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The American Women Airforce Service Pilots and Soviet airwomen of World War II

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THE AMERICAN WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS
AND SOVIET AIRWOMEN OF WORLD WAR II

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Amy Goodpaster Strebe

December 2003

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ABSTRACT

THE AMERICAN WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS AND SOVIET AIRWOMEN OF WORLD WAR II

by Amy Goodpaster Strebe

During World War II, women pilots were given the opportunity to fly military aircraft for the first time in history. Women in the United States ferried every type of airplane from factories to airbases, while in the Soviet Union, they flew combat missions along the Eastern Front. Despite differences in aerial operations and military status, Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) and Soviet women flyers shared much in common. Patriotic with a mutual love of aviation, they faced similar obstacles while challenging assumptions of male supremacy in wartime culture. Despite prejudices against them, the airwomen fulfilled a need – albeit a temporary one – created by the war. After failing to attain military status, the WASPs disbanded in 1944. The Soviet airwomen were also excluded from their postwar military. As gender stereotypes were reestablished, the women were reminded that their rightful place in society was not in the cockpit – but in the home.

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A special thanks to former WASP Jean Downey Harman of Menlo Park, California, for sharing her memories with me, and to Sasha Pursley for loaning me many of the Russian-language sources on the Soviet women pilots that I used in my research. I am grateful to Tracey MacGowan, library assistant at Texas Woman's University's Blagg-Huey Library, who helped me locate materials on the WASPs in the Woman's Collection. I would also like to thank Dr. Kazimiera J. Cottam and Dr. Reina Pennington, both fine scholars and respected leaders in their fields, who generously shared their knowledge with me of the Soviet airwomen of World War II.

I am most grateful to my good friend Katya S. Gubenko, who translated several Russian articles for me. A big thank you must also go to my first teachers, my parents, who instilled in me a curiosity, and an early interest and appreciation for the past. Thank you for your love and encouragement. I owe a debt of gratitude to my husband Gary, whose patience, technical assistance, and unwavering support helped to make this project possible.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this to my daughter Abbie. May you always have the courage to follow your dreams, wherever they may take you.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1941 two events took place on opposite sides of the world that forever impacted the history of women in aviation. On the morning of June 22, 1941, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in the form of Hitler's Operation Barbarossa. In the early morning hours of December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, thus inciting the United States to join the Second World War. As a result of these two events, thousands of American and Soviet citizens, fueled by patriotism, eagerly volunteered for the armed forces. That same year the famous American pilot Jacqueline Cochran and the "Russian Amelia Earhart," Marina Raskova, would inspire firsts in both their countries.

From the onset neither country could anticipate the tremendous human as well as material resources that would be required to win the war. Women were also called upon to participate. The international conflict provided opportunities to serve that were unprecedented in history. For the first time women pilots in the United States as well as the Soviet Union were recruited to fly military aircraft for their countries. The United States, under the tutelage of Jacqueline Cochran, formed the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program, where over one thousand women flyers ferried aircraft from factories to airbases throughout the United States and Canada from 1942-1944. The WASPs flew every type of aircraft and performed every duty inside the cockpit as their male counterparts, except combat, and thirty-eight gave their lives in the service of their country.

In the Soviet Union Marina Raskova, famous for her historic 1938 flight to the Far East, put a similar program into place. She was also one of the first women to receive the Hero of the Soviet Union award. Equivalent to the U.S. Medal of Honor, it is the highest military award for bravery in combat. In October 1941 she formed the all-female 122nd Composite Air Group that trained pilots, navigators, mechanics and ground crew for three new regiments: the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Day Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment. A little over one thousand women flew a combined total of more than thirty-thousand combat sorties, producing at least thirty Heroes of the Soviet Union; included in their ranks were at least three fighter aces. Two of the regiments received the elite "Guards" appellation, and sixty-three women pilots were killed in action.¹

This thesis will show that despite the differences in their aerial operations and military status throughout the war, the American and Soviet women pilots had much in common. Both groups of female pilots shared a deep love of flying and a desire to contribute to the war effort and help their countries defeat the scourge of fascism. The women, many of whom were in their early twenties, were patriotic, idealistic, and determined. Yet, despite the official support of the women pilots by the air force, the flyers of both nations faced discrimination. This study will discuss the mistrust and prejudices of male pilots and military personnel, as well as the physical challenges and training the women experienced as pilots. The close relationships that formed among the women and their approach to the dangers of flying and the death of their fellow pilots

¹ Reina Pennington, "The Propaganda Factor and Soviet Women Pilots in World War II," *Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 13.

will be explored. The thesis will also address the deactivation of the WASPs in 1944 – their exclusion from postwar aviation, and the attainment of the women’s long-fought-for veteran status – thirty-three years later in 1977. It will investigate the barring of Soviet women pilots from their postwar military as Soviet officials told them to disregard their wartime experiences and return home. Moreover, this study will show that despite the Russian women’s unprecedented opportunity to fly military aircraft during the Second World War and their achievements in combat, their moment in history was brief and later largely forgotten by the Soviet public once the war came to a close. With peace came the reestablishment of gender stereotypes, and the women pilots were again reminded by their countries that their place in society was not in the cockpit of a military airplane, but in the home as wives and mothers. The airwomen had fulfilled a temporary need created by the war, and were expected to return to their prewar roles in society. There would be no room for women pilots in postwar military aviation.

On the surface these women appear remarkably different in their military status, political ideology, and wartime missions. Digging deeper below the surface, however, one discovers a surprising link that threads these airwomen together in their common experiences, not just as military pilots, but also as females who were forced to endure the same gender stereotypes and prejudices that their unique wartime duties incited. Despite the historiography that exists on the WASPs and Soviet women pilots of World War II, there has never been a comparative study written on these two groups of female pilots.

History has for the most part forgotten about the Soviet women pilots and their contribution to the Second World War. There are relatively few historically accurate

accounts in print today about these women that are available in English. The foremost historians on the subject are Kazimiera J. Cottam, a Canadian military historian and translator who has written extensively on the subject; Reina Pennington, director of Peace, War, and Diplomacy Studies at Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont, and author of *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*; and Anne Noggle, a former Women Airforce Service Pilot, who traveled to the Soviet Union in 1990, interviewed sixty-nine former Soviet women veterans, and wrote two books that will be used in this study: *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* and *For God, Country, and the Thrill of It: Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II*. In addition to the primary sources listed above and numerous articles printed on the subject in English, several Russian-language materials were also examined for this thesis. The most important were Raisa E. Aronova's memoirs *Nochnye ved'my* [*Night Witches*], Evgeniia Maksimova Rudneva's diary and letters titled *Poka stuchit serdtse: dnevnik I pis'ma geroia Sovetskogo Soiuza Evgenii Rudnevoi* [*As Long as the Heart Beats: The Diary and Letters of the Hero of the Soviet Union Evgeniia Rudneva*]. In addition, the author studied Anna Timofeeva-Egorova's firsthand account of her combat flying experiences during the war in *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* [*Military History Journal*] as well as excerpts from the book *Zhenshchiny na za Shchite Otechestva 1941-1945* [*Women in Defense of the Fatherland 1941-1945*].² To round out the analysis of the Soviet women pilots, a number of general works on Soviet women in aviation, the military, society and war were also examined. These materials include articles by Mary

² The services of translator Yekaterina Shirokova Gubenko were employed.

Buckley, Tatyana Mamonova, Barbara Evans Clements, Shelley Saywell, Anne Eliot Griesse, Richard Stites, Dale R. Herspring and Jennifer G. Mathers.

In contrast to the Soviet women pilots, there has been a large body of work published on the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). In the last fifty-eight years since the end of World War II, many former WASPs have written firsthand accounts of their flying experiences during the war. Among the autobiographical works that will be drawn from in this thesis are Jean Hascall Cole's *Women Pilots of World War II*; Marion Stegeman Hodgson's *Winning My Wings: A Woman Airforce Service Pilot in World War II*; Ann Baumgartner Carl's *A WASP Among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II*; Byrd Howell Granger's *On Final Approach: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of WWII*; Betty Stagg Turner's *Out of the Blue and Into History*; Kay Gott's *Women in Pursuit: Flying Fighters for the Air Transport Command Ferrying Division During World War II*; two autobiographies by Jacqueline Cochran; several articles written by the WASPs; oral histories; letters; interviews from the PBS video titled *Fly Girls*; and a National Public Radio broadcast. In addition, newspaper articles from the period were looked at as well as government documents. This author also conducted an interview with former WASP Jean Downey Harman on August 24, 2001.

Numerous secondary sources were also consulted on the history of women in aviation and the status of American women before and during the Second World War. The materials examined include *Sky Stars: The History of Women in Aviation* by Ann Hodgman and Rudy Djabbaroff; *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* by Karen Anderson; *War and American Women:*

Heroism, Deeds and Controversy by William B. Breuer; *A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military* by Gerald J. Degroot and Corinna Peniston-Bird; and *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* by Susan M. Hartmann.

One WASP described her participation in the Second World War as “a magical bubble – a lucky accident of history.”³ The women pilots were acutely aware that their unique wartime experiences would be short-lived and temporary. After the war, social pressure forced the American and Soviet women aviators to return home and reestablish their traditional roles in society. American women would have to wait more than thirty years before they would be allowed again to fly military aircraft. According to the limited amount of academic literature available on the subject, few if any Russian women military pilots have been permitted to fly in combat in the fifty-eight years following World War II.⁴

³ *The WASPs: Women Pilots of World War II*, prod. Joe Richman, 30 min., aired on *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio News, Radio Diaries, 18 December 2002, radio broadcast.

⁴ According to a July 8, 1999 article in the *London Daily Telegraph*, Russia has one female fighter pilot by the name of Capt. Svetlana Protasova. She reportedly flies the MiG-29, but her duties and status within the Russian armed forces is not known. This author was not able to locate any more information on Capt. Protasova. After consulting several experts in the field, it could not be determined what the present situation is for women military pilots in Russia.

CHAPTER 1

AMERICA'S FIRST WOMEN MILITARY PILOTS

In the 1930s a pilot by the name of Jacqueline Cochran became known for her outstanding achievements in the field of aviation. Born Bessie Mae Pittman on May 11, 1905 near Muscogee, Florida, Cochran exhibited a tremendous drive to succeed and was determined to overcome a childhood fraught with poverty.¹ An orphan, she reportedly did not own a pair of shoes until she was eight years old. Cochran would later write of herself, "I might have been born in a hovel, but I was determined to travel with the wind and the stars."²

Always looking to reinvent herself, Cochran picked her new name out of the telephone directory, and in her mid-20s she moved to New York City to work at an upscale beauty salon called Antoine's inside Saks Fifth Avenue and to start her own cosmetics business. At a party, she met millionaire businessman Floyd Odlum to whom she confided her dreams and aspirations. The young Jackie mesmerized him, and on May 10, 1936, the two were married.³ Before their marriage, Odlum suggested to Cochran that she take flying lessons so she could get around the country faster, selling her

¹ Jacqueline Cochran and Maryann Bucknum Brinley, *Jackie Cochran: The Autobiography of the Greatest Woman Pilot in Aviation History* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 15.

² Amy Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals: Women Pilots of World War II* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2001), 17.

³ Sally Van Wagenen Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines: The Unknown Heroines of World War II* (New York: Four Directions Press, 1990), 49.

cosmetics. Cochran took his advice and earned her pilot's license in only two-and-a-half weeks. In her autobiography, Cochran described her first flying lesson in 1932: "I showed up at Roosevelt Field, Long Island, at the flying school. At that moment, when I paid for my first lesson, a beauty operator ceased to exist and an aviator was born."⁴

Cochran would go on to set more speed, distance, and altitude records than any other pilot of her time, male or female – even more than her friend Amelia Earhart, whom she met in 1935 when the two competed in the Bendix Trophy Race that two years before had been open to only men. Neither woman won in 1935. But in 1938, Jackie would go on to win first prize, beating every man in the race.⁵

On December 4, 1937, Cochran set a new national transcontinental record — beating Howard Hughes's earlier one — by racing from New York City to Miami in only four hours and twelve minutes.⁶ The flight was a dangerous one, but taking risks became Cochran's hallmark. That same year the International League of Aviators voted Cochran the world's outstanding pilot, an award that she would win for three consecutive years.⁷

In March 1939 Cochran won her second Harmon Trophy, the highest award given to any aviator in America. The day before the Harmon Award was announced, she had broken a women's altitude record by climbing to 33,000 feet above sea level. Over the

⁴ Jacqueline Cochran, *The Stars at Noon* (New York: Little Brown, 1954), 41.

⁵ Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 18.

⁶ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 43.

⁷ Ann Hodgman and Rudy Djabbaroff, *Sky Stars: The History of Women in Aviation* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 95-96.

next few months Cochran broke two women's records, two national speed records, and one intercity record between Burbank and San Francisco. On each of her record-breaking flights, sustained only with a half-filled bottle of Coca-Cola (a full one would explode at high altitudes) and a fistful of lollipops for "dry mouth," she tested new types of oxygen masks, engine superchargers, sparkplugs, airplane fuel, and wing designs, which would soon appear in America's air arsenal.⁸

That same year the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) began a program of pilot cadet training in American colleges, and many young women enthusiastically signed up for flying lessons. By June 1941, more than two thousand women pilots across the country had learned to fly. That same month, however, women were dropped from the program to make room for more men, as America's involvement in the war became imminent.⁹

By September 1939, there was little doubt about the Axis powers' intentions to wage total war in Europe. In March, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia and helped Franco's forces defeat the Republicans in Spain. A month later, Mussolini stormed into Albania. On September 1, German tank divisions rolled into Poland, and the world was again at war. With the conquest of Poland, Hitler also gave the world notice that its next war would be fought largely from the air. The invading ground troops were supported by

⁸ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 47.

⁹ Kay Gott, *Women in Pursuit: Flying Fighters for the Air Transport Command Ferrying Division During World War II* (McKinleyville, Calif.: Kay Gott, 1993), 19.

aerial bombing, which was part of the new type of warfare, the *Blitzkrieg*. After a month of intense fighting, Warsaw capitulated on September 27.¹⁰

Cochran sensed early in the war that women would be needed as pilots, and she eagerly sought the opportunity to bring female aviators into the war effort. She recalled in *The Stars at Noon*:

The pressure on our manpower during World War II and the increasing use of war power made it certain that eventually there would be a need for women pilots. All my war work up until the time General [Hap] Arnold called me home from England [where she was assisting with the Air Transport Auxiliary] had been in preparation for this time of need.¹¹

In late September Jacqueline Cochran wrote a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt. Given the dramatic events happening in Europe, it was not too soon (she wrote the First Lady) to begin thinking about the idea of utilizing American women pilots in non-combat roles, thus releasing men for combat duty overseas. The effective use of women pilots, Cochran argued, “requires organization in advance.”¹² It was her intention to be the person to organize such a group of female pilots.

Roosevelt thanked Cochran for her letter and assured her of women’s contributions in war should the need arise. Ultimately Roosevelt would lend her influence to the establishment of the WASP program. On September 1, 1942 the First Lady would write in her widely read syndicated column *My Day*, that “women pilots are

¹⁰ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 50.

¹¹ Cochran, *The Stars at Noon*, 116.

¹² *Ibid.*, 51.

a weapon waiting to be used.”¹³ In March 1941, Cochran attended an aviation awards ceremony at the White House and was introduced to General H.H. “Hap” Arnold, chief of the U.S. Army Air Corps, and Clayton Knight, who was directing American recruiting efforts for the British Air Transport Auxiliary. After Congress signed the Lend-Lease Act into law on March 11, 1941, it was the responsibility of the Air Transport Auxiliary to ship or fly planes to England. With every possible qualified pilot involved in combat, the British ATA was desperate for recruits from neutral nations. The organization had even enlisted some of Britain’s woman pilots to ferry planes around the United Kingdom. But the transoceanic hops necessary to deliver the bombers, Knight told Cochran, were proving to be a fearsome deterrent to his recruitment efforts.

Cochran offered Knight her help, and it was not long before she was piloting a Lockheed Hudson bomber from Montreal to ATA headquarters in Prestwick, Scotland, becoming the first woman to pilot a bomber over the North Atlantic.¹⁴ Cochran recruited a group of twenty-five American women pilots to serve in the British ATA and accompanied them to England for training with the British women pilots who were already ferrying aircraft. While abroad, Cochran formulated a plan to create a similar program in the United States for women flyers.

Upon her return home to the United States in July 1941, Cochran was asked what she was doing in England, and she replied, “I wanted to check up on what those girls

¹³ Willam B. Breuer, *War and American Women: Heroism, Deeds and Controversy*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 22.

¹⁴ Cochran and Brinley, *Jackie Cochran: An Autobiography*, 352.

were doing, and see how we could organize a similar group in this country.”¹⁵ That same month Cochran was invited to lunch with President Roosevelt at Hyde Park, and before she left, she was presented with a letter of introduction to Robert A. Lovett, then Assistant Secretary of War for Air. In the note, the President gave instructions that Cochran was to research a plan for an organization of women pilots to serve with the U.S. Army Air Forces.

While Cochran was busy lobbying Washington to create the first women’s military flying program in the United States, another well-known female aviator was quietly working on a plan to include women pilots in the war. Twenty-seven year-old Nancy Harkness Love was a well-connected and highly experienced pilot who was married to Colonel Robert Love, deputy chief of the Air Transport Command. Nancy Love wrote to Colonel Robert Olds, who was then head of the Air Corps’ Ferry Command, with a similar proposition to Cochran’s to enlist fifty to sixty women with extensive flying experience (at least five hundred hours logged and a commercial pilot’s license) to ferry aircraft from factories to points of embarkation.¹⁶ Thus began a rivalry between Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Love.

