that required the women to employ such dangerous tactics and operate so close to the front.

The 46th flew in a line toward the target, not in formation. They flew in three to five minute intervals to disrupt the resting German ground troops. As it was generally successful, the Soviets employed this tactic purposefully even though the Germans could prepare for the attack. The Germans equipped targets with anti-aircraft guns and searchlights. If a searchlight could catch a plane and hold it in its beam, it was very easy to shoot down. The only defense a pilot had was to maneuver to sideslip out of the beam. Rakobolskaya describes the typical tactic employed by the night bombers:

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 3-5 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 and the anti-aircraft guns were firing. Then the second crew bombed the searchlights, and the first—the target. It was necessary to take into consideration that usually the aircraft went to the target at altitudes of 1,000-1,300 meters, cut the gas above the target and approached on 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 bombs might hit the aircraft—the speed was slow, the aircraft simply was not able to get away from them. Prior to bombing they threw out illuminating flares (SAB), which hung from parachutes and illuminated the target. After releasing the bombs, the pilot could descend [powerfully] and leave the target at very low altitude.³²

Aware that the Germans were accustomed to their consistent bombing patterns, Bershanskaya developed a new tactic when the 46th was at the Terek River near Mozdok. Instead of sending the planes one by one to the target, she proposed a more dangerous tactic of “two-plane elements.” One aircrew approached silently and bombed the target, while the other aircrew ‘tackled’ the anti-aircraft guns noisily drawing the attention of the searchlights. The first time this tactic was employed it proved successful. The two-plane element required faultless cooperation on the part of the aircrews. Marina Chechneva noted “our solidarity was exemplary...the motto: ‘Save your comrade, even at the cost of our own life, if need be’ became an [irrevocable] law for all of us.”³³

Because of the slow speed of the Po-2 and the constant pattern of bombing, the regiment was required to have an auxiliary airfield close to the front line. The auxiliary airfields were about 20-30 kilometers from the front-line. Working so close to the front presented some challenges for the women. Operations in the area changed rapidly as the front-line was very fluid. The women were required to orient themselves very quickly in order not to hit friendly soldiers. Often, they would have to pick-up and leave an airfield quickly due to German bombing attacks or approaching tanks.³⁴

At the airfields, there was no need for dugouts. The women would stay in their cockpits all night, getting out only to have tea. At dawn, they would fly to their home airfield. Landing at night was very difficult. Many times they could not use searchlights because it would give away their position. They used kerosene lanterns called “flying mice” that could be seen in one direction only. The pilots quipped “soon we’ll be

expected to land by the light of our commander's cigarette." Despite these difficulties, the real challenges were fatigue and stress. Fatigue was a problem for many of the women of the 46th. Many times they were not only flying missions at night, but flying supplies or reconnaissance missions during the day. Sometimes pilots and navigators would fall asleep during a mission. Many of the crews had arrangements that the pilot would fly the aircraft into the target and the navigator would take the controls on the way back, so that each could take turns sleeping. Larisa Rozanova maintains that sometimes both pilot and navigator would fall asleep simultaneously. "You woke up, and at times you didn't know where you were and what was happening to you."³⁵

Most of the women talk about the constant fear they experienced and how it affected them. Maria Smirnova describes acutely what the women faced each night:

We faced risks every night. You shouldn't misinterpret my words and think we faced death openly and bravely—it is not true. We never became accustomed to fear. Before each mission and as we approached the target, I became a concentration of nerves and tension. My whole body was swept by fear of being killed. We had to break through the fire of anti-aircraft guns and also escape the searchlights. We had to dive and sideslip the plane in order not to be shot down. All this affected my sleep enormously. When we returned from our missions at dawn, I couldn't fall asleep; I tossed in bed and had anxiety attacks. Fear was always an inseparable part of our flights, but we knew we had to go through it for we were liberating our motherland.³⁶

Many of the women faced conditions that required an exceptional show of bravery. On one mission, Irina Kasharina had to fly her plane back after her pilot Dusia Nosal was killed by enemy fire. Nosal's body had slumped forward over the control stick, so Kasharina had to hold the dead body with her left hand and pilot the plane with her right hand in the rough air over the Crimean hills. She landed at the airfield in a state of shock.³⁷ On other occasions, the women would endure the anti-aircraft fire and searchlights only to find that when they reached the target, a bomb would stick and not drop. The navigator would be required to climb out of the cockpit, stand on the wing, and try to release the bomb with her hands.³⁸

The 46th was the most cohesive of the three regiments formed by Marina Raskova. The all-female composition of the unit was an important aspect of the camaraderie of the women. Rakobolskaya states, "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.”³⁹ Bershanskaya’s introduction of a new “two-plane element” tactic, aircraft servicing system, and a training program enabled the 46th to become one of the top-performing Po-2 regiments in the Soviet military. Her effective and innovative leadership earned the admiration and respect of the women of the 46th and also recognition for herself as one of twelve “remarkable air regiment commanders” in the Soviet Air Force. Although the women had to deal with negative male attitudes regarding their combat capabilities, they proved themselves and earned the respect and gratitude of most men. The element that most affected the cohesion of the unit was the Po-2. The primitive features of the plane, coupled with the dangers of their missions, became the symbol of wartime heroism for Soviet women pilots. The most decorated of the female regiments, the 46th was a successful regiment that undeniably contributed greatly to the Soviet war effort. Every woman of the 46th was decorated, with twenty-four women receiving the title Hero of the Soviet Union. The regiment received the honorary designation of Guards, Taman, and Orders of the Red Banner and Suvorov III class. Irina Rakobolskaya explains the fortitude of the women of the 46th “and it was so difficult to endure the death of one’s comrades-in-arms, as one witnessed other Po-2, shot down by enemy fighters or set on fire by anti-aircraft guns, going to ground like a stone! Yet the survivors kept coming back to home airfield, in order to take a new bomb load; they would again approach the target and again go into the very same hell....”⁴⁰

The following chapter discusses the cohesion of the 125th Guards Bomber Regiment. Although not as cohesive as the 46th, the 125th was a successful regiment.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER 2

¹ There is no record of Bershanskaya's military rank in 1941. She retired as a Lieutenant Colonel and most likely was a Major during the war.

² A timeline highlighting the major events in the history of the regiment is located in Appendix 2.

³ Pennington, 18.

⁴ Irina Rakobolskaya, quoted in Noggle, 29.

⁵ Rakobolskaya, "The Bygone Days," in *Women in Air War*, 117.

⁶ Pennington, 74.

⁷ Rakobolskaya, quoted in Noggle, 30.

⁸ Klavdia Iliushina, quoted in Noggle, 49.

⁹ Nina Egorova-Arefieva, quoted in Noggle, 64.

¹⁰ Olga Erokhina-Averianova, quoted in Noggle, 58.

¹¹ Serafima Amosova, "The Novorossiysk Operation," in *Women in Air War*, 142.

¹² Rakobolskaya, "The Bygone Days," in *Women in Air War*, 117-118.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pennington, 75.

¹⁵ Natalia Meklin, "Our Commander," in *Women in Air War*, 122.

¹⁶ Pennington, 75.

¹⁷ Natalia Kravtsova, *The Golden Tressed Soldier*, 1.

¹⁸ Raisa E. Aronova, *Nochnye vedmy* 2nd ed. (Moscow: Sovetskaya Rossia, 1980), 52-53, quoted in Pennington, 76.

¹⁹ Meklin, 121.

²⁰ Marina Chechneva, "The First Battles," in *In the Sky above the Front*, 100.

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- ²¹ Rakobolskaya, "The Bygone Days," in *Women in Air War*, 117.
- ²² Amosova, "The Novorossiysk Operation," in *Women in Air War*, 139-142.
- ²³ Chechneva, 104.
- ²⁴ Nina Raspopova, quoted in Noggle, 23-24.
- ²⁵ Noggle, 18-21.
- ²⁶ Galina Bespalova, "In Defiance of the Elements," in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 110-111.
- ²⁷ Rakobolskaya, quoted in Noggle, 27.
- ²⁸ Meklin, "Watch out for Mines," in *Women in Air War*, 161; Rakobolskaya, quoted in Noggle, 27. In her interview with Noggle and in her memoir, Rakobolskaya does not seem to be negative about the use of parachutes; however, Pennington notes that in a letter to her from Rakobolskaya, she seems to consider the death of Sanfirova as much the fault of the parachute as the mine. Pennington, 245, note 71.
- ²⁹ Larisa Rozanova, "On the Kuban," in *In the Sky above the Front*, 123-126
- ³⁰ Kravtsova, 9-10.
- ³¹ Chechneva, "The First Battles," in *In the Sky above the Front*, 104.
- ³² Rakobolskaya, letter to Reina Pennington, 10 August 1992, quoted in Pennington, 86.
- ³³ Chechneva, "In the Caucasus," in *Women in Air War*, 128-129.
- ³⁴ Rakobolskaya, 161.
- ³⁵ Rozanova, "On the Kuban," in *In the Sky above the Front*, 120-121.
- ³⁶ Maria Smirnova, quoted in Noggle, 32.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Rakobolskaya, quoted in Noggle, 29.
- ³⁹ Rakobolskaya, letter to Reina Pennington, 10 August 1992, quoted in Pennington, 80.
- ⁴⁰ Rakobolskaya, 120.

CHAPTER 3

THE 125TH M. M. RASKOVA BORISOV GUARDS BOMBER REGIMENT

Several factors shaped the experiences and unit cohesion of the women of the 125th during the war. The most significant was the death of their first commander, Major Marina Mikhailovna Raskova, and her subsequent replacement with a male commander, Major Valentin Vasilievich Markov. Although the appointment of Markov initially created discontent within the unit, the women and Markov would eventually develop a mutual respect and admiration for each other. The integration of the unit also affected the cohesion of the regiment. Although the women came to appreciate other male regiments, it appears that relations within their own unit between men and women, particularly that of the female pilots/navigators with the male gunners/ground crew were not substantial. Another factor that shaped the cohesion of the women of the unit was the use of the Pe-2 dive bomber and the universal disbelief in the women's abilities to master the aircraft, along with the general reaction of male pilots and infantrymen to women fighting in combat roles.

The 125th (previously the 587th) Bomber Aviation Regiment was the third regiment formed from the 122nd Aviation Group and the third group to enter active service. The regiment's dates of wartime service were from January 1943 to May 1945; it was formally disbanded in February 1947.¹ The regiment flew 1,134 combat missions in the Petliakov Pe-2 dive bomber, dropping 980,000 tons of bombs. It was comprised of two squadrons with 10 aircraft each. All of the pilots and navigators were women, while most of the gunners and some of the ground crew were men.² Its primary areas of operation were Stalingrad, Tambov, Vysedki, Borisoglebsk, Ezovnia, Orsha, Grislinen, and Ponevezys. The regiment participated in such major engagements as the battles of

Stalingrad, Kursk, and Smolensk. The 125th was a day-time bomber aviation unit whose targets included front line enemy positions: manpower firing; strong points; concentrations of armament, tanks, and artillery formations; airfields; railroad lines; stations; bridges; and (at the end of the war) seaports. It received the honorary designations of Guards, Borisov, Orders of Suvorov and Kutuzov III class, and it was named for Hero of the Soviet Union Marina Raskova. Five women were awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.³

Although initially created as an all-female regiment, the 125th integrated during training due to an aircraft change from the Su-2 bomber to the new Pe-2 dive bomber. Most of the pilots selected for the 125th were already skilled in flying the Su-2 bomber. However, because it was no longer being produced and spare parts would be difficult to obtain, Raskova requested the Pe-2 dive bomber for the regiment. The Su-2 carried a crew of two: pilot and navigator; while the Pe-2 carried a crew of three: pilot, navigator/bombardier, and tail gunner. The Pe-2 also required four additional ground crew members. Raskova was determined to deploy to the front by the winter of 1942. Because of the extra personnel requirements of the Pe-2, there was no time to recruit and train extra women to fulfill all of the personnel demands and meet Raskova's goal for deployment. She integrated the regiment with men called up from the reserves.⁴

The men served as ground crew and radio operators/gunners. Only a few women would serve as radio operators/gunners because the physical requirements of reloading the Berezin machine gun proved very difficult for most women, but not impossible. Antonina Khokhlova-Dubkova was initially the only female gunner in the regiment. She notes "the real effort was to recharge the machine gun, to pull the lever when it took sixty kilograms, and I had to do it with my left arm. I could never do it on the ground because it was very hard, but in the air it was one, two, and it was recharged!"⁵ Although so few women were gunners, they along with the female ground crew were represented well in the memoirs as valuable crew members in the regiment.

Male gunners and ground crew, on the other hand, are noticeably absent from the memoirs. There is one instance where Valentina Kravchenko mentions the "excellent working relationship" that squadron commander Zhenia Timofeeva had with her gunner, G. I. Grishko. However, typically when a male gunner is mentioned, it is usually brief

and frequently they are not identified.⁶ In an interview with Anne Noggle, Maria Dolina related two very different stories regarding a gunner. After successfully freeing the town of Borisov, the regiment received the honorary title “Borisov Regiment”. The other pilots of the operation asked Dolina to drop a streamer over the town that was inscribed “To the Inhabitants of the Town of Borisov with Military Regards, from Women Pilots of the Borisovski Regiment.” In order to drop the streamer, she lied to Markov, reporting that there was something wrong with her engine and she needed to land at the Borisov airfield. He granted her permission and the rest of the formation flew on. After she dropped the streamer and returned to the formation, the gunner reported to Markov that there was nothing wrong with the engine, and it was a hooligan trick. Dolina was arrested and given fifteen days in the guardhouse, but only served two.