Cochran and Love could not have been more different in their personalities and personal ambitions. Cochran was determined, aggressive by nature, and persuasive. Despite her humble beginnings and lack of a formal education, Cochran learned to speak the USAAF’s language and was unbending in her resolve to incorporate women flyers

¹⁵ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 54.

¹⁶ Gott, *Women in Pursuit*, 27.

into the military's war machine. Love, on the other hand, was a product of her privileged upbringing. She was bright, well educated and tenacious, but sought only to join and influence the Air Transport Command, not create an entirely new women's flying program as Cochran was setting out to do. In contrast, Cochran desired full control, while Love was satisfied relinquishing many of the chief administrative duties for more time in the cockpit. Despite the differences in the two women's understanding and use of power, they were somehow able to work together for two and a half turbulent years, though they seldom met face-to-face.¹⁷ Marion Stegeman Hodgson discussed the power struggle that existed between Love and Cochran in a book she wrote about her years as a WASP:

It was one of the minor miracles of the war that these two women, so totally different in background and approach, were eventually able to serve effectively as leaders under the same umbrella, with Jackie emerging as boss lady. Absolutely the only thing they had in common was their love of flying and a driving ambition to use women pilots in the war effort.¹⁸

Love pushed for an elite group of women pilots on a squadron level to join either the Air Transport Command or Ferry Command as an auxiliary unit attached to the Air Corps. Cochran recommended the establishment of a complete, full-fledged women's flying training program, under her direction and geared to produce thousands of ferry pilots. Successful applicants would be American citizens between the ages of twenty-one (later reduced to eighteen and one-half) and thirty-five who had a minimum of two

¹⁷ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 119.

¹⁸ Marion Stegeman Hodgson, *Winning My Wings: A Woman Airforce Service Pilot in World War II* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 17.

hundred hours of flying time (later reduced to seventy-five).¹⁹ They also had to stand at least sixty (later raised to sixty-four) inches tall, and pass the high standards of the Form Sixty-Four physical examination by a flight surgeon.²⁰ The initial program called for twenty-three weeks of training, including 115 hours of flying and 180 hours of ground school. Although Cochran ultimately prevailed, Love succeeded in creating the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), whose members would be the first to ferry aircraft from the factories to the air bases. The twenty-eight original WAFS had an average of 1,100 hours of flying time when they were accepted into the program.²¹

Upon learning of Love's new group of women ferrying pilots, Cochran convinced General Arnold that in light of the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entrance into the war, more women pilots would be needed than could be supplied by the WAFS. Arnold agreed, and on November 16, 1942, Cochran established the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) at Howard Hughes Airport in Houston, Texas with an initial class of twenty-five women who were required to have two hundred hours of flying and a commercial pilot's license. The mission of the WFTD was to perform whatever flight duties the U.S. Army Air Forces required within the United States. Like the WAFS, the women pilots ferried planes, but they also tested and flew aircraft reported to have mechanical problems; delivered planes in need of fixing to repair depots; performed

¹⁹ Joe Mizrahi, "The WASP Women Airforce Service Pilots," *Airpower* 31, no. 3 (May 2001): 6.

²⁰ Doris Brinker Tanner, "We Also Served," *American History Illustrated* 2, no. 7 (November 1985), 14.

²¹ Bruce D. Callander, "The WASPs," *Air Force Magazine* 84, no. 4 (April 2001): 4.

check flights on repaired planes; broke in new engines; towed targets for anti-aircraft gunnery practice; flew searchlight tracking missions; simulated bombing, strafing and smoke-laying missions for troop training; moved aircraft from base to base; towed gliders, and instructed male pilot cadets.

When the classes outgrew their existing facility, Cochran's women pilots moved to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. The new training base was located two hundred miles due west of Dallas-Fort Worth. Sweetwater was small, dry, isolated and wide open -- the perfect place Cochran thought to train her women pilots to fly planes the Army way.

Once Cochran had the facilities and a base of trained women instructors, she began accepting women flight cadets into an intensive training program. The applicants, who had to be experienced pilots, were found largely from a list maintained by the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) of the country's three thousand licensed women pilots.²² As word leaked out about the women's flying program, applications from all over the country poured into Cochran's office, totaling over twenty-five thousand. Women from a variety of backgrounds -- actresses, secretaries, dancers, college students, nurses, mothers and socialites -- eagerly applied. Ultimately, 1,830 pilots were accepted into training.²³

On August 5, 1943, the WAFS and WFTD merged to form the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) with Cochran as director of the WASP and its training division

²² Mizrahi, "The WASP Women Airforce Service Pilots," 9.

²³ John Bollow, "Remembering the WASPs." *Saturday Evening Post* 267, no. 3 (May-June 1995): 58.

and Nancy Harkness Love as director of the Ferrying Division. In the sixteen months the WASP program was in existence, 1,074 women successfully completed the grueling six-month training program at Avenger Field and earned their silver wings.

Despite the WASPs' non-military status, the women were required to adhere to Army regulations. They slept in barracks six to a room, with twelve sharing a single bathroom. "There was no privacy – none at all," remembered WASP Marty Martin Wyall. "We just learned to live together."²⁴ The all-women's air base created a sensation and in the first few weeks over one hundred planes with male crews reported mysterious engine problems and requested emergency landings on Avenger Field. Cochran promptly banned all unauthorized landings, and Avenger Field became known as "Cochran's Convent."²⁵

For the newly arrived women pilots, this was the chance of a lifetime. Marion Stegeman Hodgson reported for pilot training at Avenger Field in March 1943 and recalled her first impressions in her book *Winning My Wings: A Woman Airforce Service Pilot in World War II*:

We were a disparate group in our civilian clothes as we paraded in an unmilitary fashion, out of step, toward the hangar. I felt like giggling at our ragtag appearance as we passed a neat formation of coverall-clad female trainees in perfect step, the rhythmic cadence of their feet keeping time with the lusty song they were singing. Excitement swept over me at the thought that I'd soon be one of them – sunburned, disciplined, fit, happy, purposeful.²⁶

²⁴ *Fly Girls*, prod. and dir. Laurel Ladevich, 60 min., WGBH Educational Foundation, 2000, videocassette.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hodgson, *Winning My Wings*, 28.

The WASPs, like many women in wartime America, yearned to do something meaningful to help the war effort. The unprecedented opportunity for these women to fly military aircraft for their country gave the women pilots a unique sense of pride and purpose that had rarely been experienced by women in the United States before the war. They jumped at the chance to do their part for Uncle Sam.

The trainees were awakened every morning at 6 a.m. by the sounds of Reveille. After breakfast their day would be spent in physical training, ground school, which included instruction in mathematics, physics, map reading, charts, navigation, engines, weather, code and communications, as well as flying. The women pilots were given over 210 hours of military flight training at Avenger Field.²⁷

For flying, the WASPs were issued men's flight suits that were many sizes too large for them. "Surplus Army mechanics' olive drab overalls, size forty-four and up, dubbed 'zoot suits' replaced our civilian clothes, while cosmetics and fancy hairstyles became relics of the past,"²⁸ WASP Doris Brinker Tanner later wrote. Adaline Blank, a trainee in the WASP class 43-W-8, wrote a letter home to her sister describing life at Avenger Field:

The whole set-up and the very atmosphere is ARMY. We "fall in" and march to everything; to the flight line, to classes, to drill, to "mess." Every day after lunch we have an hour's drill under this boiling Texas sun . . . tomorrow we begin our flying in the Fairchild PT-19, our primary trainer ship. I can hardly wait to get my hands on a real ship . . . already my big worry is that I might "wash out." It's going to be plenty tough to come up to Army standards. Many of the girls have had much more preliminary work than I have, and much more flying time. Several from W-7 "washed" today. Everyone gets depressed when they go . . .

²⁷ Mizrahi, "The WASPs Women Airforce Service Pilots," 20.

²⁸ Tanner, "We Also Served," 16.

tonight the Recreation Room was like a morgue – you just can't help wondering "will I be next?"²⁹

The fear of every WASP trainee was "washing out" of the program. It was a genuine fear too, as only the best pilots would go on to earn their wings. Jean Hascall Cole recalled the washouts in her class of 44-W-2 in her memoirs:

Most of the heartbreaking washouts took place during those first two months of training . . . Marge Gilbert was next door to me, but Carol White had washed out early in training. She was in tears, as I remember, and we felt sorry for her, but we felt lucky at the same time that we were still there. There seemed to be so much "luck" involved in the washouts. We later found out that many good pilots didn't make it.³⁰

After twenty-four weeks of military pilot training, the WASPs sighed a big sigh of relief once graduation day arrived. Each class composed and sang a special song in tribute to the departing graduates. One favorite parodied "Yankee Doodle Dandy":

We are Yankee Doodle pilots,
Yankee Doodle do or die;
Real live nieces of our Uncle Sam,
Born with a yearning to fly.
Keep in step to all our classes,
March to flight line with our pals;
Yankee Doodle came to Texas
Just to fly the PTs,
We are those Yankee Doodle gals.³¹

²⁹ Adaline Blank, *Women Airforce Service Pilots. Correspondence July 1943-December 1943*, (Denton, Texas: Texas Woman's University Archives, The Woman's Collection, 2002).

³⁰ Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 33.

³¹ Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 46.

The female pilots reportedly caught the attention of Walt Disney, and he had the artists at Walt Disney Studios design a cartoon mascot for the WASPs. Most U.S. military units in World War II had cartoon mascots, which decorated everything from jackets to bombers. The WASPs' "Fifinella" or "Fifi" as she was nicknamed, came from the children's book *The Gremlins* written in 1942 by Roald Dahl, at the time a young RAF pilot. His book told of imaginary creatures that played tricks on pilots. He named male mischiefmakers "gremlins"; a female one was a "fifinella" or "fifi." WASPs felt Fifi was not as mischievous as a male gremlin. "She kept the sand out of your gas tank and kept the engine running," said Nonie Horton Anderson. WASP B.J. Williams added, "Fifi helped us come home safely."³²

Following graduation, the WASPs were dispersed to air bases throughout the country, where they took up assignments transporting aircraft across the United States and into Canada. The women pilots operated from 110 facilities and flew more than sixty million miles in seventy-eight different types of aircraft, from the smallest trainers to the fastest fighters and the largest bombers. They ferried the bulk of new aircraft from the factories to training bases and embarkation points and flew combat-weary planes to repair depots, then did the after-service checkout, often when male pilots would not. They towed targets for live ammunition antiaircraft battery practice, as well as air-to-air gunnery. The WASPs conducted weather reconnaissance and participated in smoke-laying missions during maneuvers. They were employed as instructors, and did

³² Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 9.

everything from radio-controlled and instrument test flying to thousands of engineering tests and utility tests.³³

Some graduates, like Ann Baumgartner Carl, became test pilots. Many WASPs also went on to pursuit training where they learned to fly the fighters like the North American P-51 Mustang, while others became qualified to fly in bombers like the B-17 Flying Fortress and B-29 Super Fortress. Twenty-two-year-old Dora Dougherty Strother was one of only two WASPs chosen to fly the colossal B-29.

Lieutenant Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, Jr. (who would later pilot the *Enola Gay* that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan) recruited Strother and Dorothea “Didi” Johnson Moorman to fly the massive bomber to demonstrate to the male pilots that it could be flown. Tibbets was determined to prove to these men that not only could the B-29 be flown but that it could be flown by women.³⁴ The women were given only three days training in Birmingham, Alabama to learn how to fly the heavy bomber. After an anxious check ride when one of the engines caught on fire, the WASPs successfully flew the B-29 (christened *Ladybird*) to Clovis Army Air Field in New Mexico. In 1995 Strother received a letter from a male pilot who was on that historic flight:

I realize that it was a long time ago but I want to thank you for helping me that day at Clovis. You came to show us that the B-29 plane was not one to be feared. You were the pilot that day and you demonstrated your excellent flying skills and convinced us that the B-29 was a plane that any pilot would be proud to fly. From that day on we never had a pilot who didn't want to fly the B-29.³⁵

³³ Mizrahi, “The WASP Women Airforce Service Pilots,” 2.

³⁴ General Paul Tibbets. *Women Airforce Service Pilots: An Oral History* (Denton: Texas, Texas Woman's University Archives, The Woman's Collection, 2002).

³⁵ *Fly Girls*.

With each new success, Jacqueline Cochran was convinced that her WASPs were making a difference in the war. It troubled Cochran, however, that her women pilots were still considered only volunteer civil servants with no official military status. With General Arnold's backing, Cochran helped to reintroduce a bill to Congress to make the WASPs a woman's service within the U.S. Army Air Forces. (The first bill that was introduced in September 1943 was ignored). On June 21, 1944, HR4219 (named the Costello Bill after Representative John Costello of California who introduced it) was defeated by nineteen votes, despite vigorous lobbying efforts by Arnold and Cochran. Not since the beginning of the war in 1941 had any legislation supported by the Army Air Forces been turned down.³⁶

There are many reasons for the defeat of the WASP militarization bill. By early 1944, air superiority had been achieved in Europe, and American male pilots began returning home. Flying schools were being shut down so civilian pilots were now faced with the draft – not to be pilots, but foot soldiers in the infantry. If the male pilots took over the WASPs' flying jobs, they could avoid the draft. They launched an aggressive campaign against the WASPs in the media and on Capitol Hill.³⁷ The protests of the male pilots coincided with a growing backlash against the idea of women “freeing men to fight” as men returned home from the war to find women in coveted flying positions. At the same time traditionalists both in and out of Congress were becoming increasingly

³⁶ Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). 101.

³⁷ *Fly Girls*.

concerned about women's growing independence and economic power and feared they would not return to their "rightful" roles of homemaker, mother and low-wage employee when the war ended. These factors accompanied by tremendous social pressures facilitated by the media constituted a powerful lobby against passage of the bill that sought to militarize the WASPs.

The defeat of the Costello Bill meant that the WASPs would remain civil servants without the benefits given to full-fledged members of the United States military. The WASPs were denied the benefits under the GI Bill of life insurance, medical coverage, education assistance and home mortgages. It was not until 1977 that President Jimmy Carter granted the WASPs veteran status. The WASPs felt the sting of their quasi-military status directly whenever a fellow pilot was killed. Because they had not been officially accepted into the Army Air Forces, the government refused to pay for the bodies of WASPs to be shipped home for burial or pay for funeral expenses. The women pilots would often have to collect the necessary funds themselves.

In order to appreciate the exceptional opportunity for women pilots to fly military aircraft during the war, it is helpful to look back a decade earlier to the 1930s and comment briefly on the lives of the Depression-era women. The Great Depression cast a long shadow over the 1940s. According to Susan M. Hartmann in her book *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, when the economy hit its low point in 1933, the gross national product plunged from \$149.3 to \$107.6 billion; national income

stood at one-half its 1929 level; and more than thirty percent of the workforce – twelve million men and women – could not find employment.³⁸

The majority of adult women experienced the Depression years as wives and not paid workers. More than ninety percent of all women married, but only fifteen percent of all married women were employed outside the home in 1940.³⁹ Above all women were viewed as mothers and wives, and their participation outside the home in the public sphere was limited. Especially during the harsh years of the Depression, women were discriminated against if they were married and decided to seek employment. Public opinion viewed these workingwomen as stealing jobs away from able-bodied men who needed to work to support their families. A Gallup poll in 1936 reported that eighty-two percent of the respondents believed that wives with employed husbands should not work outside the home, and that three-fourths of the women polled agreed.⁴⁰

The outbreak of war in 1941 helped to solve America's domestic economic troubles while boosting production and creating new jobs. As thousands of men left their jobs to join the military and were deployed overseas, women were encouraged to leave their homes (if only temporarily) to replace the men in the labor force. The United States government reminded women of their duty to their country, and they entered the workplace in large numbers. While the Depression had encouraged public criticism of women workers, the labor shortage of the war years necessitated appeals by government

³⁸ Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

and employers for women to take jobs. The need for female labor lent a new legitimacy to the women worker and made government, employers, and labor unions more willing to think about their concerns. Between 1940 and 1945 the female labor force grew by more than fifty percent.⁴¹ Despite a willingness to deviate from the established norms for women, the claims of home and family remained strong. Wives of servicemen were three times as likely to work as wives with their husbands present. The women, some of whom were employed for the first time outside of their homes, felt pride in their accomplishments. An older woman in Baltimore who had returned to paid employment after years of being a homemaker, commented on her job in assembly work at Bendix Friez Company: "I love my job and I hate the idea of giving it up. Sometimes I can hardly wait to get there. Never thought I could do such exacting work – and I'm real proud."⁴²

Women with special skills were sought in every aspect of war work, and the few thousand women in the United States who had experience in aviation as pilots, were recruited to do their part as well. Women flying enthusiasts, who at the time had to be content flying for recreational purposes or working as a flight instructor, jumped at the rare opportunity to fly military aircraft while also contributing to the war effort. The women who joined the WASPs knew they were an elite group, and answering their

⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

⁴² Karen L. Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1981), 63.

country's call for service, they were determined to prove that they were just as capable of flying military planes as their male counterparts.

Unfortunately the women pilots did not have long to prove their merit in the cockpit. The WASP program was cut short when it was officially terminated on December 20, 1944, eight months before the war ended. It was the first of the women's services to be disbanded. In the words of WASP Doris Brinker Tanner, "The battle to give women equal opportunity in military cockpits was lost."⁴³ Although the airwomen proved that the experiment had been successful, the WASP program could not hold up under the social pressure brought on by negative publicity in the media and a powerful lobby of male civilian pilots who wanted the women pilots' jobs. After a lengthy battle for militarization, General Arnold and Jacqueline Cochran were forced to accept defeat. The stunned WASPs packed their bags and returned home, while planes remained at airfields across America waiting to be delivered until male pilots could be trained to replace them.