On the other hand, she relates a story of heroism on the part of a gunner. Her formation had been attacked by German fighters on their way to the target. Of the nine planes, five had been shot down. One by one, the remaining planes were forced to land. Dolina was left alone against a German fighter. Out of bullets, Dolina’s crew started firing flares. At this point, both engines were on fire, and the flames were beginning to enter the cockpit. After making a belly landing, the gunner, wounded from the landing, went into the burning cockpit and pulled both Dolina and the navigator, Galina Dzhunkovskaya, out. Both women were on fire and had sustained considerable injuries during the landing. Dolina specifically mentions his gender when she stated, “our gunner was a man, and he saved our lives.”⁷ It is not what the memoirs and interviews say about the male gunners and ground crew that is significant, but rather what they do not say. Although the memoirs were written to praise the women of the regiments, other male regiments, fighter squadrons, and soldiers are mentioned. The lack of any mention of the male ground crew and the scant information on the gunners coupled with the praise of the female ground crew and gunners presents evidence of unit cohesion among the women of the regiment, but not necessarily of the regiment as a whole.

Another example of unit cohesion among the women was the mastery of the Pe-2. The Pe-2 was a twin-engine, twin-tail dive bomber. It had a maximum speed of 336 mph at 16,400 feet and could carry a bomb load up to 1,200 kg.⁸ The Pe-2 was considered the most complex and up-to-date aircraft in the Soviet Air Force: many of the male pilots and

instructors doubted that the women would be able to master such a machine. In his memoirs pilot Meniailenko writes:

The Pe-2 aircraft was quite difficult to control, particularly on one engine, and did not tolerate delayed pilot reactions. Nevertheless, it was a good dive bomber, with a large safety margin and tolerance for high g-loads. Good pilots liked this aircraft, while the less competent ones were afraid of it. Of course, for a woman to fly the Pe-2, especially at a time when the fate of the Homeland was being decided, was quite an achievement....⁹

The cockpit design of the Pe-2 and a heavy control stick when carrying a full bomb load were problematic for the crews. Captain Valentina Savitskaya-Kravchenko, navigator, described the poor design of the cockpit. The forward compartment was very small and difficult to exit, with the pilot and navigator flying back to back. The gunner sat in a separate compartment in the tail. Most of the women had difficulty handling the control stick and reaching instruments. The pilots circumvented this problem by putting three folded pillows behind their backs and having the navigator push on their back as they pushed the stick to get the tail up for takeoff.¹⁰

The difficulty in getting the Pe-2 off of the ground with a full bomb load was not limited to female pilots. Galina Brok-Beltsova recounts a time in East Prussia when they took a heavier bomb load and less fuel. A Pe-2 from a male regiment took off in front of them, crashed into a hangar, and exploded. They were next in line to take off. Although it was apparent that they were extremely overloaded, her pilot successfully cleared the hangar and completed their mission. She states, "It was a victory—not over the German troops but over ourselves. You fight your own cowardliness."¹¹

But the cockpit design and heavy control stick were not the only problems with the Pe-2. As a rule, combat missions were flown in a "V" formation so that the machine gun field of fire overlapped. If one of the engines of the Pe-2 was disabled for any reason, it was forced to drop out of formation and thus would become vulnerable to enemy attack. Although it had its challenges, the Pe-2 was noteworthy for its speed. It could evade the Messerschmitt Bf 109E, and British pilots watching over Murmansk were stunned to find that it could evade their Hawker Hurricanes.¹² As beneficial as speed was in the air, however, the aircraft's fast landing speed, coupled with poor airfield conditions, led to many crashes.¹³

The first woman to master the Pe-2 was Evgenia Timofeeva. Her triumphant solo and the subsequent success of the rest of the regiment convinced skeptical male instructors that the women were indeed capable of mastering this “intractable” machine.¹⁴ However, other male personnel not familiar with the women’s regiment had typical reactions of disbelief or surprise, particularly when they learned that the women were flying the Pe-2. Marta Meriuts recounts an experience at the end of the war during a reception at the Kremlin. The commander of the front under whom they fought asked why the women had been invited to the reception. They explained to him they were the pilots from the 125th. He was surprised to learn about the women after the war. Speaking almost fifty years after the war, Meriuts goes on to say “even now very few men can believe that women crews could fly the dive bomber.”¹⁵

The largest setback to unit morale was the death of their first commander, Major Marina Raskova. Well-loved and idolized by the women of the regiments, Raskova had an undeniably positive effect on the women and on the three regiments in general. Raskova cared a great deal for her regiments—she demanded the best aircraft, oversaw the delivery of supplies, and took an interest in the welfare and training of the women. Her ability to utilize the Soviet system—with her access to high level government and military officials—allowed her to not only create, but also to care for, her regiments. This reveals her capability to command, but the respect and unswerving devotion of those she commanded demonstrates her success as a leader. The memoirs contain numerous accounts of the love and respect that the women had toward Raskova. Tragically, she would not live to lead them into combat.

In late November 1942, the 125th received their first orders to proceed to the Western Front to assist the 8th Air Army. Dangerous weather turned a one-night journey into a trip that would prove tragic and costly not only to the 125th, but to all of the “Raskova” regiments. Both squadrons set out from Engels on 01 December 1942. Severe weather set in and grounded the squadrons at an intermediate field. 10 days later, the weather finally broke, but there was only enough hot water for the radiators of one squadron. Raskova ordered Nadezhda Fedutenko to take the first squadron ahead while she stayed behind with Evgenia Timofeeva’s second squadron. Meanwhile, Raskova was called to Moscow to receive new orders sending the 125th to the Stalingrad front. She

ordered Timofeeva to depart as soon as the weather cleared. Ten days later, the second squadron headed out, leaving behind two aircraft that had experienced engine trouble. Raskova returned to the transit field to escort the repaired aircraft to the front. On 04 January 1943 the three Pe-2s took off for Stalingrad. While en route, the weather once again closed in. Two of the Pe-2s were able to make forced landings in a field, but Raskova's plane crashed, killing her and her crew. Raskova's remains were sent to Moscow, where she was interred in the Kremlin wall in the first state funeral of the war. The other members of her crew were buried together in a common grave in Saratov.¹⁶