Despite criticism of the WASP program that developed in the media as a result of their attempt to militarize while male pilots returned from overseas duty, the women flyers earned the respect of male pilots as well as many top-ranking military officers. In the end, they proved that women were physically capable of piloting military aircraft. General Arnold, a staunch supporter of the WASPs, was the keynote speaker at the graduation of the last class on December 7, 1944:

We will not again look upon a women's flying organization as experimental. We

⁴³ Tanner, "We Also Served," 49.

will know that they can handle our fastest fighters, our heaviest bombers; we will know that they are capable of ferrying, target towing, flying training, test flying, and the countless other activities which you have proved you can do . . . we of the Army Air Force are proud of you; we will never forget our debt to you.⁴⁴

The backlash of official government action against the WASPs hurt the pilots profoundly and bewildered them, but they clung to the knowledge that their service record had been outstanding. Some of the women pilots were later commissioned in the new United States Air Force, but not on flying status. The majority of the WASPs married, started families, or returned to college or their prewar jobs. Although only a few of them continued flying after the war, the Women Airforce Service Pilots would forever cherish the memories of their days as America's first military pilots.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

CHAPTER 2

MARINA RASKOVA AND HER SOVIET AIR REGIMENTS

Thousands of miles away another accomplished woman flyer was preparing to organize a group of young female pilots to fly in defense of Soviet Russia. Marina Raskova, one of the most venerated and best-loved women aviators of the USSR, is largely unknown in the West. Raskova was admired for her achievements in aviation in the same way Amelia Earhart was in the United States. Founder of the world's first all-female air regiments during World War II, Raskova, who rose to the rank of major, would become the first woman navigator in the Soviet Union and commanding officer of the 587th Dive Bomber Regiment, subsequently renamed after her death in 1943 the 125th M.M. Raskova *Borisov* Guards Dive Bomber Regiment. One of the first women to earn the prestigious title Hero of the Soviet Union, Raskova served as a role model for her fellow aviators, male and female, for not only her tremendous skill and personal courage, but her ability to make decisions and lead her regiment under severe and often very difficult circumstances.

Like Jacqueline Cochran, Raskova did not set out early in her life to become a pilot. Born in Moscow on March 28, 1912, Marina Mikhailovna Malinina aspired to be an opera singer, but a middle-ear infection at the age of fifteen pushed her life down another path. Raskova chose instead to study chemistry and engineering, and later mastered the theory of air navigation. She became the first woman in the USSR to earn

the diploma of professional air navigator, going on to become an instructor at N. Ye. Zhukovsky Air Force Engineering Academy in Moscow.¹

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

By the mid-1930s, Raskova became involved in a greater number of important aviation-related events, and in August 1935 she took part in her first independent flight as a pilot. According to Kazimiera J. Cottam in her book *Women in War and Resistance*, in July 1936, Raskova began probationary navigator training in the 23rd Heavy Air Brigade.² In the meantime, she continued teaching at the Academy. In June 1937 Raskova participated as navigator in an air race from Moscow to Sevastopol and back to Moscow flying the same plane as in the 1935 flight but this time with additional fuel tanks. She was the fourth to arrive in Sevastopol and the sixth to return to Moscow, completing the journey within twenty-four hours. That same year Raskova met pilot Valentina Grizodubova who proposed to her that they fly together in a Yak-12 to establish a long

¹ Kazimiera J. Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers* (Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1998), 18.

² Ibid., 20.

distance record. On October 24, 1937, they set a new women's record when they covered approximately 895 miles from Moscow to Aktyubinsk, Kazakhstan.³

On July 2, 1938 Raskova again established a new women's long distance record when she flew (as navigator) with pilot Polina Osipenko and co-pilot Vera Lomako in an MP-1 non-stop from the Black Sea to the White Sea, having taken off in Sevastopol and landed in the vicinity of Arkhangel'sk on Lake Kholmovskoye. The route lay across four different air masses -- tropical, continental, polar and arctic -- and required tremendous skills by the crew. The aviators set an international women's straight-line distance record when they flew 3,695 miles. As a result of this record-setting flight, senior lieutenants Osipenko and Lomako as well as lieutenant Raskova (who became a career officer in 1938) were awarded the Order of Lenin.⁴

Not long after this flight, Grizodubova, with Stalin's support, arranged for an aircraft to be assigned to them for their proposed flight to the Far East (with Osipenko as co-pilot). It was an ANT-37 (a converted long-range DB-2 bomber) nicknamed *Rodina* ("Homeland") by Grizodubova. In addition to flight training, the three women practiced firing rifles and pistols. The flight was delayed after Raskova developed appendicitis, and in September 1938 a state commission cancelled the flight due to the lateness in the year and anticipated bad weather. Stalin, however, overruled the decision and the *Rodina* took off on September 24, 1938 at 8:16 a.m.⁵

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Ibid., 22.

During the course of this mission, overcast skies completely obscured all visual landmarks, leaving radio signals as the only means of orientation. When the radio station ceased transmitting, there was nothing to do but continue on, eventually running out of fuel. Raskova's crew position in the nose of the aircraft was hazardous for a crash landing, so she was ordered to parachute from the plane over the *taiga*, a dense, swampy, forested area of Siberia. Raskova landed in the swamp, and it was not until ten days later that she finally came upon her aircraft and was reunited with Osipenko and Grizodubova. The story of Raskova's flight was widely publicized, and her courage and stamina caught the imagination of the Soviet people.⁶

Raskova spent several months recovering from the injuries to her legs she sustained as a result of the historic flight. Not only had Raskova proven her courage and skill in flying, but her youthful beauty also helped to attract the interest of the Russian people. At the age of twenty-six she was a national celebrity, a recipient of the second Order of Lenin, as well as the Gold Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. Raskova, along with Grizodubova and Osipenko, became the first women to receive the country's highest honor and the only women to receive it before the war. The flyers were elevated to the equivalent status of American movie idols in the USSR, and they received significant attention from the press. One wonders if the primary reason behind the heightened public interest in female aviators like Raskova, and Jacqueline Cochran and Amelia Earhart in the United States, was largely due to their gender. Despite women's involvement in the

⁶ Anne Noggle, *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 15.

field of aviation since the early days of balloon flight in the late eighteenth-century, the world had not yet grown accustomed to reading about the exploits of female pilots. The Soviet public was entranced by these women flyers, who despite their feminine nature, had excelled in the male-dominated field of aviation. Stalin toasted Raskova, Grizodubova, and Osipenko at a banquet held in their honor at the Kremlin. In his speech he remarked on the history of matriarchy in Russia, and he concluded by saying, "Today these three women have avenged the heavy centuries of the oppression of women."⁷ According to author David L. Hoffmann, Soviet propaganda in the 1930s depicted heroines as both valiant workers and dutiful mothers. Even Soviet pilot-heroines were portrayed as both pilots and mothers, and at the Kremlin reception to honor them, Hoffmann pointed out that the female aviators were pictured with their children and described as devoted mothers.⁸

Raskova would come to inspire hundreds of young women to fly for the Soviet Union when the time came to defend it. In Reina Pennington's book *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*, pilot Yevgeniya Zhigulenko recalled Raskova before the war: "Marina Raskova was an exceptional person. A famous pilot and Hero of the Soviet Union, she was still a simple, kind woman. She helped many young women who wanted to fly."⁹ Despite her fame and the pressures placed upon her

⁷ Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 17.

⁸ David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity 1917-1941* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

during the war, Raskova was known for her friendliness and her down-to-earth nature. She became the idol of many, including Soviet “ace” Lilya Litvyak, who would become the first woman in history to shoot down an enemy aircraft. She reportedly kept pictures of Raskova in her notebook. The aircrew of the *Rodina* met for the last time on March 8, 1939 at the Pilots’ Club on International Women’s Day. Osipenko was killed two months later in a plane crash. At her funeral, Stalin was one of the pallbearers.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Raskova, who was working as a civil defense volunteer at the time, began receiving hundreds of letters from women pilots eager to utilize their flying skills in the war. In October, after getting the full support of Stalin, Raskova set in motion a voluntary recruitment of women flyers, and the Aviation Group 122 was born. Historians have several theories as to why Stalin approved the unprecedented formation of the women’s air regiments. One theory is that the women were recruited as the result of a presumed shortage of male pilots.

Pennington points out that this perception of a shortage of personnel during the war is inaccurate.¹⁰ On the eve of the war the Soviet Air Force was the largest in the world. There was however, a shortage of aircraft when Aviation Group 122 was formed. A theory also persists that the women’s regiments were created solely for propaganda purposes. Lastly there is a theory, perhaps the most credible, that they were established because of the popularity and persistence of Raskova.

Raskova used her personal relationship with Stalin to convince him that women pilots should be utilized in the war. She also emphasized the young women’s strong

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

patriotic feelings, and their desire to fulfill their duty to their country. Despite those in the Kremlin who believed that combat was not a woman's affair, Raskova's persistence won out. Before giving her his blessing, however, Stalin reportedly cautioned Raskova, "You understand, future generations will not forgive us for sacrificing young girls."¹¹

Three women combat aviation regiments were formed under the auspices of the 122nd Aviation Group: the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment (Yak-1 fighters) that would later become part of the 270th Bomber Division of the 8th Air Army; the 587th Dive Bomber Aviation Regiment (Pe-2 bombers); and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment (Po-2 biplanes). In February 1943 the 588th would be renamed the 46th Guards Night Bomber Regiment in recognition of its outstanding achievements, and the 587th Regiment would become the 125th Guards Dive Bomber Regiment.

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

¹¹ Ibid., 26.

missions.¹² Galina Brok Beltsova,¹³ a navigator in the 125th Regiment, explained in an interview after the war, how the women pilots acquired the nickname by the German pilots that has stuck with them ever since.

We slept in anything we could find – holes in the ground, tents, caves – but the Germans had to have their barracks, you know. They are very precise. So their barracks were built, all in a neat row, and we would come at night, after they were asleep, and bomb them. Of course, they would have to run out into the night in their underwear, and they were probably saying, “Oh, those night witches!” Or maybe they called us something worse. We, of course, would have preferred to have been called “night beauties,” but, whichever, we did our job.¹⁴

One of the Soviet Union’s most highly decorated fighter pilots, Alexei Maresyev, praised his country’s women pilots who fought and died alongside the men during the Great Patriotic War:

It is hardly possible to overestimate the contribution made by [Soviet] women to our victory over Nazism . . . many of them fell on the battlefield, having discharged their soldierly duty honourably. They had a zest for life; they wanted to study, to raise children, and to work hard, but when the need arose they faced danger and died without faltering. They consciously sacrificed their young lives in the great cause . . . on board fighters and bombers they fought the enemy every bit as well as men did. These Soviet young girls amply demonstrated their iron will, steady hand, and accurate eye.¹⁵

¹² Amy Goodpaster Strebe, “Marina Raskova and the Soviet Women Aviators of World War II” in *Russian Life* 46, no. 1 (January/February 2003): 46.

¹³ Recently, Galina Brok Beltsova represented her fellow Soviet women pilots when she accepted a plaque honoring the induction of the Soviet airwomen of World War II into the Women in Aviation Pioneer Hall of Fame at the Women in Aviation International Conference held in Nashville, Tenn.

¹⁴ Phyllis Anne Duncan, “How They Must Love Their Homeland,” [article online] FAA Aviation News (May/June 2002, available from <http://www2.faa.gov/avr/afs/news/archive/mayjune2002/Flyers.htm>); accessed 15 September 2003.

¹⁵ Kazimiera J. Cottam, *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II* (Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1997), xvii.

Russian pilot Nadezhda Popova recalled several decades after World War II: “Sometimes, on a dark night, I will stand outside my home and peer into the sky, the wind tugging at my hair. I stare into the blackness and I close my eyes, and I imagine myself once more a young girl, up there in my little bomber. And I ask myself, ‘Nadya – how did you do it?’”¹⁶

To put the women pilots’ achievements into perspective, it is important to look back at the lives of Soviet women in the decade that preceded the war years. A famous painting by Russian artist Yuri Pimenov entitled *New Moscow* from the 1930s shows a woman driving a car down a street in the capital. The painting suggests her independence, modernity, and competence. She is driving alone, needing no one alongside to give support or advice on how she could improve her driving. Like the “new” Moscow, she is a “new” urban woman, self-determined and capable of adapting her lifestyle to the changing times while at the same time also benefiting from them. She is up to date, has mastered the latest technology of the road and is moving forward. She personifies the Soviet idea of progress.¹⁷ Most Soviet women in the 1930s of course did not look like the woman in this painting; they possessed no car and had little hope of ever owning one. The painting signified, however, that a new era was dawning and that change was afoot. Gender relations were redefined in a decade where women were now

¹⁶ Bruce Myles, *Night Witches: The Untold Story of Soviet Women in Combat* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1981), 270.

¹⁷ Mary Buckley, “Complex ‘Realities’ of ‘New’ Women of the 1930s: Assertive, Superior, Belittled and Beaten.” In *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Linda Edmondson (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 180.

being pushed by the Soviet state to increase productivity. As their workload amplified, wages increased for the “new” women. They became part of a labor elite and were given monetary and material rewards for their efforts as well as invitations to attend conferences, where they came in contact with top leaders. Competition between female workers spurred them on to even greater productivity. Famous pilot Polina Osipenko pledged to “fly higher, further and faster than all the girls in the world.”¹⁸ The bonuses and rewards given to the women were thought to be incidental, however. Soviet women, it was believed, were not motivated by personal gain, but were concerned with the well-being of society as a whole. Soviet citizens, regardless of gender, were expected to sacrifice their individual aspirations for the good of the state. The pilot Valentina Grizodubova summed up this view of the female mentality: “Whenever Soviet woman works, she is led by a single aim: to be of use to her beloved motherland.”¹⁹

By the start of the war, Russian women already made up 45 percent of the working force,²⁰ while in the United States, female workers represented 27.6 percent of America’s prewar labor force.²¹ The German invasion in June 1941 produced some adjustments to the images of Soviet women. Women took on a new symbolic form. The

¹⁸ Lynne Attwood, “Rationality versus Romanticism: Representations of Women in the Stalinist Press.” In *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Linda Edmondson (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 161.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism 1860-1930*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 395.

²¹ Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, 21.

“new” Soviet woman was replaced by the image of Mother Russia. Instead of driving cars along Moscow’s main boulevards, women were now portrayed wearing headscarves and flowing skirts, urging their sons on to battle. According to historian Barbara Evans Clements, in the iconography of the war and also in the minds of many Soviet soldiers, women came to represent endurance, rebirth, and the more nurturing of emotions rarely found in the world of combat. In her article, Clements extended this enduring image to women themselves: “Women as well must have drawn sustenance from this vision of themselves, for it honored their contribution to the war, justified their suffering, and legitimated their own deep feelings about their succoring role within the family and the community.”²² Motherhood was an essential feature of the Soviet woman, and she was encouraged to break records in this field too.

In reality, women were not only urging their sons to fight, but were taking up arms themselves. Nearly one million Soviet women fought in uniform and performed all kinds of combat duties during the war.²³ (By the end of World War II, approximately 350,000 women had served in the United States military in non-combat roles).²⁴ For Soviet women during the Great Patriotic War, the image of Mother Russia seemed to embody not only the caring and protective qualities of a mother, but also the self-

²² Barbara Evans Clements, “Later Developments: Trends in Soviet Women’s History, 1930 to the Present.” In *Russia’s Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel and Christine D. Worobec. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 272.

²³ Stites, 429.

²⁴ Vicki L. Friedl, *Women in the U.S. Military, 1901-1995: A Research Guide and Annotated Bibliography*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 12.

sacrificing and courageous traits of a warrior, defending her country as she would her own child. In the 1930s, and for many years following the war, women would be called upon to work and help rebuild the USSR. The image of the brave and selfless mother who sacrificed and defended her nation against all foes, however, would endure.

The thirties was not only a decade of rapid industrialization in the Soviet Union, but it was also considered to be the “Golden Age of Aviation.” There was a surge in aviation programs, both civilian and military. The second Five-Year Plan called for a tremendous increase in both number and distance of civil aviation routes. Geological surveys and Arctic missions were now conducted by air, and Soviet accomplishments in sport and military aviation received heightened attention.²⁵ Soviet Russia in the thirties was complicated and also potentially dangerous. The same system that nurtured women pilots’ love of flying and encouraged them to explore aviation was also capable of destroying them in Stalin’s totalitarian state.

Because the Soviet Union had the distinction of being the first country in the world to proclaim legal equality for women in 1917, the military flying schools and Osoaviakhim (the Society for Cooperation in Defense and Aviation-Chemical Development) could not legally refuse entry to qualified women. It was through Osoaviakhim, a paramilitary organization, that most Soviet women received flight training.²⁶ Founded in 1927 to train teenagers and young adults in quasi-military skills

²⁵ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 6.

²⁶ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 8.

such as defense and chemical warfare, marksmanship, and parachuting, by the 1930s it began developing a network of air clubs to provide flight training in light aircraft.²⁷

The Soviet government emphasized the importance of aviation and air travel, which was seen as the most promising means of transportation, especially since the vast expanses of Soviet territory were still not linked by roads or railroads. Officially young Soviet women were encouraged to participate in all facets of Osoaviakhim training. However, many women encountered obstacles when attempting to get into flight training. Marina Chechneva (who subsequently became a night bomber pilot and a Hero of the Soviet Union in the Second World War) described the manner in which her male flying club instructor discouraged her from seeking a career as a pilot as being typical of the time:

Quite a few women were studying at the air club; however, the attitude of many of the instructors towards them was, to put it mildly, less than enthusiastic. The instructors took women in their groups unwillingly. That was clear. Women were only beginning to enter aviation. Not everyone believed that we would be able to work in this field on an equal basis with men. The example of famous women pilots did not convince the skeptics. "Aviation is not a woman's affair" they declared repeatedly, and tried in every way possible to dissuade young women from joining the air club.²⁸

Nevertheless, many Soviet women persevered and learned to fly. By 1941, one hundred to one hundred and fifty air clubs had been established; one out of every three or four pilots was a woman.²⁹ Even when their instructors were supportive, some of the

²⁷ Ibid., 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 9

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

young women faced opposition from their parents. Antonina Bondareva, later a Guards lieutenant in the 46th Regiment, related the following story:

When I was in the seventh grade, an airplane came to our town. In 1936 it seemed something extraordinary. A campaign was launched spontaneously: "Young Boys and Girls, Take Up Aviation!" Being a Komsomol member, I was, of course, in the front ranks and immediately joined an air club. Father was dead against it, though. Until then all the members of my family had been steelworkers, with several generations of blast-furnace operators. My father believed that a woman could be a steelworker but never a pilot.³⁰

It is interesting that the idea of women flying airplanes was more foreign to Russian men in the 1930s than the concept of female steelworkers. In the United States at that time, possibly the opposite was true. This perception may be due to the fact that there were more women steelworkers employed in the USSR than there were women aviators. In light of this, women faced many hurdles in becoming pilots before the war, despite the Soviet decree that guaranteed gender equality. The purpose of the pilot training (for the men anyway) in the Osoaviakhim was to prepare them for either active or reserve military duty. The men who received flight training at the air clubs were registered in the military reserve forces, but women were not. No provisions were made for women pilots to play a military role until the German invasion in June 1941.

The women pilots and navigators who were recruited soon after the invasion for Marina Raskova's 122nd Composite Air Group (that later became the 586th Fighter Regiment, the 587th Bomber Regiment, and the 588th Air Regiment) were subjected to a rigorous training program, and in the case of the pilots, one that crammed nearly three years of flying experience into several months. The women's instruction, equipment, and

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

ultimate assignment were identical to those of their male counterparts. A significant proportion of the ground crews attached to the regiments were women as well.

Responsible for maintaining and preparing the aircraft for their sometimes numerous daily missions, the armorers and mechanics handled ammunition boxes and machine-gun belts, made quick-time repairs, and attached heavy bombs, often working without cover in subzero weather. The ground crews were as dedicated as the aircrew, and they grew close to their pilots and aircraft.³¹

Although the majority of the women recruited for the aviation regiments were young and single, some were married and some had children. Many of the married women had lost husbands or children in the war. Dusia Nosal, who became the first woman aviator to be awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union during the war, lost her baby in the bombing at the beginning of the war (and was later killed in action herself). Other mothers left their children with relatives. Marina Raskova had an eight-year-old daughter whom she left in the care of her mother. Mechanic Inna Pasportnikova, in a 1993 interview with author Reina Pennington, recalled, "The main complication was with women with children. There had to be someone to take care of the children."³²

While Raskova set to work to form the women's air regiments, the Germans were advancing closer and closer to Moscow. Soviet citizens learned from radio reports that Moscow was in imminent danger of occupation. It was imperative that the women pilots be trained quickly so that they could participate in aerial combat in defense of their

³¹ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 10-11.

³² Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 35.

country. Raskova personally interviewed every volunteer. Most all of the women wanted to be utilized as pilots, but navigators were badly needed too, and Raskova chose those pilots with a technical education to fill the navigator slots. A minimum of five hundred flying hours was required of women who desired to serve as fighter or bomber pilots. Uniforms were issued, but as there were no women's uniforms, the recruits were forced to wear the oversized flight suits of male airmen, similar to the clothing given to the WASPs. Pants could be hitched up with belts and the cuffs could be rolled up, but footwear was a problem. If the oversized uniforms made them look ridiculous, the men's boots made the women look clumsy. Pilot Raisa Aronova recalled: "They gave us men's clothing, right down to the underwear."³³

The day after the women were given their uniforms, Raskova received orders to send the aviation group immediately to Engels, a city on the Volga River north of Stalingrad, to complete the formation and training there. In Moscow there was panic among its citizens as the Germans drew closer. During the night of 16-17 October 1941 when the women departed for Engels, one hundred trains carrying 150,000 people reportedly left Moscow.³⁴

These first trainees, who numbered between three hundred and four hundred, were greeted by exceptionally cold weather (four degrees below zero Fahrenheit) after spending nine days on the train. The girls passed the time on the long journey studying

³³ Raisa E. Aronova, *Nochnye ved'my*. [*Night Witches*]. (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1969), 24.

³⁴ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 39.

military regulations, singing, and tailoring their uniforms. Food was scarce and there was no possibility of bathing while on the train. Raskova, who spent time in each of the cars during the trip to Engels, advised the trainees that they should sleep as much as they could. Aronova recalled Raskova telling them to “rest, because ahead lie very demanding studies.”³⁵

Once in Engels, the first order that was issued was for all the girls to get a “boy-style” haircut. Bomber pilot Nadezhda Popova recalled the order. “I remember one girl with gorgeous long hair crying, saying, ‘Long hair is a woman’s treasure, her beauty.’ It was our first taste of military discipline.”³⁶ According to Shelley Saywell in her book *Women in War*, in an ironic twist, an air force general, arriving to inspect the women weeks later, lifted one woman’s cap off, and the long hair she had refused to cut off came tumbling down. There was silence on the parade ground. Then he said, “Now that is what a woman should look like. Why do all of you want to look like boys?”³⁷ When they got to the front, most of the women grew their hair back.

Studies began in earnest. During the next few months, the members of the 122nd underwent an extremely condensed, intensive course of training. There were ten courses a day plus two hours of drill; navigators studied Morse code for an additional hour and

³⁵ Aronova, *Nochnye ved'my* [*Night Witches*], 28.

³⁶ Shelley Saywell, *Women in War* (Markham, Ontario, Canada: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985), 138.

³⁷ Ibid.

rose earlier than the other students, who slept on average five or six hours a night.³⁸ To prepare the trainees for the difficult conditions at the front, Raskova would sometimes sound an alarm in the middle of the night, requiring everyone to dress and form up outdoors by putting on their overcoats over their nightshirts, making them march around the airfield with the cold wind blowing on their bare legs.³⁹ For many of the women who were barely out of their teens, military life was a difficult adjustment. Some of the girls had never been away from home before. Conditions were poor at the front, and the women were forced to adjust to an entirely new way of life. One woman told Saywell many years after the war:

But your evaluation of things changed. What seemed absolutely horrible in the beginning gradually became more or less acceptable. Later, when new women arrived at the front and experienced the hardships for the first time, we would wonder what they were upset about. We were used to not washing for weeks, to the lack of privacy, to the embarrassment of lice inspections. Under fire for the first time new recruits would be hysterical, while we had become calm about it.⁴⁰

Marina Raskova, now thirty years old, oversaw all aspects of the women's combat training. She drove herself hard and was sometimes so exhausted she did not have the strength to undress at night and slept on top of her bed in her uniform. To her trainees, she encompassed immeasurable energy and endurance. Ekaterina Fedotova, later a flight commander in the 125th, remembered a time when she had gone into Raskova's office and found her asleep on her table. When she tried to leave without disturbing her,

³⁸ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁰ Saywell, *Women in War*, 138.

Raskova opened her eyes and, without moving, said, "Give your report. I'm listening."⁴¹ A talented musician, Raskova would sometimes sneak away from her work late at night to play the piano, which would help to calm her nerves. Respected and loved by the women she trained, she is remembered for being soft-spoken and friendly, and for having a keen sense of humor and a kind heart. While in the process of transferring her regiment to the front at Stalingrad on January 4, 1943, the plane Raskova was piloting crashed after being caught in a heavy snowstorm and dense fog, killing all four crewmembers aboard. Raskova, who had been commander of the 125th Regiment for only a few months, never got to experience combat herself.

Raskova's death came as a great shock to her fellow pilots and countrymen. Her regiment pledged to become worthy of bearing Raskova's name when the honorary title of Guards was conferred on the regiment on September 23, 1943.⁴² In Kazimiera Cottam's book *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers*, pilot Katya Ryabova, squadron commander of the 588th Night Bomber Regiment, in a letter home to her family wrote: "I will always remember her young, beautiful, brave, her face looking tired and intense."⁴³ For navigator Galina Brok Beltsova, Raskova was a powerful role model to her young pilots.

For inspiration we had a portrait of Raskova at our base, and we each carried a picture of her in a pocket on the leg of our flight suits. The pocket had a clear

⁴¹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 45.

⁴² Strebe, "Marina Raskova and the Soviet Women Aviators of World War II," 47.

⁴³ Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, 27.

covering over it, so we could see her picture. We all called ourselves, "Raskovsi," belonging to Raskova. She was brave, and so we were brave.⁴⁴

Raskova was posthumously awarded the Order of the Patriotic War, First Class, and her ashes were interned in the Kremlin Wall beside those of Osipenko. Raskova had been acutely aware that she and her fellow female flyers were making history. In May 1942 she had told the members of the 588th after accompanying them to the front near Stavropol: "I believe that all of you will come back as heroes. Epics and songs will be composed about you. You will be glorified by future generations."⁴⁵

In early 1942 the three air regiments were formed under the auspices of the 122nd, and by late spring the women received orders to go to the front. On the morning of May 23, 1942, garrison commander Colonel Bagaev made a short speech to the crews of the 588th who soon would be experiencing their first taste of combat:

Today, for the first time, a woman's regiment leaves our airfield for the front. You do not fly on awesome machines, but on training aircraft. And it's true that you yourselves are not excessively awesome in appearance. But I am certain that in these light-winged airplanes, you will be able to inflict heavy blows on your enemy. Let fly with you my fatherly wish: success to you and combat glory!⁴⁶

The women flyers were anxious to test their training in action, and no pilot could forget her first encounter with the enemy. Popova, assigned to the 588th Night Bomber Regiment, recalled her first combat mission near the southern front in the Ukraine:

It was a very, very dark night. Not one small star could be seen. The sky was covered in cloud; it seemed that it was an abyss of darkness, pitch black ... and

⁴⁴ Duncan, "How They Must Have Loved Their Homeland."

⁴⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁶ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 49.

when I got up in the air, I could see the front line marked by green, red and white tracer lights, where skirmishes continued throughout the night. I followed the lights towards the accumulation of enemy troops. Suddenly, the plane in front of mine got caught in three and later five projector lights, which blind pilots. I watched them fall to the earth right in front of my eyes and saw the explosion of flames below. I flew towards the enemy lines, thinking I must help my friends. Irrational thoughts ... I knew they were dead. We dropped the bombs on the dots of light below. They shot at us and I circled round and flew back towards the base. When I landed I could see they already knew. I was ordered to fly another mission immediately. It was the best thing to keep me from thinking about it.⁴⁷

Arguably the best-known Soviet woman pilot in the war, who became famous for being a double “ace,” was Lidya (nicknamed “Lilya”) Litvyak. A senior lieutenant as well as a flight commander of the 73rd Guards *Stalingrad-Vienna* Fighter Regiment/6th Fighter Division/8th Air Army, she also served in the 586th as well as two other fighter regiments. Born August 18, 1922 in Moscow, Litvyak learned to fly at a young age. Striking in appearance and small in stature, she made a powerful impression on everyone who came in contact with her. A lover of nature, she is said to have decorated the inside of her cockpit with wild flowers found near the airfield, and legend has it that she painted a white lily on the fuselage of her aircraft. No one could have predicted that this petite blonde pilot (she had to have the pedals of her plane adjusted so she could reach them), who liked to fashion colorful neck scarves out of parachutes, would prove to be such a deadly adversary in the skies.

On September 13, 1942 Litvyak would go down in history as the first woman in the world to shoot down an enemy aircraft. She downed two German fighters that day in an intense air battle over Stalingrad that involved a German ace named Erwin Maier who was a three-time recipient of the Iron Cross. He had scored his eleventh victory three

⁴⁷ Saywell, *Women in War*, 139.

days earlier. Maier was forced to bail out of his aircraft, and once captured on the ground, he asked to meet the Russian ace who had shot down his plane. When the twenty-year-old Litvyak stood before him he stared in amazement. In disbelief he demanded proof that she had indeed been the pilot he had fought with. After Litvyak described in detail their dogfight (which had been her first), Maier was forced to believe her account. According to Vladimir Belyakov's article in *Aviation History*, when Maier had accepted the bitter truth, he knelt down beside her and ceremoniously offered her his Swiss-made gold watch – a great luxury in Russia at that time. Litvyak's response to the gesture was to say, "I do not accept gifts from my enemies," after which she abruptly turned and walked away.⁴⁸ For a pilot of her limited experience to achieve two kills in a single day (especially one involving a fighter ace) was an amazing accomplishment.

After having been wounded on several occasions, Litvyak perished August 1, 1943 in an air battle where approximately nine Soviet and forty enemy aircraft took part. It was believed at the time that Litvyak died instantly from a fatal bullet wound to the head while still in the air. However, her mechanic Inna Pasportnikova, based on later evidence, maintains that Litvyak died on the ground, after she crashed behind enemy lines. In 1979 when her body was finally discovered, it was revealed that Litvyak had in fact belly-landed her aircraft near the village of Dmitriyevka of Shakhterskiy District/Donetsk Region and was buried there in a common grave. Litvyak was not awarded the Gold Star of Hero of the Soviet Union until May 5, 1990 when Mikhail

⁴⁸ Vladimir Belyakov, "Russia's Women Top Guns." *Aviation History* (March 2000): 36

Gorbachev signed the decree, forty-seven years after her death. After flying 268 combat missions, Litvyak shot down twelve enemy planes (which also included the downing of an artillery observation balloon), and had three shared kills to her credit. In Pennington's *Wings, Women, and War*, male colleagues described Litvyak as "a remarkable girl, smart, with the true character of a fighter pilot and a daredevil."⁴⁹

The young Soviet women flyers were fueled with intense feelings of patriotism and a deep desire to do something to help their countrymen and women defeat the Nazis who were occupying their land. Like the American WASPs, they sought the opportunity to serve their country in its hour of need. The Russian women were in a unique position, however, to inflict direct blows to the enemy, and downing a German aircraft became retribution for the lost lives of their friends and fallen comrades. Despite the women pilots' proven heroism, the USSR soon forgot their wartime contributions. In 1945 Soviet society encouraged women who had fought at the front to discard their uniforms and return home and reestablish their prewar roles as housewives and mothers. After World War II, Soviet aviation remained off limits to them, and never again would Russian women get an opportunity to fly military aircraft into combat.

⁴⁹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 142.

CHAPTER 3

PATRIOTISM AND A LOVE OF FLYING

When America went to war in December 1941 following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the country for the first time solicited the involvement of women in all aspects of war production and encouraged their enlistment as volunteers in the armed forces. Although American women served in similar auxiliaries in the Great War, they were recruited in record numbers three decades later. The largest number of women joined the female corps of the military branches: 140,000 served with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) [in 1943 the organization dropped the "Auxiliary" and became the WAC]; 100,000 with the navy's Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES); 23,000 with the Marine Corps Women's Reserve (MCWR); 13,000 with the coast guard's Semper Paratus Always Ready (SPARs), and a little over one thousand women served as WASPs.¹

For the women in the Soviet Union, this was not the first time they had been called for duty by their country. According to Dale Herspring in his article, "Women in the Russian Military: A Reluctant Marriage," approximately five thousand women fought in World War I.² The most well known of these women warriors were the all-female Battalion of Death formed by Maria Bochkareva in 1917, who tried unsuccessfully to defend the Winter Palace during the October Revolution. Unlike women recruited for

¹ Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, 31-32.

² Dale R. Herspring, "Women in the Russian Military: A Reluctant Marriage." *Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military*, 15, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 44.

service in women's auxiliaries in other nations, including the United States, the Russian women soldiers were armed and trained for combat. According to Linda Grant De Pauw in her book *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War From Prehistory to the Present*, Maria Bochkareva's call for women to volunteer as soldiers emphasized feminine values. "We women are turning into tigresses to protect our children from a shameful yoke to protect the freedom of our country," she told her recruits.³ Bochkareva explained that maternal instinct, not a quest for glory or adventure, was what sent the women into the trenches. A significant part of their mission was, by their example, to shame soldiers in the Imperial Russian Army into fighting. Although the women's Battalion of Death was short-lived, the Russian Civil War that followed saw women fighting on every front. The Great Patriotic War would continue women's presence on the battlefields of Russia.