Raskova's accident is not without criticism. Aleksandr Gridnev, commander of the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, expressed the opinion that Raskova should not have attempted the flight in such poor weather conditions. Conversely, Zina Stepanova, a navigator with the group, reports that they were informed by Moscow that their flight route was clear. Galina Tenueva-Lomanova, a pilot of one of the other Pe-2's on the trip, concurs that the weather was clear when they took off. However, she criticizes Raskova's judgment in not landing when it became apparent that the weather was deteriorating. Tenueva-Lomanova claims that Raskova was anxious to get to her regiment and thus exercised poor judgment by not landing while the weather was still favorable.¹⁷

The death of Raskova had an immeasurable effect on the women. The women had lost their commander, but more importantly, they worried about the fate of their "orphaned regiment." "What will happen to our regiment? Are we capable of joining other operational units? Suppose our effort to master our new, complex aircraft was in vain? Would our superiors trust us without Marina Raskova in command of the Regiment?" Evgenia Timofeeva states that "I was constantly tormented by such doubts..." On 15 January 1943, Timofeeva was ordered to take temporary command of the regiment. She was "literally stunned" and at first wanted to refuse. However, she realized that if she were to respond negatively, her superiors would possibly distribute the personnel to other regiments now that Raskova was dead. She, Lieutenant Ye. Ya. Migunova, and chief of staff Captain Militzia A. Kazarinova pledged to respond to Raskova's death by doing their best.¹⁸

On 02 February 1943 Major Valentin V. Markov took over command of the 125th while the unit was on the Don Front. The initial reaction by both Markov and the women

of the 125th was dissatisfaction. When asked by General Nikitin, head of the Air Force Personnel directorate, to command Raskova's regiment, Markov hesitated, and was then told "I've already signed the... order."¹⁹ Markov states that he left the office "pale and angry." When he encountered friends in the corridor who asked about where he was going, he threw up his hands: "Better don't ask. I am off to a women's regiment." His friends looked at him with pity and predicted that he would go through hell with the regiment. Markov admitted that he agreed.²⁰

Markov wondered how he would command women. He thought they were illogical and easy to offend. He worried about their discipline, a crucial element in completing successful missions. He was also apprehensive about how the women would react to him replacing Raskova. He decided to be just, strict, and demanding, irrespective of their gender. His apprehension, however, was not solely related to gender issues regarding commanding women, but also to the complexity of the Pe-2. He states, "I knew the aircraft and knew how difficult it was even for male pilots to fly. I couldn't imagine how women could manage it."²¹

Markov arrived while the women were out on a sortie. He watched them land with confidence and competence. He immediately called for an inspection and for the regiment to form up, at which time he gave the following speech: "I am your new commander. I warn you, I am going to expect a lot from you. Don't count on any allowances from me because you are women. Please remember this. You've some operational flying experience, but it's not enough. We'll begin by improving discipline."²² The women took offense at this speech. They did not expect differential treatment based on their sex, but more importantly, they felt that they had good discipline with more than fifty combat sorties to their credit.²³

The women did not want a man to take command of the regiment. From Raskova's death, they tried to find a replacement for her. Although the women had confidence in Timofeeva, it was a temporary assignment about which Timofeeva herself had reservations. Timofeeva appealed to Valentina Grizodubova—one of the women on the famous *Rodina* flight²⁴—to take over the regiment, but she never responded. Valentina Savitskaya-Kravchenko states, "we would even have accepted Grizodubova."²⁵

The women were determined to dislike Markov. He sternly instituted many new rules regarding smart uniforms, clean collars, and boots that shone. He ordered the navigators to clean their cockpits, a task the women felt was uncalled for since the ground crew maintained them in excellent condition. Fedotova writes that at every turn they gave him a hard time. They called him “bayonet” behind his back because he was tall, thin, and stern looking. When he would assign air crews and leave someone out, they would beg for a change. When he defended his choice, they would burst into tears.²⁶ The women constantly asked themselves “What would Raskova have done in this situation?”—holding Markov up to a standard that they thought he could never achieve. However, Fedotova admits that “eventually Markov proved himself a worthy successor to Raskova. It turned out that in fact they had many personality traits in common: humanity, sharpness of mind, high standards, sense of fairness, and modesty.”²⁷

When Markov started to lead the women into battle, he earned their respect and gratitude. “A proficient pilot and leader, in battle he acted as a caring father.”²⁸ The women were struck with his concern over the welfare of the regiment when he would lead, constantly checking on the other members of the formation. Markov states the period of main combat training was April 1943 at the Northern Caucasus Front. It was very dangerous, with heavy dogfights in the air. After this period, he noticed that the attitude towards him had become softer and more respectful, and by the summer of 1943, they had all become “real, true combat friends.”²⁹ Many of the women subsequently credit their survival to Markov. Fedotova writes “when we developed trust in our commander, we realized that he also had confidence in us, worried about us, was proud of our successes, and took our failures to heart. Already this was quite an achievement, a guarantee—as it were—of our future successes in combat.”³⁰

What is remarkable about Markov is his concern regarding the best way in which to command women in general. He credited his success with the regiment to the many people who helped him with the training of the women, particularly the regimental doctor, a woman, who gave him advice regarding the “problems of women.”³¹ He worried about the inevitable losses and wondered how the women would cope with losing comrades. He established a tradition of coming home after a successful mission in an “air show” formation to demonstrate to those on the ground that everybody was

coming home with a victory.³² After the war, Markov describes the women as “self-disciplined, careful, and obedient to orders; they respected the truth and fair treatment toward them. They never whimpered and never complained and were very courageous.”³³

The women also had to deal with a wide range of reactions from various groups of male soldiers. The infantry soldiers on the front lines were the most diverse in their reactions, with some very suspicious and others considerate. In some situations, Soviet male soldiers on the front line often mistook the women who were forced to jump from their planes as German paratroopers or saboteurs and treated them as such. Natalia Smirnova recalls a harrowing jump that gunner Liza Absaliamova had to make during a mission. They were attacked by a Nazi fighter over the front line. The starboard wing was on fire and the pilot issued the order to jump. When Liza forced her way through the upper hatch, the slipstream caught her and forcefully knocked her against the tail of the plane, rendering her unconscious. She regained consciousness during her descent and opened her parachute. As her plane was going down in flames, the Nazi fighter turned his attention to her. Liza attempted to control her landing as she was being blown toward enemy territory. She landed in a tree, breaking both of her legs. While she was suspended in the tree, unable to free herself from her harness, a group of men came running toward her. She was relieved to find they were Soviet soldiers; however, they thought she was a German paratrooper. When they saw that she was a woman, they mistook her for a saboteur despite her explanations of her identity. They took her to the command post and eventually became convinced she was who she said she was. At that point they became remorseful of their treatment of her.³⁴ Sasha Egorova had a similar experience when she was forced to abandon her aircraft and found herself behind enemy lines. She eventually made it to the Soviet side, where Soviet signalers found her. They mistook her for a boy. When she proclaimed that she was a woman pilot and presented her documents, the men did not believe her, stating that “her eyes, with their stern look, were not a woman’s eyes.”³⁵ In some cases, the men on the front lines were very considerate to the women. Antonina Khokhlova-Dubkova recalls when her crew was shot down and was awaiting help. Some infantry soldiers crawled toward them and handed the women big green leaves full of strawberries. She remembers this as the first nice thing of the war—red strawberries.³⁶

Male pilots, particularly from other bomber regiments, were generally alike in their initial mistrust, followed by gradual acceptance. In January 1943 the regiment reached the Stalingrad front, where they shared an airfield on the west bank of the Volga River with the 10th Leningrad Bomber Aviation Regiment. Galina Olkhovskaya wrote that “people in the division met us with mistrust. Male pilots found it difficult to accept the idea that some girls have learned to handle complex aircraft just as well as they did, and were ready to carry out any and every combat mission. But after only a few flights they became convinced that we were at least as good pilots as they were, and sometimes even surpassed them.”³⁷ Evgenia Timofeeva differs in her recollection, stating that the women received a “friendly reception” when they arrived on the Don Front. She credits the 10th with teaching the women how to detect targets, execute evasive maneuvers in the anti-aircraft gunfire area, and repulse enemy fighter attacks. Fighting the duration of the war together, the 10th became known to the women as the “brothers’ regiment.” Timofeeva speaks warmly of them when she states, “together we fought, together we rejoiced in each other’s successes, and together mourned our fallen comrades.”³⁸

In some instances, the fighter pilots were protective and cordial. Dubkova recalls one day when some Soviet planes flew over the regiment’s airfield and dropped a teddy bear with a note pinned to it “Dear young girls, we just learned we are escorting you. Don’t you get frightened; we’ll do everything to defend you, fight for you with the last drop of our blood. Thank you!”³⁹

Many of the women have fond memories of the French Normandie-Nieman Fighter Regiment. This may be due to the cordial and tolerant attitude of the French pilots concerning the use of women in combat. Although the French pilots initially were doubtful of the women’s abilities, particularly regarding the Pe-2, they present a unique view concerning the use of women as combat pilots when they claim that “for the first time, we, French pilots, were presented with an opportunity to discuss matters pertaining to flying with representatives of the fair sex.” Later, at a reunion with the pilots of the 125th, Colonel Leon Cuyaut expressed his feelings regarding the women “We were not only amazed, we were delighted, when we learned that Soviet women were taking part in air battles on all fronts. We observed them in combat, and we just had to admire them.”⁴⁰

While the reaction to women was varied, as seen above, the most revealing behavior came from Markov. Although he cautioned the women that he would make no exceptions for them because of their gender, in reality his adaptation to the way in which he commanded them was contrary to this statement. Markov changed the way he commanded by adapting to what he thought was the best way to deal with women stating “you should be delicate when you are treating the women; you should use your ears like radars.”⁴¹ He notes that his superiors did not make any distinction between male and female regiments, but he admits that he wished they would remember that they were women and not send them into the hell of war. Even though Markov did treat the women differently than he did the men, he still tried to sway the opinion of men regarding the capabilities of his pilots. During a break in the battles at Tambov, Markov arranged for some training tests for the women. This served as a demonstration for the men. According to the Kravchenko, the attitude of the men changed after that.⁴² Markov was proud of the women of the regiment. He remembers a time when he visited a male regiment sharing the airfield and was gratified to hear a commander reprimanding a pilot for his bad landing and citing the women’s performance as a comparison. “You made a lousy landing today! Well? Have you watched the girls landing? I can’t face them now. Shame on you!”⁴³ Markov’s acceptance, admiration, and pride in the women allowed for a successful working relationship during war. His effectiveness as a commander is evident in the respect and appreciation expressed by the women in their memoirs.

The women often engaged in friendly morale building competition with each other. The armorers would compete for “best crew,” while pilots would compete for excellent formation flying and number of combat missions. But the true sign of cohesion is the bravery, mutual support, and friendship evident when any one person sacrifices themselves for another member of the regiment. On a mission 14 October 1943, Lyuba Gubina’s starboard engine was damaged by an exploding shell. On the way back from the target, her plane began to lag behind and lose altitude. Her wingmen Anya Yazovskaya and Irina Osadze stayed with her. German fighters appeared and engaged the bombers in battle. Two fighters attacked Yazovskaya’s plane piercing one of her fuel tanks. With her arm wounded, her flying suit on fire, her face and hands burnt and cut, Yazovskaya continued to cover Gubina’s aircraft with her machine guns. When her navigator Valia

Valkova was injured in the head, Yazovskaya ordered the crew to bail. Two other Messerschmitts attacked Osadze's aircraft. A shell exploded in the cockpit killing Osadze and navigator Lena Ponomareva. The male gunner, Valia Kotov, was able to jump out of the burning plane. With both wingmen destroyed, all four German fighters turned their attention to Gubina's crippled aircraft. The bomber's controls were damaged, and Gubina ordered the crew to jump. The gunner Omelchenko jumped first and safely landed. The navigator, Katia Batukhtina, got caught on the machine gun's ring mount outside of the plane. Gubina saw Batukhtina struggling outside of the plane, so she worked the controls to swing her free. Batukhtina was able to parachute to safety, but Gubina did not have sufficient altitude to jump herself and died in the crash.⁴⁴

The 125th was a successful regiment that contributed greatly to the war effort. Markov stated after the war that when he compares his experience of commanding a male and female regiment, the women were easier to command because they had a strong spirit of a collective unit.⁴⁵ This spirit was the driving force in their success as a regiment. The women drew strength from each other in the mastery of the Pe-2, in proving themselves to other male regiments, and doing the best they could in Raskova's memory. Although the relations between the men and women within the regiment were not as strong as the women's relations with each other, the regiment as a whole was effective. Their designation as a Guards unit, the honorary name Borisov the Orders of Suvorov and Kutuzov III class, and being named for Hero of the Soviet Union Marina Raskova were all prestigious recognitions by the Soviet Government of the contributions made by this regiment. Five women from the regiment received the title Hero of the Soviet Union, proving that the women not only fought, but fought well. Kravchenko summarizes: "Their wartime odyssey began in the sky over Saratov, during the chilly winter of 1942, an odyssey in the course of which they were to experience the joys of victory and strong camaraderie, but left behind them their comrades' precious graves, which became the milestones of our sorrow, as it were."⁴⁶