In the United States, unlike the USSR, women's experiences taking up arms against an enemy was spotty at best. The government employed creative ways to attract the involvement of women in the war. Propaganda posters were produced by the Office of War Information (OWI) to lure American women out of the home and into the factories. In its push to recruit women, the United States government was careful to portray the woman war worker as unmistakably feminine. Some people feared that women would ultimately lose their femininity if they took on the jobs left by men. The reinforcement of women's traditional roles was also extended to the jobs depicted in the posters. The gap between a woman's domestic duties and her work duties was

³ Linda Grant De Pauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War From Prehistory to the Present* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 215.

intentionally blurred by government policy, which suggested that women be told that war work was “pleasant and as easy as running a sewing machine, or using a vacuum machine.”⁴ The OWI recognized that the menial jobs would need to be associated with a noble cause in order for them to attract women. According to Maureen Honey in her book *Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II*, “These jobs will have to be glorified as patriotic war service if American women are to be persuaded to take them and stick to them.”⁵

Women were a popular subject of propaganda posters in the Soviet Union. Mother Russia was portrayed in one of the best-known recruiting posters as a “handsome, middle-aged woman in a billowing red peasant dress and scarf, her arms raised in a summoning gesture, her expression firm and admonitory. Over her head is emblazoned, also in red: ‘The Motherland is calling!’”⁶ The poster appealed to Soviet men’s feelings of loyalty to their land as well as their women, and both were viewed to be in need of defending as the German invaders stormed through their country. For women, the poster honored their contribution to the war, and illustrated their vital role as maintainers of Soviet morale.

According to Lisa Kirschenbaum, “Mothers functioned in Soviet propaganda both as national symbols and as the constantly reworked and reimagined nexus between home

⁴ Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 96.

⁵ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 40-41

⁶ Clements, “Later Developments: Trends in Soviet Women’s History, 1930 to the Present,” 272.

and nation, between love for the family and devotion to the state.”⁷ Kirschenbaum went on to point out that the Soviet insistence on both the vulnerability and self-reliance of women paralleled that of the American female war worker. Propaganda in the United States urged the acceptance of women in male jobs, yet was also aimed at preserving their femininity.

During World War II, women most frequently enlisted in war work out of patriotism and a desire to promote victory. The American women who signed up for the female corps of the armed services were portrayed as being “just as feminine as before they enlisted.” Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, director of the WAC, sought to portray women’s service in terms of their traditional feminine relationships and responsibilities, and she recommended advertising copy which pointed out that servicewomen would be hastening the return of their sweethearts and husbands by “only performing the duties women would ordinarily do in civilian life.”⁸

According to former WASP Anne Noggle, the overwhelming reason why women pilots were attracted to the WASP program was a desire to serve their country. Some had other reasons, she pointed out, like women who had “husbands, fiancés, sweethearts, fathers, or brothers in uniform.”⁹ Women who had loved ones serving overseas often

⁷ Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, “Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families”: Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda.” *Slavic Review* 59, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 825.

⁸ Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, 42.

⁹ Anne Noggle, *For God, Country And the Thrill of It: Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 12.

sought solace in wartime work, hoping that their contributions would help to bring their men home sooner. WASP Anne McClellan's pilot husband had been missing since the Baatan Death March, and Ah Ying ("Hazel") Lee, an American of Chinese ancestry, was engaged to [and later married] a major in the Chinese Air Force. Some of the women, like twenty-two-year-old Rebecca Edwards, were already widows of the war. In the book she published on her experiences as a WASP, Noggle wrote, "No doubt the women loved to fly as much as the male pilots, and some were accused of joining to seek 'affairs of the heart.' But over and above all other reasons was the feeling that they were making a direct and useful contribution – that they were able to do something for the war effort."¹⁰

Cornelia Fort, one of the first WAFS pilots, wrote a moving account of her reasons for becoming a wartime pilot in *Woman's Home Companion* in July 1943. The article was published posthumously after she became the first woman pilot to die on war duty in American history, when the bomber she was piloting crashed in Texas on March 21, 1943. In the article, twenty-four-year-old Fort emphasized the important role the women pilots were performing for the war effort:

We have no hopes of replacing men pilots. But we can each release a man to combat, to faster ships, to overseas work. Delivering a trainer to Texas may be as important as delivering a bomber to Africa if you take the long view. We are beginning to prove that women can be trusted to deliver airplanes safely and in the doing serve the country which is our country too.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cornelia Fort, "At Twilight's Last Gleaming." *Woman's Home Companion*, July 1943, 19.

The native of Tennessee, who had been giving a flying lesson over Pearl Harbor on the morning it was attacked by the Japanese, witnessed firsthand the devastation of the aerial invasion. The harrowing experience only fueled her determination to fly for her country. In the article she went on to write:

As long as our planes fly overhead the skies of America are free and that's what all of us everywhere are fighting for. And that we, in a very small way, are being allowed to help keep that sky free is the most beautiful thing I have ever known. I, for one, am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have.¹²

WASP Doris Brinker Tanner acknowledged the unique wartime role played by her fellow female flyers. "We women pilots viewed America from a perspective then shared by few other groups – and we deeply, sincerely loved our country."¹³ In her book *Winning My Wings: A Woman Airforce Service Pilot in World War II*, Marion Stegeman Hodgson commented on the historical significance of what the WASPs were doing in the war: "We were just grateful to have a chance to do something women had never before been allowed to do in our country: fly military airplanes."¹⁴ In a radio interview on National Public Radio, Libby Gardiner, who flew the B-26 during the war as a WASP, echoed Hodgson's sentiment: "We just felt we had really won a prize to get to fly these airplanes, which were off limits for us in any ordinary way, and to get paid for doing it and to know that we were contributing to the war effort – it was just too much. Very few

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tanner, "We Also Served," 19.

¹⁴ Hodgson, *Winning My Wings*, 26.

men ever got a chance like that and here we were getting this chance.”¹⁵ Motivated by patriotism, a love of flying, and a keen sense of adventure, the pilots, like many American women, sought to contribute their special talents to help win the war. A WASP motto helps to illustrate this feeling experienced by the airwomen:

To serve; to add my strength to theirs
Who give their all;
To Fly; to do my part
Is all I ask.¹⁶

In addition to the strong feelings of patriotism that drew the female pilots to the war, the women’s strong personalities as well as their yearning for adventure, attributed to their decision to join the WASP program. Ann Baumgartner Carl, who would later become the first woman to fly a jet, had graduated from Smith College and was looking for new challenges when she learned of the women pilot training program in Texas. “I had done a lot of other adventurous things – mountain climbing and training horses and things like that, and it just seemed like the next step,”¹⁷ she said in *Fly Girls*, a recent documentary on the WASPs. The flying bug bit Carl hard after only her first lesson. She recalled the moment in her book *A WASP Among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II*: “When I got home, the light of the sky continued to fill my mind. I could still feel us drifting above the treetops. I could not sit still. I circled round and round the

¹⁵ *The WASPs: Women Pilots of World War II*.

¹⁶ Marianne Verges, *On Silver Wings: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II 1942-1944* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 237.

¹⁷ *Fly Girls*.

room, imagining dangerous wartime rescues, flying on and on above the land and the clouds. I felt suddenly more alive. This is what I was made for, I told myself.”¹⁸

Carl’s interest in aviation could have also been awakened early on by a visit to her school by Amelia Earhart after the famous flyer’s historic flight in 1932. Carl was seated in the front row. Once she earned her pilot’s license and had acquired the necessary flight hours, the expectation of adventure convinced Carl to leave her job as a writer for *The New York Times*, in order to train alongside her fellow women pilots, who would be given the unprecedented opportunity to fly military aircraft in wartime America. “I thought of all the things I had been interested in as I grew up,” Carl wrote in her book. “And they all seemed to have the aura of adventure. Now there was the added impetus to become part of the war effort, in some way.”¹⁹ Incidentally, Carl would be the only woman jet pilot in America for almost a decade – until Jacqueline Cochran broke the sound barrier in 1953.

Jean Hascall Cole, who joined the WASP trainees in Sweetwater, Texas in 1943, marveled at the motley band of women who converged on the dusty little town to become the first military pilots in the history of the United States. In her book on the WASPs Cole wrote: “As I was to learn, we came from all corners of America, from the small towns and the big cities, from the privileged classes and the not-so-privileged. For each of us, flying was a passion, and some combination of daring, rebellion, and determination

¹⁸ Ann Baumgartner Carl, *A WASP Among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1999), 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

took us into the air.”²⁰ Despite the varied backgrounds and lives of the WASPs, each of the women pilots shared a fierce resolve to succeed and a desire to volunteer their services for the betterment of their country.

In the Soviet Union, like the United States, the women pilots were not drafted into military service as the men were; they volunteered to serve in the air force. In Russia, women fought to defend their beloved motherland that was being ravished by German forces. According to Reina Pennington in her book *Wings, Women, and War*, “it would be difficult to overstress patriotism as a motivation”²¹ for the women’s active involvement in the war. Pennington points out that the Soviet women pilots did not simply support their nation in its time of need; they were willing to kill to do it. They fought for the right to fight, insisting on using their special skills in aviation.

The Soviet women pilots were faced not only with the test of combat, but like the WASPs, also the task of continually proving themselves to their own country. The women were acutely aware that they had to measure up to, or even surpass, the standards set by male aviators. Navigator Polina Gelman noted, “We were always trying to prove that we were as good as men. This of course was one of the incentives.”²² The women could not fail to recognize that many men questioned their abilities, and they were constantly being judged and tested.

²⁰ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 7.

²¹ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 169.

²² *Ibid.*, 170.

Although many of the young Soviet women pilots volunteered as a result of an initial overwhelming surge of patriotism, they quickly came to realize that the war was nothing short of a national life-or-death struggle. A number of women pilots, however, had other motivations for joining the air force and becoming military flyers besides patriotism. Fighter “ace” Lilya Litvyak hoped that by proving herself to be a competent and brave fighter pilot, she could redeem her family name. Her father had been among the thousands “purged” and imprisoned in 1937 for charges that were never made clear. Litvyak never doubted her father’s innocence, and she believed that her fame in combat could erase his status as an “enemy of the people.” Litvyak’s deepest fear, according to Pennington, was becoming missing in action. In the Soviet Union any soldier whose body could not be found, that is, who went “missing without a trace,” were automatically suspected of desertion. Sadly, Litvyak herself would go missing in action when she was shot down on August 1, 1943 during an air battle. Her body was not discovered until thirty-six years later.

Pilot Katya Budanova, who like her friend Litvyak, would die a violent death in the war, wrote a letter home to her sister explaining her participation in the conflict:

Olechka, my darling . . . I am now devoting my entire life to the struggle against the vile Nazi creatures. I would like to tell you this: I am not afraid to die, but I don’t want to die . . . If I am fated to perish, my death will cost the enemy dearly. My dear winged “Yak” is a good machine and our lives are inseparably bound up together; if the need arises, we shall both die like heroes. Keep well, my dear, love the Homeland more, and work even harder than before for its benefit. Love and kisses. Katya.²³

²³ Kazimiera Cottam, *In the Sky Above the Front: A Collection of Memoirs of Soviet Air Women Participants in the Great Patriotic War* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1984), 194.

The women's decision to fight to the death on behalf of their country was also provoked by tragedies that struck close to home. After her brother was killed in the early days of the war, Nadezhda Popova promised to avenge his death and sent a cable to Moscow asking to be sent to the front to fight. Witnessing firsthand the death and destruction caused by the Germans in her town, Popova wanted to do what she could to rid the invaders from her country. "When the German planes flew over us we could see the smiling faces of the Nazi pilots while they shot into the crowds, gunning down the women and children fleeing to the east with their bicycles, cribs, bundles on their backs," she remembered. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing."²⁴ During the war, Popova's family home became a Gestapo police station, where Soviet citizens were tortured. "It was like a terrible storm had invaded our country," she said. "The war changed our lives forever."²⁵

The Soviet women pilots who volunteered for combat service were individuals who shared an adventurous spirit and who were not afraid to stray from the traditional views held of women during that time. Something inside of them yearned to explore and to be free, and this sensation often led them to aviation. Popova, who was one of the first women pilots to join Raskova's regiments, learned to parachute when she was only a teenager. "I was very lively, energetic, wild kind of person. I loved to tango, foxtrot, but I was bored. I wanted something different. Most of the girls I knew didn't want to learn

²⁴ Saywell, *Women in War*, 137-138.

²⁵ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 80.

to fly. They were frightened, especially of jumping. I don't know why, but it never frightened me.”²⁶

Like the WASPs, many of the Soviet women flyers dreamed from a very young age of becoming pilots. The possibility of flying high above the clouds was often a welcome escape from their humdrum existences in small towns. Some women lived near airports or had an opportunity to see airplanes up close when an air show came to their city. The destiny of famous pilot Polina Osipenko, who would accompany Raskova on the historic *Rodina* flight in 1938, was changed forever in 1930 when two sport aircraft landed in a field on the outskirts of her village. Along with the rest of her town, she went to take a look at the airplane, an unusual sight in her village located on the shore of the Azov Sea. She spoke with the pilots, one of whom happened to be a woman. The experience made a strong impression on the twenty-three-year-old, and Osipenko was soon making inquiries about admission to flying schools.²⁷ Yevgeniya Zhigulenko, who would later become a flight commander for the 46th Regiment, exhibited an early love for adventure and outdoor sports as a youth, developing a passion for parachute jumping. After learning of the flights of famous airwomen Grizodubova, Osipenko and Raskova on the radio, Zhigulenko decided that her future lay in aviation.

Inspired by patriotism, Soviet and American women pilots, like many women during World War II, eagerly volunteered to do their part to help in the war effort. Witnessing firsthand the scourge of fascism at their doorstep, the Soviet airwomen

²⁶ Saywell, *Women in War*, 137.

²⁷ Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, 12.

answered the call to defend their Motherland in a way that would have a quantitative impact on the war. As thousands of their countrymen and women were forced to submit to German forces, the female flyers avenged their deaths in the skies above the Eastern Front. Unlike the WASPs, who had a non-combat role in the war, their Russian counterparts were in a unique position to render death to the enemy. The young women, mostly in their early twenties, fought not only for the preservation of their homeland, but also for their place in it. Combining an adventurous spirit and a forceful determination, the women pilots of both countries were resolved not only to help bring about an Allied victory, but to prove to their countries that they could be counted on to perform their duty in one of modern history's greatest conflicts.

CHAPTER 4

GENDER ISSUES

The American and Russian women pilots were well aware from the very beginning of their involvement in the war that they would be continuously tested and scrutinized by the male pilots and aircrews they came in contact with on the air bases. Most men were not comfortable with the idea of female pilots, and many flatly refused to fly in an airplane piloted by a woman. Flying – especially military flying – was considered strictly men's domain at the time, and the airwomen were forced to endure discrimination and the sexist attitudes directed at them in their effort to convince men that they too could successfully fly military aircraft. In the end, both groups of female pilots earned the respect of male aircrews. It would take, however, the hard work and dedication of the women flyers to overcome the prejudices against them. The excellent flight record of the WASPs and Soviet women pilots would prove, not only to their male counterparts, but also to the world, that women had successfully passed the experiment with flying colors. The pilots' contributions helped to overcome the doubts of many cynics who did not see any value in utilizing women aviators in the war.

From its very inception, gender was the defining point of the WASP program. Women accepted into WASP training already had to be proven flyers with pilot licenses and seventy-five hours of flight time (later reduced to thirty-five), while male trainees did not have to have pilot licenses or any flight experience whatsoever to be accepted into the USAAF's pilot training program. The Army Air Forces also treated the administration of the WASP program differently. The details of the women pilots' training program

remained a closely guarded secret, and since the WASPs' public relations plan discouraged media contact, as a result, the media, the public, and Congress knew little of their accomplishments during the war. America's limited knowledge of the women pilots and their successful wartime missions would prove to be a damaging factor in the WASPs' failed attempt to militarize in 1944.

Although the women pilots were confident in their flying abilities, they recognized that their gender would be challenged in ways that could be both humiliating and invasive. In March 1943, the Air Transport Command ordered its women pilots grounded for the week they were menstruating. The 1942 Civil Aeronautics Administration *Handbook for Medical Examiners*, which directed the doctors who conducted physicals required for a student pilot to solo, stated: "A history should be obtained of any menstrual abnormalities, pregnancies and miscarriages. All women should be cautioned that it is dangerous for them to fly within a period of three days prior to and three days after the menstrual period."¹ In a matter of weeks, it became evident that the ferrying division was not going to enforce it. None of the men in high command were particularly anxious to monitor women pilots in this way, so the regulation was formally dropped. According to author Sally Van Wagenen Keil, whatever fears the ATC may have had about the dangers of women flying while menstruating, proved unfounded. The WAFS had flown almost daily from December through March without a single accident, not even a minor mishap.²

¹ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 129.

² Ibid.

By the time the WASPs graduated and were sent to their respective air bases for duty, they quickly became accustomed to the dumbfounded and unbelieving reactions they received from male pilots and air personnel. As the following story recounted by WASP Carole Fillmore illustrates, many people were not even aware of the women pilots' existence. The women's presence in the air oftentimes took the men in the control tower completely by surprise.

On her way to Newark to deliver a P-51 Mustang, Carole Fillmore flew from Long Beach to Athens, Georgia, where she ran out of daylight. She tuned in the Athens tower and called for landing instructions, but no one answered. She called the tower again but still no response. In minutes she was directly over the field. She began to circle, and asked for a radio check. Suddenly an exasperated voice could be heard in her earphones: "Will the woman who is calling please stay off the air, we're trying to bring in a P-51." Fillmore looked around in the growing dusk for the other Mustang. Seeing none, she called in again for landing clearance. "Will the lady who's trying to get in, please stay off the air!" shouted the tower. "We are trying to make contact with the P-51!" Fillmore was beginning to feel weary from her long day in the air, and her patience was running out. Finally, she pressed the button on the stick activating her throat mike. "For your information, the lady who is on the air is in the P-51," she said, and without waiting for an answer, turned on final approach and headed straight down the runway at 120 miles an hour. The radio suddenly came alive. "Yeah, man, I hear you, I hear you,

did you see the light? You're coming in fine, just great." Fillmore made a perfect landing. "Aw, that was beautiful," the startled man in the tower called out.³

Sometimes the men's ignorance of the WASPs resulted in hilarious encounters with the opposite sex, as Teresa James soon discovered after being transferred to Camp Davis in North Carolina, a mixed-gender air base. James was at the officers' club one night where a party was going on, and she found herself at a table with some P-47 pilots who were getting ready to go overseas:

I was dancing with this guy and he was telling me all this air crap – blab, blab, blab – you know, the "I'm going away to war so can't we get together kind of thing" – the old story . . . and I said what kind of airplane is it? And he went on to beguile me – how it was a big engine and "do you know what could happen to me if the engine quit on take off?" The next morning in operations I'm in my flight suit writing up the manifest and that guy did a double take [when he saw me], I thought he was going to drop dead. After all these stories he was telling me about the P-47 and he had no idea I was a P-47 pilot!⁴

WASPs were generally accepted by the young air force officers who were close to the women's own ages, but there were exceptions as Marion Stegeman Hodgson found out as soon as she arrived in Texas for training. In her account of her WASP years, she remembered the comments made by a particular male officer in Sweetwater, while waiting for the bus that would take her and her fellow trainees to Avenger Field.

While we milled around the lobby that morning, noisily waiting for our ride, two lieutenants strutted through the room pretending to ignore us as they wound their way toward the drugstore that adjoined the lobby. Just as they passed behind me, I heard one of them snort, "More women pilots! I'd like to give a U to every damn one I ride with. I'm putting in for a transfer."⁵

³ Ibid., 257.

⁴ *Fly Girls*.

⁵ Hodgson, *Winning My Wings*, 24.

The lieutenant was a check pilot, and the “U” he was referring to stood for “Unsatisfactory.” If women pilots had proved themselves to USAAF leaders, men at lower levels of authority, especially the older male personnel, did not always accept them. WASP “Kaddy” Landry recalled the hostile reception she received at an air base by a commander who had no tolerance for women flyers. “When we got to the tow target squadron at Biggs, the commanding officer was horrified. I guess he didn’t know we were coming. He not only didn’t want us to do anything for him, he didn’t want to do anything for us. He wouldn’t see about getting us proper quarters or anything.”⁶ According to Landry, the officer was eventually transferred to another base.

Given the fact that women were more the exception than the rule in military aviation during the war, air bases, especially the operations center, were not equipped with women’s facilities. A WASP, after landing at an air base after a long day of flying, would find herself in the embarrassing position of asking a man to check if the “coast was clear” so she could use the men’s bathroom. In an interview with the author, WASP Jean Downey Harman remembered such an experience: “In those days operations didn’t have men’s and women’s restrooms. The sign said men’s room, so I asked the guy if he would stand by for me while I went in and used it. He said, “Oh you’re doing a man’s job, you can go in there and be a man.”⁷ Despite the harsh comment made to her, according to

⁶ Callander, “The WASPs,” 6.

⁷ Jean Downey Harman, interview by author, 24 August 2001.

Harman, she and her fellow WASPs generally shrugged off the men's rude remarks.

"We just laughed at it – we thought it was terribly funny," she said.⁸

Incidentally, WASPs did not have a "relief tube" to use inside their planes if they had to use the toilet while flying as the male pilots did. "You just had to control your bladder by not drinking too many liquids before a flight,"⁹ recalled B.J. Williams. The women pilots hoped they could land and get to a bathroom fast enough. It proved more of a challenge on the cross-country trips.

Jo Wallace Orr got a little more than she bargained for when she delivered a B-25 to Dorval Field in Montreal as she described in a 1995 interview in the *Saturday Evening Post*. While checking in her aircraft, the clerk, busy checking papers, perfunctorily pushed a kit across the counter to her. Back at the hotel, Orr opened it and discovered condoms – something she confessed she had never seen before. On her next trip, Orr was once again handed the kit. This time she loudly cleared her throat and immediately got the attention of the very embarrassed soldier. "He just about died," she said.¹⁰

Orr was not alone in her embarrassing encounter with prophylactics. Most all of the WASPs who wrote about their experiences after the war managed to recall at least one humorous tale that was unique to their gender. Marion Schorr Brown did not forget one particular winter ride to El Paso when she was flying with two male wingmen whom she was evaluating. In the winter months, according to Brown, the WASPs would wear

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 52.

¹⁰ Bollow, "Remembering the WASPs," 60.

men's long underwear to fly in. As they approached the southern states, the weather would become warmer and it was customary for the women to discard layers of their clothing to keep cool. As Brown and her two wingmen approached the air base, she reached behind her to put her shirt on, and to her horror it was not there. Her plane had two cockpits, and it had apparently fallen into the second cockpit, which was impossible for her to access while she was in flight. Brown tried motioning to the two male pilots on either side of her to let her land before they did but they did not understand her, and were on the ground in no time, she recalled.

So I'm poking around out there and I think, what the heck am I going to do? And then I landed and right away they sent a jeep . . . follow me, you know? And the jeep would go that way and I would go the other way. And he's wondering what's the matter? She must be having problems. We had no radio communications so I take the farthest looking ramp I could find, taxi out that way. The jeep follows me thinking I got trouble. I have problems! So I get there and they're ready to jump up on the wing when I stop. When I opened the cockpit and canopy I held up a map in front of me and I said, just go away! I can taxi. I know how to get back to the ramp. "No ma'am, we'll help you," he said. So there was nothing I could do, he's up on the wing now. So I tell him, "will you get my shirt in the backseat and then go away for a minute?" I imagine they laughed about that one for a very long time.¹¹

For many women pilots, gender was not something they believed needed to be overcome in order for them to gain respect in the field of aviation. It was no surprise that Jacqueline Cochran, who succeeded in setting up a profitable cosmetics company while at the same time setting world aviation records, took particular pleasure in her femininity. Cochran recalled later in her second autobiography:

¹¹ Marion Schorr Brown, *Women Airforce Service Pilots: An Oral History*. (Denton, Texas: Texas Woman's University Archives, The Woman's Collection, 2002), 36.

I'm feminine but I can't say that I ever was a feminist. I remember when I crash-landed at Bucharest during that London race after hours of hard flying without having any food or water and being nearly chilled to the marrow with cold. I refused to get out of the plane until I had removed my flying suit and used my cosmetic kit. That was feminine and it was natural for me. It gave me the pick-up I needed and I wasn't ashamed to do it. I didn't want to be a man. I just wanted to fly. This doesn't mean that I'm not extremely proud of what women have been able to do in aviation. Women are just as capable as men in the air. Sometimes they are more capable, in fact. But I do believe that women, especially women like me, are many-sided creatures. As the poets might say, we're diamonds with many facets.¹²

Even though Jacqueline Cochran strictly forbade the WASPs from dating male pilots, relationships nonetheless developed between the men and women, and after the war many of the WASPs went on to marry their flight instructors or male pilots with whom they had been stationed. It was not unusual for the airwomen to apply makeup and check their hair when making their approach to land at mixed-gender airfields. The WASPs were serious pilots, but they were also young, spirited, and not above looking attractive to the opposite sex.

Florene Miller Watson, who was among the first WAFS, gained a reputation as an excellent navigator with a penchant for wanting to look her best. "Guys would want to follow me too, and I'd say, 'I don't care who follows me, but pay attention and don't you all be dumb and sit on your map and not know where you are,'" she recalled years later. Navigation was tricky business in those days with often only a compass, a map, and a watch. "Guys who knew me would say, 'When she gets her lipstick and comb out, you know we're getting close.'" Guys kidded me a lot about that. I'd be bouncing all over the

¹² Cochran and Brinley, *Jackie Cochran*, 20.

sky trying to get my hair done and my lipstick on and get myself organized for my landing.”¹³

The clothing and makeup worn by the female pilots, as well as their general appearance, intrigued the public. Decades before when Amelia Earhart ventured to capitalize on her fame by producing a line of sportswear, the press could not resist commenting. What the well-dressed male aviator might choose to wear never seemed to attract the attention of the media the same way as the women flyers' clothing.

The WASPs were no exception, and the pilots received an extensive photo spread in *Life* magazine on July 19, 1943. The article acknowledged the young airwomen's patriotism and dedication. However, as Luanne C. Lea argued:

The *Life* article projects a female stereotype who is especially concerned with her appearance. [It] applies that the major problems in flight training are unattractive coveralls and varieties of headgear that will control but not disrupt hairdos as, “feminine locks constantly creep into girl fliers' eyes.”¹⁴

The article concludes opposite a full-page photograph of the WASPs sunbathing outside their barracks: “That flying agrees with them anyone can see as Uncle Sam's suntanned girl pilots march along at Avenger Field, lustily singing the Air Corps' ‘Off we go into the wild blue yonder, climbing high into the sun!’”¹⁵ This depiction of the WASPs was consistent with the representation of women in the 1940s. In newsreels and magazine articles of the day, women were routinely referred to as “girls” or “gals.” Even

¹³ Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 57.

¹⁴ Luanne C. Lea, “Women, Aviation and the Media,” *Women in Aviation* 3 (January-February 1992): 3.

¹⁵ “Girl Pilots: Air Force Trains Them at Avenger Field, Texas,” *Life*, 19 July 1943, 80.

though men in uniform were sometimes called “boys,” the reference to women as “gals” was often a subtle way to lower the status of women. Newspaper editors were convinced that the American public was more interested in learning about what women were wearing and how they looked, than what they were doing or saying.

In 1944 Hollywood released a movie entitled *Ladies Courageous* based on the WASPs. Directed by John Rawlins, the black and white film starred Loretta Young, Geraldine Fitzgerald and Diana Barrymore. Unfortunately for the female flyers, the movie capitalized on traditional and unflattering myths about women, instead of portraying the pilots as they really were. In his book *Heroes Without Legacy: American Airwomen, 1912-1944*, Dean Jaros described the way in which the WASPs were represented in the film: “Hysterical outbursts in the face of danger, competition for the attention of men, foolish flying errors, and suicide attempts are the order of the day.”¹⁶ The real-life WASPs distanced themselves as far away from the movie as they could. “It was horrible,” Caro Bayley Bosca decided when she saw the movie at a theater near her base. “I was never so embarrassed in my life ... everybody here knew it was rotten and sympathized with us.”¹⁷ Overcoming prejudices in their day-to-day flying jobs was challenging enough; they did not need any help from Hollywood. Unfortunately for the women pilots, however, the movie was released at the same time Congress was considering the WASP militarization bill in June 1944. The film’s poor portrayal of the female flyers may have helped turn the congressmen against the WASPs.

¹⁶ Dean Jaros, *Heroes Without Legacy: American Airwomen, 1912-1944*. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1993), 106.

¹⁷ Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 77.

In the beginning of the war, the Soviet women pilots experienced the same discrimination from their male colleagues as the WASPs, despite the Soviet propaganda that advocated women's equality. With the intensity and innate hardships that came with fighting at the front, the Russian pilots quickly earned the respect of the men they flew with, even those who questioned women's participation in the war and their ability to stand up to the pressures of combat. Olga Sholokhova, a pilot with the 125th Regiment, remembered the enthusiastic reception she received by French male pilots when she was forced to make an emergency landing during a snowstorm in her Pe-2 dive bomber at their air base. As the Frenchmen rushed to greet the pilot who had made a perfect landing in such poor visibility, they were shocked to find themselves face-to-face with Olga and her copilot Valya Volkova. "And how surprised we were when we saw that the pilots were two charming young girls," recalled the colonel of the air squadron. "For the first time, we French pilots were able to speak on the subject of flying with beautiful ladies in a time of war."¹⁸ The French pilots lavished praises on the Russian airwomen. "If we could pick all the flowers in the world and lay them before your feet, we still would not be able to express our delight to Soviet women pilots,"¹⁹ they said. In 1960 a reunion took place between the former pilots of the "Normandie-Niemen" Regiment, and the women veterans in Moscow's House of Friendship. "Fraternal greetings to my comrades-in-arms, young Soviet airwomen, who proved themselves men's equals in

¹⁸ *Zhenshchiny na za Shchite Otechestva 1941-1945 [Women in Defense of the Fatherland 1941-1945]*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Russian Committee of Veterans of the War, 2000), 188-189.

¹⁹ Ibid.

valour while fighting against the common enemy,” read an inscription by French pilot Jacques André, who during the war was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.²⁰

The Russian women pilots shared pride in their wartime accomplishments. Not only were they pleased with their individual achievements in combat, but they were also proud of their country which afforded them this historic opportunity. Navigator Yevgeniya Gurulyeva-Smirnova recalled her satisfaction in an interview with Anne Noggle in 1990:

No other country in the world let women fly combat, but Stalin proclaimed that our women could do everything, could withstand anything! It was a kind of propaganda to show that Soviet women were equal to men and could fulfill any task, to show how mighty and strong we were. Women could not only bring babies into being but could build hydroelectric plants, fly aircraft, and destroy the enemy. Even if Stalin hadn't let the girls fly we would have volunteered by the thousands for the army.²¹

According to Reina Pennington, available Soviet sources indicate little or no difference in the numbers and types of missions flown by the women's aviation regiments and other Soviet Air Force regiments. Chief of Staff of the 46th Regiment Irina Rakobolskaia commented, “Nobody made any allowances for our youth or sex. They demanded from us nothing less than from a man's regiment.”²² Vladimir Lavrinenkov,

²⁰ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 109.

²¹ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 111.

²² Reina Pennington, “‘Do Not Speak of the Services You Rendered’: Women Veterans of Aviation in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1996): 120-151; reprinted in *A Soldier and A Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military*, ed. Gerald J. DeGroot and Corinna Peniston-Bird. (London: Longman, 2000), 156.

General-Colonel of Aviation, confirmed that the women flew the same types of missions and performed as well as the men:

The women pilots served at the airfield on an equal footing with the men. And they even fought no worse than the men . . . It wasn't easy for the girls at the front. Especially the women fighter-pilots: air combat demanded from them unusual physical strength and endurance. And the fact that the girls without complaining bore all the difficulties is a credit to them, and evoked tremendous respect from those around them.²³

Major Valentin Markov, who replaced Marina Raskova upon her death as commander of the 587th in 1943, also stated that the women's regiments were treated the same as male regiments, and given the same types of combat assignments. He admitted after the war, "There were times, though, when I wished the command would remember that they were women and not throw them into the inferno of fighting."²⁴ Markov had large shoes to fill when he was asked to replace the much beloved Raskova. Initially disliked by the women pilots who resented his strict discipline, they grew to admire him and the feelings became mutual.

The women in my regiment were 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. If I compare my experience of commanding the male and female regiments, to some extent at the end of the war it was easier for me to command the female regiment. They had the strong spirit of a collective unit.²⁵

There were some differences, however, in how male flight instructors treated their female students. Not accustomed to working with women, many of them had a difficult

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 105.

time adjusting. Instructor G.N. Meniailenko recalled that the men had trouble controlling their language in front of the women. When the male students would make a mistake, he said, "We swore at them on the ground and sometimes in the air as well. But it was forbidden to do anything like that while instructing the pilots of Marina Raskova's regiment. When it happened, they were offended and even cried . . . we had to rein ourselves in." ²⁶

The physical demands placed on the women were no different than the male pilots at the front, but the constant strain of nerves and lack of sleep took their toll on each of them. Some women developed temporary paralysis from the stress. Pilot Raisa Zhitova-Yushina lost the feeling in both her legs on her final combat mission in 1945 [she made 535 during the war] after experiencing paralysis many times due to this nerve problem. Many of the airwomen, especially mechanics, worried that the heavy work they had done in the war would make them incapable of bearing children. The mechanics, who rarely received the glory in battle as the pilots did, had an especially physically demanding job that did not take into consideration their gender. Senior mechanic Nina Karasyova-Buzina recalled the job she did in the war:

This work that we did was not really women's work, because of the weight of the bombs that we manually attached to the aircraft . . . the bombs weighed 25, 32, or 100 kilos each . . . some nights we lifted 3,000 kilos of bombs. Three of us lifted the bombs, working together. We did our work at night and were not allowed to have any light to work by. So we worked blind, fumbling in darkness for the proper place to attach the bombs . . . we worked in mud, frost, sleet, and water, and we were very precise in fixing the bombs. We had to work barehanded so that we could feel what we were doing. ²⁷

²⁶ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 44.

²⁷ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 86.

Sleeplessness was another problem that plagued the pilots, during as well as after, the war. Serafima Amosova-Taranenko remembered having to get by on only a few hours of sleep a day when she flew night missions in the 46th Regiment:

After the war we had a lot of headaches, could not relax, and had very hard problems with our sleeping, because for nearly three years we turned over the day and night. During daytime we could sleep for only about four hours and that is not enough. Then, with training and briefing, there were a lot of sleepless nights. For the first year after the war everyone had problems with sleeping, and I know there were no sleeping pills. I couldn't sleep for at least three months.²⁸

The airwomen were conscious of the particular dangers they faced being female pilots flying over enemy territory. If they were shot down and captured by German troops, they thought they would be tortured. Both pilot and navigator made a pact that if they were to find themselves in enemy territory they would shoot themselves in the head instead of risking capture. Many of the women feared imprisonment more than death. "I knew capture would mean rape and torture," remarked Nadezhda Popova in an interview. "That frightened me more than anything. We carried guns and knew if we were shot down over enemy territory to keep one bullet for ourselves."²⁹ Klavdia Deryabina also remembered the arrangement she had made with her co-pilot. "My co-pilot and I had agreed we'd never land on enemy territory," she said. "We decided better to crash the

²⁸ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 47.