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER 3

- ¹A timeline highlighting the major events in the history of the regiment is located in Appendix 3.
- ² Pennington, 97. The only men who flew were Markov and his male navigator Nikolai A. Nikitin.
- ³ Valentin V. Markov, quoted in Noggle, 100.; Pennington, 90.
- ⁴ Pennington, 52-53. For more information regarding Raskova's acquisition of the Pe-2 Dive Bomber, see Pennington 51-55.
- ⁵ Antonina Khokhlova-Dubkova, quoted in Noggle, 114.
- ⁶ Valentina Kravchenko, "The Bombs Went Into the Target" in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 48.
- ⁷ Maria Dolina, quoted in Noggle, 121-123.
- ⁸ Noggle, 99.
- ⁹ M. A. Kazarinova, "Our Country is Endangered," in *Women in Air War*, 8.
- ¹⁰ Ekaterina Musatova-Fedotova, quoted in Noggle, 147.
- ¹¹ Galina Brok-Beltsova, quoted in Noggle, 134.
- ¹² Vaclav Nemecek, *The History of Soviet Aircraft from 1918* (London: Key Publishing Ltd., 1986), 156.
- ¹³ Evgenia Guruleva-Smirnova, quoted in Noggle, 111.
- ¹⁴ Ekaterina Migunova, "The Unprecedented Battle of the Nine," in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 45.
- ¹⁵ Marta Meriuts, quoted in Noggle, 137.
- ¹⁶ Pennington, 93.
- ¹⁷ Galina Tenueva-Lomanova, quoted in Noggle, 153.
- ¹⁸ Evgenia Timofeeva, "The First Battle," in *Women in Air War*, 17-18.

¹⁹ Cottam contends that the decision for Markov to lead the 125th cannot be entirely credited to General Nikitin. According to Galina Dzhunkovskaya-Markova, she along with Commissar Yeliseeva and pilots Lomanova and Gubina went to see General Nikitin while they were in Moscow for Raskova's funeral. Nikitin handed them several files of candidates and told them to make the decision as he "was too busy." Galina chose Markov based on his experience flying the Pe-2. It is not clear if there were any women candidates among the files or if Markova would have selected a woman based on gender alone. See Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 110, note 5.

²⁰ Markov, "I Am Proud of My Regiment!" in *Women in Air War*, 20.; Markov, quoted in Noggle, 102.

²¹ Markov, quoted in Noggle, 102.

²² Markov, 20.

²³ Fedotova, "Father," in *Women in Air War*, 24.

²⁴ The flight of the *Rodina* set a women's international straight line distance record and a women's international nonstop broken-line distance record in 1938. The original flight plan was from Moscow to Komsomolsk. The crew consisted of Marina Raskova, Polina Osipenko, and Valentina Grizodubova. The *Rodina* made a forced landing short of Komsomolsk. The rescue effort (and particularly the survival of Raskova, who had been separated from the crew in the *taiga* for 10 days without food or water) made the women instant national heroes. All three women received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal. They were the first women to receive the award and the only women to receive it before the war. For more information regarding the flight of the *Rodina*, see Pennington, 13-17.

²⁵ It is not surprising that Grizodubova did not respond. She was opposed to the formation of the women's regiments. In an interview with Reina Pennington, Valentina Savitskaya-Kravchenko states that Grizodubova did not want to work with women. See Pennington, 19 and 33-35. Pennington further states in a footnote that the women remained hostile toward Grizodubova, who passed away during Pennington's visit to Russia. When asked if they would attend her funeral, all but one veteran interviewed responded negatively. See Pennington, 247, note 30.

²⁶ Fedotova, 24.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Markov, quoted in Noggle, 103.

³⁰ Fedotova, 25.

³¹ Markov, quoted in Noggle, 103.

³² Markov, "I Am Proud of My Regiment!" in *Women in Air War*, 21.

³³ Markov, quoted in Noggle, 105.

³⁴ Natalia Smirnova, "Air Gunners by Machine Guns," in *Women in Air War*, 98-99.

³⁵ A. Kulakov, "A Certificate of Merit," in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 78-79.

³⁶ Dubkova, quoted in Noggle, 113-115.

³⁷ Galina Olkhovskaya, "The Brave Squadron," in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 26.

³⁸ Timofeeva, "The First Battle," in *Women in Air*, 18-19.

³⁹ Dubkova, quoted in Noggle, 113-115. This note, from a fighter regiment, demonstrates the protective attitudes of some of the fighter pilots. This may simply be a product of the function of the fighter regiments in relation to the bomber regiments; however, it seems unlikely that they would have dropped the same note to a male regiment.

⁴⁰ Galina Turabelidze, "A Reunion of Comrades in Arms," in *In the Sky Above the Front*, 94-95.

⁴¹ Markov, quoted in Noggle, 104.

⁴² Pennington, 97.

⁴³ Markov, 21-22.

⁴⁴ Aleksandra Eremenko, "She Died Saving Her Comrade," in *Women in Air War*, 72-74.

⁴⁵ Markov, quoted in Noggle, 105.

⁴⁶ Kravchenko, "The Girls from Saratov," in *Women in Air War*, 46.

CONCLUSION

Unit cohesion is the glue that holds together a military unit through times of adversity, fear of death, and unimaginable suffering and sacrifice. Many factors affect the cohesion of a unit. Ranked in order of their significance on the whole, the factors examined in this study were: the effectiveness of command, the plane each regiment flew, the gender composition of the unit, and the reaction of men to the women fighting. The three regiments experienced different levels of cohesion based on the above factors, with each factor affecting each unit differently.

The factor common to all three regiments in significance was the effectiveness of command. The most cohesive unit, the 46th, had one commander, Evdokia Bershanskaya, throughout the war; her leadership was both innovative and effective. Bershanskaya's introduction of a new "two-plane element" tactic, aircraft servicing system, and a training program enabled the 46th to become one of the top-performing Po-2 regiments in the Soviet military. The women trusted and admired her. Conversely, the least cohesive unit, the 586th, did not trust their first commander, Tamara Kazarinova. This mistrust split the loyalties of the women, and in one of many controversies, the loudest dissenters were removed from the regiment. Kazarinova was replaced by Aleksandr Gridnev. Although there is not much written about Gridnev, it is apparent that he was a capable commander who cared a great deal for his regiment. In interviews conducted after the war, the women convey only positive memories of him. In the 125th, tragedy struck early in the war when Marina Raskova, the hero of all of the women, was killed before she could lead her regiment in combat. The women unswervingly followed her and were reluctant to trust her replacement, Valentin V. Markov. The initial reaction by both Markov and the women of the 125th was dissatisfaction. However, Markov earned the trust and respect of the women when he led them into battle. Although Markov's appointment initially

created discontent within the regiment, he and his subordinates ultimately developed a mutual respect and admiration for each other.

Another important factor that affected the 46th and 125th, in particular, was the aircraft they flew. The 46th flew the Po-2, a small, defenseless plane made of plywood and fabric. The regiment suffered many casualties because of the nature of the plane they were flying. Considered a relic from the 30's, the Po-2 became the symbol of wartime heroism for Soviet women pilots. The 125th, on the other hand, flew the Pe-2 dive bomber which was considered the most complex and up-to-date aircraft in the Soviet Air Force. There was a universal belief that women could not fly it. The women of the 125th drew strength from each other in their mastery of the Pe-2.

Command and plane assignment deal with standard military issues that would be significant for any military unit. However, the next two factors, gender composition and male reaction are more sociological. The 46th was the only regiment to remain all-female throughout the war. The women were extremely proud of this fact, and the regiment proved to be successful. The 125th, on the other hand, was integrated during training. The relations between men and women, particularly those of the female pilots/navigationers with the male gunners/ground crew, were not substantial. Although the relations between men and women in the regiment were not as strong as the women's relations with each other, the regiment as a whole was effective. The 586th was not integrated until the dismissal of Kazarinova, after which a male squadron of pilots and ground crew was added to the regiment. The pilots were segregated while the ground crew were not. Relations between the female and male pilots were seemingly non-existent, and the male pilots are not even mentioned in published sources. Conversely, relations among the ground crew seem to have been good.

Finally, the women in all of the regiments had to deal with a wide range of reactions from various groups of male soldiers. Male reaction played a relatively minor role in the cohesion of the 46th, as most of the men were generally accepting of the women. There are a few instances of initial mistrust followed by acceptance, but, for the most part, the women garnered respect from the men based on the nature of the missions they were flying, their proximity to the front, and the plane they flew. Male reaction also played a minor role in the cohesion of the 586th. Very little is mentioned in published

sources and subsequent interviews about any negative reaction to the women fighting. In contrast, the level of cohesion among the women of the 125th was the most affected by negative male reaction. Infantry soldiers were diverse in their reactions, with some very suspicious and others considerate. Male pilots were generally alike in their mistrust followed by gradual acceptance.

Of the three regiments, the 46th was the most cohesive, followed by the 125th, with the 586th exhibiting the least cohesion. Each regiment had distinctly different missions, different experiences, and different levels of cohesion based on the factors discussed in this study. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, it turns out that the most significant factors of cohesion are based on normal military matters (*i.e.*, command and equipment) rather than on gender issues. While gender issues are significant, they are not as important as effective and capable command. As this study has demonstrated, it is clear that the women did not follow their commanders primarily because of gender. Rather, whatever initial expectations or misgivings they may have harbored, the women ultimately were either disillusioned or won over by the leadership abilities of their commanders. In that regard, a good contrast can be drawn between the 46th and the 586th. The 46th had a female commander and remained all-female throughout the war. The effective leadership exhibited by Bershanskaya was reflected in the attitudes manifested by her troops. The 586th for a short time was all-female with a female commander. Where the 46th was very cohesive, the 586th was not. In the case of the 586th, however, both morale and cohesiveness improved after an ineffective female commander was replaced by an effective male commander.

Unit cohesion was an important element of the three regiments as reflected in the way the veterans remember and talk about their units. In the case of the 46th, the emotional writing of the memoirs conveys the true sense of camaraderie and compassion within that unit. The women of the 125th convey the sense of strength and support that they drew from each other during the war and reflect the pride of their achievements. Of the three regiments, the memoirs of the 586th are by far the most devoid of emotion. The 586th was the least cohesive unit, and the memoirs from the regiment are antiseptic and factual.

The Soviet Union was unique in its use of women for combat roles, becoming the first state to use female pilots to fly combat missions. World War II was the last time that women were used on any real scale in combat. The study of these women presents a tremendous opportunity to straddle military history, women's studies, and Russian history to establish precedence in contemporary debates surrounding the use of female combatants. The information presented in the previous chapters reveals that one cannot generalize about the Soviet airwoman and her experiences in the women's regiments formed during World War II. The cohesion and successes of the women in these regiments proves that women are capable of serving in combat roles; however this fact did not have much long-term impact. The demobilization of women and the perceived need to return to normalcy seems to have obliterated the memory of Soviet women pilots from the pages of history. Even today, there is much skepticism, in particular among Russian men, that women combat pilots existed. After the many decades that have passed since the end of World War II, examination of the contribution of these women to the Soviet victory is slowly coming to the forefront to take its place in the annals of Russian, military, and women's history.

This thesis has far from exhausted the materials available regarding the Soviet airwomen of World War II. Future studies might focus on Marina Raskova's role in the formation of Aviation Group No. 122, her relationship with Stalin and her influence within the Soviet system. A comparative study of the women aviators and those women in other combat roles would also be a good subject regarding the use of women in combat. The future study of these women can only serve to demonstrate the significance and contribution made by Soviet women during the greatest conflict of the 20th century.

APPENDIX A

UNIT HISTORY OF THE 586TH FIGHTER REGIMENT

- 16 April 1942 – the 586th enters active service as part of the 144th Fighter Aviation Division
- 24 April to 10 February 1943 – the 586th was based at Anisovka near Saratov. The regiment conducted 509 sorties, 32 at night
- 10 September 1942 – eight pilots are sent to male regiments to serve as replacements at Stalingrad
- 24 September 1942 – Valeria Khomiakova became the first woman to shoot down an enemy plane at night. This is the first official kill for the 586th
- Fall 1942 – a third squadron of male pilots is added to the 586th
- October 1942 – Aleksandr Gridnev takes over command of the 586th
- 13 February to 16 August 1943 – the 586th is transferred to the 101st Fighter Aviation Division based at Voronezh. The regiment performed 934 flights and is credited with shooting down seven Ju-88 bombers and three FW-190 fighters
- 18 August to 17 September 1943 – stationed at Kastornoe
- 17 September to 05 December 1943 – stationed at an airfield named Kursk-West. The 586th completed 261 combat sorties
- 05 December to 04 February 1943 – assigned missions over Kiev, Ukraine. The regiment flew 199 sorties

- 21 March to 02 September 1944 – based at Zhitomir-Skomorokhi protecting fixed targets and rail junctions. The regiment flew 611 combat sorties
- 07 September 1944 – transferred to the 141st Fighter Aviation Division
- 07 October to 20 December 1944 – based at Beltsy to cover the Dnestr River crossings
- 23 February to April 1945 – based at Debrecen, Hungary. The regiment flew only 12 combat sorties in a two month period
- 25 April 1945 to the end of the war – the 586th was stationed at Tsinkot airfield near Budapest, Hungary¹

ENDNOTES FOR APPENDIX A

¹ Pennington, 104-125.