²⁹ Saywell, *Women in War*, 144.

plane than be taken prisoner. A lot of us took that decision. You wouldn't want to be a 'Night Witch' in captivity. We'd have been doomed to torture."³⁰

Perhaps in light of this decision, there were few Russian airwomen who fell into the hands of the Germans. Pilot Anna Timofeeva-Egorova was one of the few to survive her incarceration. On her 277th mission, Egorova was shot down and captured by the enemy. After sustaining extensive injuries to her legs, back and head, as well as burns to her body, she was sent to the camps for five months before being liberated by Soviet troops in January 1945. It is not known if she was tortured by the Germans upon capture, but one can only imagine what a curiosity a Soviet woman pilot would be to the Germans who were not accustomed to seeing women engaged in aerial combat.³¹

For some of the women, the atrocities of war did not harden them, but instead gave them a deeper appreciation for life. "Was the war a woman's business? Of course not," said Maria Smirnova, a commander of the 46th Regiment.

There is an opinion about women in combat that a woman stops being a woman after bombing, destroying, and killing; that she becomes crude and tough. This is not true; we all remained kind, compassionate, and loving. We became even more womanly, more caring of our children, our parents, and the land that has nourished us.³²

It was Nadezhda Popova's opinion that the women pilots' wartime missions transcended gender. Instead of the deaths and killings they experienced making them

³⁰ Robyn Dixon, "Women of War: 'Night Witches' Recall Fighting Nazi Invaders With Suicidal Courage," *Los Angeles Times* (20 May 2001): 4AA.

³¹ For a more detailed account of Anna Timofeeva-Egorova's combat experience in the war, see Anna Timofeeva-Egorova, "Derzhis' Sestrenka!" [*Hold Fast, Sister!*] *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* (USSR) 3 (1983): 68-74.

³² Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 37.

cold and unfeeling as many believed, she said she ultimately felt that it helped to make the women who shared in the experience, more understanding toward one another. She explained:

I don't think you can separate men from women in this situation. War does not spare anyone; it doesn't distinguish between the sexes, or the young from the old. It was a who-will-win situation. They were destroying us and we were destroying them. There was no choice involved. That is the logic of war: it is the life or death, victory or be vanquished. I killed many men, but I stayed alive. I was bombing the enemy – the target – just some lights on the earth below. War requires the ability to kill, among other skills. But I don't think you should equate killing with cruelty. I think the risks we took and the sacrifices we made for each other made us kinder rather than cruel.³³

It is interesting to note that after the war, despite their impressive record in aerial combat, the majority of women veterans interviewed said they did not think women should participate in combat. It was clear that the women were proud of their achievements, but they believed women should only serve in combat if their country was threatened by a national emergency as it was in the Great Patriotic War. Many veterans also questioned their countrywomen who wished to fly military aircraft in peacetime. It was not that the women were adopting an anti-feminist stance necessarily, but instead were reflecting the traditionalist views they had always held. Navigator Alexandra Akimova explained in Anne Noggle's book why she believed combat was against a woman's nature:

The very nature of a woman rejects the idea of fighting. A woman is born to give birth to children, to nurture. Flying combat missions is against our nature; only the tragedy of our country made us join the army, to help our country, to help our people ... at the cornerstones of our history, women were together with their men

³³ Saywell, *Women in War*, 149.

– they stood beside their men. To be in the army in crucial periods is one thing, but to want to be in the military is not quite natural for a woman.³⁴

Despite the harsh conditions at the front and the masculine nature of their jobs, the airwomen did their best to maintain their femininity. Fighter pilot Lilya Litvyak reportedly decorated the inside of her cockpit with wildflowers, and fashioned a colorful neck scarf from parachute material. Like the WASPs, many of the Russian women pilots were stationed at mixed air bases, and relationships naturally developed between the young people. “We always tried to look good,” said Nadezhda Popova. “We wore a little make-up even if it was forbidden. You only have your youth once. Ours came during the war, but still, we were not going to miss it.”³⁵ A famous photograph taken by Khaldei of Popova and some of the women in her regiment shows the young Nadya primping for the camera before the attack at Novorossisk in September 1943. Pilot Yevgeniya Zhigulenko recounted a romantic view of herself as a young woman pilot preparing for a possible encounter with a potential suitor from a male airbase:

But life remains life and we, as military pilots, still remained young girls. We dreamed of our grooms, marriages, children, and a future happy, peaceful life. We thought to meet our future mates at the front. But our 46th Regiment was unique, for it was purely female. There wasn’t even a shabby male mechanic to rest a glance on. Nevertheless, after a night of combat we never forgot to curl our hair. Some girls thought it unpatriotic to look unattractive. I argued that we should. I said, “Imagine that I have a forced landing at a male fighter airdrome. Soldiers are rushing to my aircraft because they know that the crew is female. I, absolutely dashing, slide out of the cockpit and take off my helmet, and my golden, curly hair streams down my shoulders. Everyone is awed by my dazzling beauty. They all desperately fall in love with me.”³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 94.

³⁵ Saywell, *Women in War*, 145.

³⁶ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 56.

Despite the frequency of male-female relationships at the front, sex was another matter entirely, according to many of the airwomen who were interviewed after the war. Author Shelley Saywell spoke to an unidentified woman veteran in her book *Women in War* who commented on the sex lives of young Russian soldiers:

There were certainly a lot of front-line love affairs, but obviously it was difficult to have sex. To do so you need the time and the place, and during the war we seldom had either. There was absolutely no privacy . . . the conditions were hardly conducive to sex anyway. We were filthy, exhausted and hungry. We were just trying to survive. But there were a lot of cases when married men fell in love with girls at the front and never returned to their families afterwards. So we weren't entirely popular with everyone when the war ended.³⁷

In contrast to the WASPs, the Soviet airwomen received very little media attention during the war. The "Night Witches" of the 46th Regiment got the most attention, probably due to the fact that they were the USSR's first all-female air regiment, and consequently, were viewed as the most vulnerable. The pilots of the 46th flew mostly the outdated wooden biplane, the Po-2, while the other regiments flew modern fighters and bombers. According to Reina Pennington, men also flew the Po-2 into combat, but were not referred to in print as "Eaglets" as the women flyers were. Instead, the male pilots were described in magazine articles as "Eagles" or "Falcons." Pennington points out that the frequent use of the term "girl-pilots" (*devushki-letchiki*) further supports the idea that the women pilots were not regarded on equal terms with the men as Soviet propaganda preached. The Soviet male pilots were as young as the women, but the men were never described as "boy-pilots."³⁸ Even though the 46th received the most attention

³⁷ Saywell, *Women in War*, 145

³⁸ Pennington, "Do Not Speak of the Services You Rendered," 161-162.

in the Soviet press, it was not a propaganda blitz. According to Irina Rakobolskaia, the regiment's chief of staff, the first articles about the 46th actually changed their names to the masculine form. "It was like the regiment was a classified secret," she said. "Maybe they were afraid that we wouldn't be equal to the situation."³⁹ Or perhaps Stalin had a change of heart and became uncomfortable advertising the fact that Soviet women were fighting in combat at the front? Was the image of young Soviet girls dogfighting against Germany's best fighter "aces" high above the Motherland too much out of synch with Russian society's traditional views of women? There existed an obvious contradiction in the image of the "new" Soviet woman who was modern and independent, and the nurturing, domestic Russian woman who symbolized Mother Russia. The Soviet airwomen challenged both characterizations, and even after the war, proved difficult to classify by the socialist ideology professed by the USSR.

From the beginning, gender was at the very core of the Soviet women's regiments, as well as the WASP program. Despite being given the same combat assignments as male pilots during the war, the Soviet women flyers were viewed differently from their male counterparts. Partly because of the outdated planes they flew, the "Night Witches" of the USSR were seen as vulnerable. In the United States, the WASPs received attention in the media that focused on their gender. In newspaper articles, the American public read about the seemingly glamorous lives of these "girl pilots." The airwomen recognized that their gender would be challenged in the military. Most of the pilots let the disapproving comments roll off their backs, and it made them

³⁹ Pennington, "The Propaganda Factor," 26.

even more determined to prove themselves in the air where their gender was not an issue. Throughout the duration of the war, the American and Soviet women pilots earned the respect of the aircrews they flew with. But winning over their countrymen would prove more difficult as the war drew to a close.

The women aviators received unceremonious gratitude from their countries for filling a need created by the war, but history would relegate them to footnotes. More than eighty years ago American historian Henry Adams wrote in his autobiography, "The study of history is useful to the historian by teaching him his ignorance of woman; and the mass of this ignorance crushes one who is familiar enough with what are called historical sources to realize how few women have ever been known. The woman who is known only through a man is known wrong."⁴⁰ Until women in aviation are viewed without the curiosity that accompanies their involvement, their gender will continue to define their accomplishments. And this chapter in military history that has been predominantly known through men may finally be rewritten.

⁴⁰ Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel and Christine D. Worobec, ed. *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12-13.

CHAPTER 5

THE TIES THAT BIND

The severe strain that is placed on soldiers during a time of war draws them especially close to the individuals in their unit, and as a result, tight bonds of friendship often develop that last a lifetime. The WASPs and the Soviet women pilots developed intimate and long-lasting relationships with the women with whom they served in World War II. Close ties formed between the women frequently as a result of the dangers that were inherent in their jobs as military pilots. More than sixty years after the war, the veterans (many of whom are now grandmothers and great-grandmothers) keep in regular contact with each other, reminiscing about their days in the war. Anne Noggle wrote about the special bond that exists between her fellow WASPs:

I thought about how few women have had the opportunity not only to fly for our Air Force, but to be thrown together willy-nilly in training and to know the bonding that usually is associated with groups who live and work in close proximity. This sense of belonging is all the more intense when the duties involve danger and risk. That makes it so rare with women. Add to that the kind of independent women we are and you have a portrait of a Women Airforce Service Pilot.¹

Every two years the WASPs hold a reunion in a different city in the United States. In an interview with the author, WASP Jean Downey Harman commented that the reunions are special times to reconnect with one's friends and former classmates. "There was such a close bonding among classmates," she said. "When I go to a reunion, the

¹ Anne Noggle, "Return of the WASPs." *Air & Space* (June/July 1990): 87.

most important thing for me is to be with my classmates. We write each other often and e-mail," Harman said.²

Despite the non-combat status of their flying assignments in the war, the WASPs were reminded all too often of the dangerous nature of their jobs. By June 1944, twenty-three WASPs had crashed to their deaths. Most died because of mechanical failures of their aircraft and some as a result of mid-air collisions. During 1944 a WASP would be killed almost every month. Ann Baumgartner Carl recalled the news of the deaths of two trainees while at Avenger Field:

One morning we awoke to our first deaths – two women pilots and an instructor lost on a night cross-country flight. The two women, Margaret Seip and Helen Severson, were best friends of Caryl Jones in my barracks. Caryl may have learned the details, but she did not talk about it, preferring to mourn in silence while she kept busy collecting together her friends' things to send to their families. The rest of us were saddened and sobered by their loss, by their absence. It forced us to look within and face our own mortality.³

Carl said that up until that time she and her fellow pilots had focused solely on flying well and practicing those things they did not do so well, like landings, steep turns, holding altitude. They had never faced the actuality of death. "Now it suddenly hovered there in front of us," she said. "We could fail. We could die. Yet, we secretly felt 'it won't happen to me' . . . many of the women turned to their God – who for them, was indeed their 'copilot.'"⁴

² Harman, interview.

³ Carl, *A WASP Among Eagles*, 49.

⁴ Ibid.

Two trainees were killed in 44-W-1, the WASP class of Anne Noggle. She adopted a stoic view of death during those years and said it was not something she and the other women pilots dwelled on too much. She wrote in her 1990 article in *Air & Space*:

I don't remember really talking about it among ourselves; we kept busy and we knew there would be losses. I think when you are doing something where there is risk, you don't let it into your conscious mind, at least I didn't. You made a pact with yourself that it might happen but probably not to you, and you are a fatalist – or you quit flying.⁵

Due to the WASPs' civil servant and non-military status in the U.S. Army Air Forces, when one of their fellow flyers was killed, the government refused to pay for the remains to be shipped to their families for burial. Many WASPs personally contributed money to have the bodies, as well as belongings, of their classmates sent home. A number of WASPs even accompanied the coffins of their close friends on their final journey. Families of the deceased pilots were not given any insurance money, there was no flag placed on their coffin, and no gold star for their parents to hang in the window to show that their child had died in the war – all things provided for people who were officially a part of the military.

Dora Dougherty Strother said that although the deaths of her fellow WASPs was upsetting, she tried to keep in mind that people were dying every day in the war. More than 50,000 men in the Army Air Forces ultimately perished in the Second World War.⁶

⁵ Noggle, "Return of the WASPs," 84.

⁶ Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 58.

One loss was particularly hard on Strother, and she recalled in the video *Fly Girls*, the death of her friend Mabel Rawlinson at Camp Davis that she witnessed up close:

They were not able to get her out and so she burned inside her plane. The fire was intense. It was a very traumatic time for all of us here. There was an old nurse who came over to our barracks with a couple bottles of beer. She sat on the end of the barracks watching the fire, drinking her beer and singing old hymns . . . thinking the thoughts that we were all thinking.⁷

Strother, who would later become a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force, acknowledged that death, however tragic, was part of the risk they all took being military pilots. "I think when you join the military you obviously go through a mindset that you're prepared for something like this . . . but this was the first time I had seen a friend die so it was a trauma for me and I think for all of us."⁸ By the end of 1944 when the WASPs were officially disbanded, thirty-eight women pilots had died in the service of their country.

The most dangerous flying assignments given to the WASPs took place at Camp Davis in North Carolina. Here the women pilots flew missions to train antiaircraft artillery gunners. Camp Davis was a large base and the fifty-two WASPs who were assigned there were the only women working alongside thousands of men, many of whom strongly protested the arrival of the female flyers. WASP Eileen Roach discovered firsthand the dangers involved in target-towing missions. One day when Roach was halfway into her tow-target pattern at one end of the beach at about 1,500 feet, she began to see white specks zing past the nose of her plane and over the canopy. After

⁷ *Fly Girls*.

⁸ Ibid.

several rounds she realized they were tracer bullets, non-live shells shot amidst the live ammunition to show gunners where they were aiming. Then she heard cracking sounds against the metal fuselage. She quickly got on the radio and said, "Hey, I think you are hitting me!" After several resounding metallic whacks, the bombardment stopped. A gunnery officer's voice crackled over the radio. "Sure am sorry," he said. "Some gunner down here thought he was supposed to shoot at the plane up there marked with that cloth marker. We got him straightened out." Roach flew a couple more passes of the beach and then turned back toward Camp Davis. When she climbed down out of the cockpit, she noticed four bullet holes in the fuselage within inches of where her head had been.⁹

After two WASPs were killed at Camp Davis, Jacqueline Cochran flew there from Washington to investigate. The women pilots had repeatedly complained of having to fly planes that were in no condition to leave the ground. Several engines had quit in mid-air; eleven pilots had suffered forced landings. The tires on the planes, the WASPs told Cochran, were so old that in one day there were five blowouts. Only a handful of the radios actually worked. The women also complained that their male instructors did not have enough flying experience to instruct them in the dangerous business of towing targets. When the leader of the WASPs arrived at Camp Davis, she was met by a roomful of angry, frustrated, and anxious aviators, two of whom sent resignations to Cochran soon after her visit. Many of the WASPs feared for their lives. They soon learned that in order to stay alive they would have to look out for themselves. Following the fatal crashes, the WASPs routinely inspected their planes themselves.

⁹ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 227-228.

After personally investigating Betty Taylor's death at Camp Davis, Cochran left quietly for Washington without discussing her findings with any of the WASPs. What Cochran had found inside Taylor's demolished A-24 aircraft she could not make public. She feared jeopardizing her entire women's flying program if the truth became known. She would not reveal the details of the investigation even to the women pilots who were risking their lives at Camp Davis. In the gas tank of the airplane Cochran found traces of sugar. Sugar in sufficient quantities could stop an engine in seconds. She was convinced that the accident was caused by sabotage. Afraid of adverse publicity and a mutiny by the WASPs on the base that would surely take place once the truth became known, Cochran never told her group of women flyers what caused the death of Betty Taylor. From that day forward until the WASPs were demobilized, controversy would surround them at Camp Davis.¹⁰

Among the thirty-eight WASPs who were killed during the war, the body of Gertrude Tompkins Silver was never found. Thirty-three-year-old Silver took off from what is now Los Angeles International Airport on October 26, 1944 on a mission to deliver a P-51 Mustang to an air base in New Jersey. She and the aircraft she was flying were never seen or heard from again. Because her flight plan was misplaced, four days passed before anyone realized that she had not made it to Palm Springs, the first leg of her cross-country trip. Recent searches for her crash site have involved divers, sonar technology, and a sub-bottom profiler in the area off Santa Monica Bay where she is believed to have gone down. Large pieces of aluminum have been detected about fifteen

¹⁰ Ibid, 232.

feet below the ocean floor, but the volunteer search team, which includes Silver's great niece, is being forced to wait for permits before they can extricate the plane.¹¹ In the meantime, the fifty-nine-year-old mystery of what happened to WASP Gertrude Tompkins Silver remains unsolved.