APPENDIX B

UNIT HISTORY OF THE 46TH GUARDS NIGHT BOMBER REGIMENT

- 23 May 1942 – Receives orders to join the 4th Air Army on the Southern Front in the Donbas region. Assigned to the 218th Night Bomber Aviation Division under the command of D. D. Popov
- June 1942 – Participates in their first combat missions in the battle for Stavropol. General Vershinin considers this the most difficult period of the war because the Germans had renewed their offensive and pushed deep into Russia to Stalingrad¹
- August to December 1942 – flew in defense of the Transcaucasus
- 07 November 1942 – the regiment is recognized for its service on the North Caucasus Front. Ten women receive medals and another thirty-two receive commemorative watches from General Vershinin
- January 1943 – flew in regions of Stavropol and the Kuban. The 46th began to use its new servicing system for aircraft
- February 1943 – receives its Guards designation and is renamed the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment
- March to September 1943 – flew near the Taman peninsula and for the liberation of Novorossiisk
- April 1943 – Evdokia Nosal is posthumously awarded the first Hero of the Soviet Union medal in the regiment

- 31 July 1943 – the 46th suffers the worst single incident of casualties when four crews (eight women) are killed in a single mission
- August to October 1943 – eight crews are sent to assist the Black Sea Fleet battalions in seizing Novorossiisk
- October 1943 – the 46th is awarded the honorary name Taman for its service in the area
- November 1943 to May 1944 – transferred to the 2nd Belorussian front under the command of Marshal Rokossovsky. Flew at Kerch, the Crimea, and Sevastopol
- June to July 1944 – flew at Mogilev, Minsk, and other locations in Belorussia
- July to August 1944 – flew in Poland. The regiment begins using parachutes after the loss of pilot Tania Makarova and navigator Vera Belik
- December 1944 – four more women (Maria Smirnova, Evdokia Nikulina, Evdokia Pasko, and [posthumously] Evgenia Rudneva) are awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal
- January 1945 – flew in Western Prussia
- March 1945 – participates in the liberation of Gdansk. Rebased to Buchholz, northeast of Berlin, in support of the Soviet Army's final push to Berlin²

ENDNOTES FOR APPENDIX B

¹ Pennington, 79.

² Pennington, 72-89.

APPENDIX C

UNIT HISTORY OF THE 125TH GUARDS BOMBER REGIMENT

- November 1942 – Receives orders to join the 8th Air Force on the Western Front. Due to poor weather conditions, the regiment is delayed in reaching the Western Front. Raskova is called to Moscow to receive new orders reassigning the regiment to the Stalingrad Front
- 04 January 1943 – On their way to Stalingrad, Marina Raskova and her crew (regimental navigator Kirill Ilich Khil, gunner N. N. Erofeev, and mechanic V. I. Kruglov) are killed in a crash resulting from poor weather
- January 1943 – The squadrons reach the Stalingrad front and share an airfield on the west bank of the Volga River with the 10th Leningrad Bomber Aviation Regiment. The 125th will fight with the 10th for the duration of the war
- 20 January 1943 – The VVS orders the 125th transferred from the 8th Air Army to the control of the 16th Air Army
- 28 January 1943 – The 125th completes its first mission during the battle of Stalingrad
- 30 January 1943 – The 125th begins flying combat missions independently without the lead of the 10th
- 02 February 1943 – V. V. Markov takes command of the 125th

- 27 April to 09 May 1943 – The 125th is transferred to the 223rd Bomber Aviation Division (2nd Bomber Aviation Corps) of the 4th Air Army on the North Caucasus Front and works in conjunction with the 56th Army in the Crimea. Markov regards this period as the main combat training for the regiment due to heavy opposition from the Luftwaffe¹
- 04 May 1943 – The 125th receives its honorary designation “named for Hero of the Soviet Union Marina Raskova”
- 24 May to 02 July 1943 – Based near Krasnodar, the 125th supports the 37th Army in the North Caucasus
- Summer 1943 – The unprecedented battle of the “nine”²
- 19 July 1943 to 20 June 1944 – Becomes part of the 223rd Bomber Aviation Division under the 1st Air Army. Based at airfields near Grabstevo, Ezovnia, and Ivanevo, the 125th participates in the battles of Kursk and Smolensk
- 07 September 1943 – Re-designated from the 587th Bomber Aviation Regiment to the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment (only the second regiment within the division to receive the honor of this Guards designation)
- April 1944 – Reinforcements arrive
- June 1944 – The 125th joins the 5th Guards Bomber Aviation Corps of the 16th Air Army on the 3rd Belorussian Front. Subsequently based at Shelganovo, Kamenka, and Balbasovo
- 10 July 1944 – Receives the honorary name Borisov for participation in the capture of the city of Borisov
- 22 July to 29 December 1944 – Remains with the 5th Guards Bomber Aviation Corps, but is transferred to the 1st TransBaltic Front
- January to May 1945 – Still part of the 5th Guards Bomber Aviation Corps fighting on the 1st Pribaltic and 3rd Belorussian Fronts in Western Prussia

- During the latter part of the war, the 125th flies with the famous French Normandie-Nieman Fighter Regiment
- 19 February 1945 – Is awarded the Order of Kutuzov
- 18 April 1945 – Is transferred with the 5th Guards Bomber Aviation Corps to the Leningrad Front for operations with the 15th Air Army in the Baltic
- 28 May 1945 – Is awarded the Order of Suworov
- 18 Aug 1945 – Maria Dolina-Melnikova, Galina Dzhunkovskaya-Markova, Nadezhda Fedutenko, Klavdia Fomicheva, and Antonina Zubkova receive the title Hero of the Soviet Union³

ENDNOTES FOR APPENDIX C

¹ Markov, quoted in Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 103.

² The unprecedented battle of the “nine” refers to a battle between nine Soviet bombers and eight enemy fighters. In the summer of 1943, Evgenia Timofeeva’s squadron was assigned a mission to bomb enemy troops near a Cossack village. Because of solid cloud cover, the squadron had to fly below the clouds. They encountered enemy fighters that their fighter escort engaged. The squadron continued toward the target, where they encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire. Three aircraft were damaged but managed to stay in formation. Eight Messerschmitts descended from the clouds and attacked the formation. The bomber formation suffered severe damage, but managed to shoot down four of the Messerschmitts and to hit the target successfully without losing a single air crew. The actions of these pilots became a model for the courage and valor of Soviet flight personnel and were studied by Soviet combat pilots in every sector of the Eastern Front. Ekaterina Migunova, “The Unprecedented Battle,” in *Women in Air War*, 31-35; Pennington, 99.

³ Pennington, 95-103.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Leigh Bhuvakorakul was born on 26 July 1973 in Rockledge, Florida. She graduated from high school in Titusville, Florida in 1991. She completed a B.A. degree in History with a minor in Classics from The Florida State University in 2001. Ms. Bhuvakorakul completed a M.A. degree in Russian and East European Studies at The Florida State University in April 2004.