The Soviet women pilots who flew combat missions throughout the war faced life and death situations on a daily basis. Death was a very real possibility, and the young women in their own way had to reconcile with it and learn to live with the fear. As a result of their perilous flying assignments, extremely close bonds of friendship formed between the women. According to Reina Pennington, the Soviets did not publish precise figures on women's wartime casualties, but according to the regimental histories compiled by the women pilots themselves after the war, it is believed that at least sixty-three women in Marina Raskova's three air regiments were killed in action. Regardless of how frequently it occurred, the death of a comrade-in-arms was something the airwomen never grew accustomed to. Nadezhda Popova remembered the constant fear she and her fellow pilots experienced during the war:

We were frightened all the time. You didn't think about it during the flight, but later. We flew each night, and all through those years never slept enough. There was an enormous strain on the nerves. I would see images of burning planes crashing with my girlfriends in them whenever I closed my eyes. I hoped that if my time came it would be an instantaneous death. The thought of being severely disfigured scared me much more. I was young and pretty, and I wanted all the things every young girl wants. I wanted to live a life I would not be ashamed of if I survived.¹²

¹¹ Norma Meyer, "Female Pilot Missing Since '44 Target of Searchers' Expedition." *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 12 August 2001: A4.

¹² Saywell, *Women in War*, 144.

The night bombing pilots of the 46th Regiment flew without parachutes so that the lightweight planes could carry an extra load – about 550 to 660 pounds of bombs per sortie. It was a precarious trade off, but one the pilots did not question. Another reason for not having parachutes may have been that the pilots flew their bombers so low to the ground to make the use of parachutes not possible. The hazards of flying at the front drew the women aviators together, and the veterans today emphasize the strong emotional bonds they experienced with their colleagues. Women in the 46th Regiment appear to have been especially close to one another. “Our regiment was very harmonious and close-knit,” wrote Polina Gelman. “We were like sisters. So we have passed through our entire lives. Right to the present we rely on one another as if we were family.”¹³ Christine White, a Russian history professor at Pennsylvania State University, drew comparisons between the Soviet women pilots and the WASPs in her introduction to Anne Noggle’s book *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. She commented about the unique relationships that developed between the women flyers:

There is also a striking degree of similarity between the two groups in the camaraderie that the women shared. There is a closeness – a community of being – that approaches the relationship of family. It is not surprising to note that both groups developed their strongest ties during periods of great stress: the WASPs during their training, and the Soviet women while in the field.¹⁴

The worst night of combat for the 46th Regiment came on July 31, 1943 when four crews (eight women) were lost to German fighters. In remembering the event, Serafima Amosova-Taranenko remarked: “You can imagine our feelings when we

¹³ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 169.

¹⁴ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 12.

returned to our quarters and saw eight beds folded, and we knew they were the beds of our friends who perished a few hours ago. It was impossible not to cry. It was a great loss and pain but none of us surrendered, and we were full of anger and decided to pay the enemy back for the loss of our friends.”¹⁵

For the women who witnessed the final moments of their friends’ lives that summer night, the horrific images remained vivid in their minds many decades after the war. Maria Smirnova recalled watching the planes “burn like sheets of paper.” “We were not equipped with parachutes at that time, so eight girls burned in the air,” she said. “It is a horrible scene when a plane is burning. First it explodes; then it burns like a torch falling apart, and you can see particles of fuselage, wings, tail, and human bodies scattered in the air.”¹⁶

Serafima Amosova-Taranenko, who was a pilot and deputy commander of the 46th Regiment, was proud of the courage and skill exhibited by the women in her unit. Every pilot understood the dangers they faced in combat she said, but it was a danger they generally kept to themselves. She recounted to Anne Noggle in her book on the Soviet women aviators:

To fly a combat mission is not a trip under the moon. Every attack, every bombing is a dance with death. In spite of this, every girl knew the danger, and none refused to fly her mission or used a pretext to avoid participating in the bombing. Our feelings were that we were doing a simple job, just a job to save our country, to liberate it from the enemy. I don’t know what was in the hearts of these girls when they were climbing into and sitting in the cockpit before their flight. I don’t know, but you could not read on their faces any fear or feeling of

¹⁵ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

danger, and they performed their duty with an open heart and very honestly and bravely.¹⁷

Over a period of time, the pilots created rituals in an attempt to deal psychologically with their stress when fellow airwomen were known missing or presumed dead. Olga Yerokhina-Averjanova, a mechanic in the 46th Regiment, remembered:

On the night of a crash, we never slept, never left the airfield. We waited until dawn, believing in miracles, asking God to save our girls, waiting for them to return. Many of them did not come back, but sometimes when the planes were missing after a mission they really did return. They were shot down and made emergency landings, returning sometimes two or three days later.¹⁸

When some members of the regiment failed to return from a nightly mission, their plates and silverware were put out for them in the mess the next morning even when it was known that they had been shot down. Their places, according to pilot Raisa Zhitova-Yushina, were set for several days in the hope that they would return. Oftentimes superstitions replaced the religious faith that was forbidden in Soviet Russia. But just as the state's propaganda that upheld the image of the "new" Soviet woman often conflicted with reality, so did the idea that religious belief did not exist among the airwomen. Judging by the interviews of the veterans, there were women in the regiments who prayed to God to keep them and their fellow flyers safe. For those who denounced religion, photographs of family members were often a replacement, brought along in the cockpit for strength and comfort.

¹⁷ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸ Ibid., 59.

When a pilot was killed, her body was buried under the airfield and a brief ceremony was held to honor her memory. The women would plant flowers in the mounds of dirt that covered their comrade's body in a loving tribute. Rows of mounds along the airfield became a familiar sight. Evgeniia "Zhenya" Rudneva, a navigator in the 46th Regiment, recorded in her diary on March 29, 1944 the burial of two pilots from her unit. "Yesterday we had weather appropriate for a funeral: it rained all day and in the evening. The girls were buried to the accompaniment of an orchestra and the salute of twenty rifles."¹⁹ Rudneva was killed a week later on April 8, 1944 on her 645th combat mission.²⁰

Every year since the end of World War II, the survivors of Marina Raskova's three air regiments have met on May 2 in a small park in front of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow to remember old times and honor their fallen comrades. Probably the most memorable reunion for the Soviet women pilots took place in May 1990 when a group of former WASPs traveled to the USSR to meet the Russian combat pilots about who they had only heard rumors during the war. The historic meeting between the world's first female military pilots was featured in a November 1990 article in *Soviet Woman*. Barbara Lazarsky, then president of the WASPs, was quoted as saying, "We are grateful

¹⁹ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 190.

²⁰ For a personal account of the 46th Regiment's wartime missions and conditions at the front, see Evgeniia Maksimova Rudneva, Irina V. Rakobolskaia, ed. *Poka stuchit serdtse: dnevnik i pis'ma geroia Sovetskogo Soiuzu Evgenii Rudnevoi* [As Long as the Heart Beats: The Diary and Letters of the Hero of the Soviet Union Evgeniia Rudneva]. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1995).

to you for having been our allies. We hope to remain friends.”²¹ WASP Marion Stegeman Hodgson recalled meeting the Soviet airwomen in her book: “The best reunion of all was when a group of us went to the USSR in May 1990 to meet Soviet women pilots, our sisters in World War II who flew combat. For us, the Cold War ended that May.”²²

WASP Anne Noggle traveled to the Soviet Union in the fall of 1990 to interview and photograph sixty-nine of the Russian women veterans. At a special banquet held in her honor, Noggle, who represented her fellow Women Airforce Service Pilots, was made an honorary member of the 125th Regiment. According to Noggle, the WASPs had often imagined how they would have fared if they had been called upon to fly in combat during the war. Noggle recorded her thoughts of her trip to meet the Russian women in the preface of her book *A Dance With Death*:

I thought then, on my way to their country, that these stories would cut across all boundaries and that our gender-relatedness was a key – our sameness as girls and women, past and present would be more significant than our differing cultural backgrounds. That proved to be true. As they told their stories, their voices and gestures spoke even before the translated words. For people held mute for almost all the years of their lives by terror and despotism, the communication of the spirit has never been silenced.²³

During her trip to the USSR to meet the Soviet women veterans, Noggle discovered that she and her fellow WASPs shared much in common with their Russian counterparts. Despite the dissimilarities in wartime flying missions, military status, and

²¹ Natalia Rybalkina, “A Visit to the ‘Night Witches,’” *Soviet Woman* (November 1990): 5.

²² Hodgson, *Winning My Wings*, 256.

²³ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, x.

political ideologies, the female flyers were connected not only by gender, but also by a fervent desire to serve their country in its hour of need. The close friendships that developed between these pilots while performing perilous airborne missions during the Second World War continue to this day.

CHAPTER 6

THE WASPS ARE DISBANDED

In 1944 as an allied victory became more certain, articles in the American media began to reflect a concern for the postwar economy and encouraged a return to prewar values, which placed women in the home rather than in factories and the military. Articles on women in the military became sharply critical as the war reached its end. No longer revered as patriotic symbols, these women were viewed as threats to men returning from overseas and a detriment to the postwar economy. Unfortunately for the WASPs, it was in this climate that they attempted to gain militarization.

From the very beginning the WASPs were told that the program would be militarized, and they performed and were evaluated as if they already were members of the armed forces. "We fully expected that we were going to be in the military when we joined," remembered WASP Marty Wyal.¹ WASPs were subject to military customs and procedures. They wore uniforms, marched, and saluted. The differences were that the female pilots did not receive the same benefits of those who were in the military, and they could quit their positions at any time. As civilians, WASPs were not entitled to the hospitalization, death, or veterans' benefits as the male pilots they served with, nor did they receive the same pay, housing, or living expenditures. In April 1944 eighty-five WASPs were sent to officer training school in Orlando, Florida, in anticipation of their

¹ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 33.

becoming Army officers.² That same spring the WASPs were issued new Santiago blue uniforms. To the women pilots, militarization seemed just around the corner.

As far back as 1942, numerous avenues were explored to militarize the WASPs. One suggestion was to place the WASPs under the control of the Women's Army (Auxiliary) Corps (WAC). Jacqueline Cochran, however, strongly disliked WAC director Oveta Culp Hobby, and she rejected the idea outright. Cochran reportedly said about Hobby: "I will not serve under a woman who doesn't know her ass from a propeller."³

It was concluded in August 1943 that the only way for the WASPs to be "brought into the U.S. Army Air Forces so as to have them comply with the requirements ... is to have separate legislation passed providing for the establishment of a new military division of the Army Air Forces."⁴ As a result, the USAAF began work on a bill to establish the women pilots as a militarized unit of the Air Forces. Despite warnings that Congress was becoming increasingly hostile to legislation of this nature, the USAAF believed the bill was the WASPs' last remaining option.

In 1944, when the USAAF brought the WASP bill before Congress, two major obstacles existed: a Congress that was concerned more with cutting military expenses than with creating new programs, and the thousands of men who wanted the flying positions then held by the WASPs. The latter would ultimately draw public attention to

² Ibid., 28.

³ *Fly Girls*.

⁴ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 42.

the actions of Congress. The male civilian pilots, who had recently been laid off and were now subject to draft into the walking Army, organized a powerful lobby against the WASP bill. The opposition led by the male pilots, teamed with the increasingly negative publicity in the media about the WASPs, ultimately led to the disbandment of the women's flying program.

As a result of the pressure applied by the male civilian pilots, the House Civil Service Investigating Committee began an inquiry into the WASP training program. The investigation was highly publicized in the media. An article in the *Washington Times Herald* distorted the facts about the WASPs, making their achievements irrelevant, and instead emphasized the women's gender:

Miss Cochran, who in peacetime was never too busy gathering up both men's and women's flying trophies to neglect her own femininity, is also determined that the women flying for the Air Transport Command shall not neglect their feminine allure. She has ordered them out of slacks and dungarees and into dresses at least four nights a week at the Sweetwater, Texas, Training Post.⁵

Newspaper accounts of the women pilots that had once been positive grew critical as opposition to the WASP bill attracted the attention of the American public. An article by the Chicago Tribune Press Service titled "Army Passes Up Jobless Pilots to Train Wasps: Prefers Women to Older, Experienced Flyers" began: "With 5,000 experienced airplane pilots looking for jobs as a result of the liquidation of the civil aeronautic commission's pilot training program, the government is training more than 1,000 young

⁵ John O'Donnell, "Capitol Stuff," *Washington Times Herald*, 31 March 1944.

women, at an estimated cost of \$6 million, as ferry pilots for the army.”⁶ Supporters of the displaced CAA male pilots were quick to emphasize the cost of the WASP program and seldom mentioned the actual wartime service carried out by the women flyers.

Articles about the proposed legislation to militarize the WASPs frequently focused more on the plight of male civilian pilots than on the WASPs. Realizing that opposition to militarizing the WASPs was largely based on the concern for the male pilots, Secretary of War Henry Stimson began to address the issue. He stated that the purpose of the legislation was not to give women special privileges, nor to prevent skilled male pilots from flying, but to allow the military to take full advantage of the wartime contribution of women pilots.⁷

Jacqueline Cochran, determined to control her WASP program that was now fighting for its very existence, forbade the women pilots from speaking with the media or publicly discussing the bill before Congress. “In the last twelve to fourteen months of our service in World War II, an edict came down from headquarters that there was to be no publicity and no media interviews or anything about the WASPs or by the WASPs,” said WASP Madge Rutherford Minton.⁸ One can only imagine the frustration the women pilots experienced reading the negative reports about them in the press and being unable to respond to them. The slander aimed at the WASPs resulted in many letters to

⁶ “Army Passes Up Jobless Pilots to Train Wasps: Prefers Women to Older, Experienced Flyers,” Chicago Tribune Press Service, 11 February 1944.

⁷ “WASPs to Be Part of Army Under War Department Plan,” Associated Press, 4 May 1944.

⁸ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 66.

Jacqueline Cochran from her airwomen who were shocked by the negative publicity campaign that was being waged against them. WASP Isabel Fenton wrote to Cochran in August 1944:

Your distress, we know, must be greater than ours, but I am writing to find out what we can do about our existing situation. There has been no favorable publicity about us at all with the possible exception of *Time* magazine's backhanded reference to the "hard working, rule abiding but expensive WASPs." We know the things printed are not true and we would like to have them refuted . . . why don't we get somebody who'll come out with the truth about us?⁹

The WASPs were accused of being excessively glamorous. When their new uniforms were issued in late spring 1944, it resulted in unfavorable media attention. A *Washington, D.C. Star* article emphasized the alleged exclusiveness of the women's uniforms:

An exclusive Fifth Avenue shop is outfitting the War Department's women flyers in snappy new military uniforms at \$505 per WASP, a Senate Military Affairs Subcommittee was told yesterday. By contrast, Mr. Morrison said, the flying instructors being thrown out of jobs by cutbacks in USAAF pilot training look a bit ragged in old khaki pants and "Woodtick" coats discarded by the CCC.¹⁰

According to information compiled by WASP Byrd Howell Granger in her book *On Final Approach: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of WWII*, each of the WASPs' Santiago blue uniforms cost the United States Government \$326.06. Additionally, the women pilots were expected to pay for the required flannel shirts, neckties, shoes, socks, stockings, handbag, underclothing, gloves, and a black and white dress, themselves,

⁹ Byrd Howell Granger, *On Final Approach: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of WWII*. (Scottsdale, Arizona: Falconer Publishing Co., 1991), 392-393.

¹⁰ "WASPs to Get Snappy Outfits Costing \$505," *Washington, D.C. Star*, 10 June 1944.

estimated at costing at least \$100.¹¹ The WASPs were proud of their uniforms, as they helped to give the women pilots the legitimacy among military personnel that they craved. The WASPs' new uniforms were the only blue uniforms worn by American servicemen and women in the war.

The year before, on September 30, 1943, Representative John Costello of California introduced the first WASP militarization bill, House Resolution 3358. It would be six months before the Committee on Military Affairs held hearings on the bill. In the meantime, Costello submitted a longer bill, House Resolution 4219. This bill was constructed similarly to the first bill, except that it provided greater detail concerning the administration of the WASP program.

On March 22, 1944, the hearing by the Committee on Military Affairs took place and lasted less than one hour with only USAAF Commanding General H.H. "Hap" Arnold testifying. Arnold reiterated that the passage of the bill was important not only so that the USAAF could expand the WASP program and eventually replace all male pilots domestically, but also to enable the USAAF to utilize more effectively WASPs who were already active.¹² That same day the committee issued a report recommending the passage of H.R. 4219. According to the report, the committee recognized the personnel shortages that warranted the expansion of the WASP program as well as the insurance and medical benefits the women pilots deserved as members of the armed forces. Two days later Senators Joseph Hill of Alabama and Harold Burton of Ohio submitted Senate Resolution

¹¹ Granger, *On Final Approach*, A-90/E.

¹² Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 80.

1810, "A bill to provide for the appointment of female pilots and aviation cadets in the Air Forces of the Army." S.R. 1810 was the Senate version of H.R. 4219 and contained the same elements as the House bill.¹³ Expectations for the passage of the bill looked promising, especially because Congress had never rejected a piece of legislation supported by the War Department or commanding generals during the war.

Between March and June 1944, however, the male civilian pilots began to receive considerable sympathetic coverage in the media. The male military pilots returning from combat overseas also wanted to guarantee their flight pay, and so they joined the civilian pilots in their attack against the WASPs. As several civil aviation organizations and veterans' associations joined their cause, they formed a formidable lobby against the women pilots. The male pilots convinced Representative Robert Ramspeck, who chaired the Committee on the Civil Service, to investigate the WASPs. The thirteen-page report that became known as the Ramspeck Report was created without any members of the investigating committee visiting the WASPs' training school at Avenger Field or any bases to which WASPs were assigned to active duty.¹⁴

Unfortunately for the airwomen, the misleading and often erroneous findings in the Ramspeck Report made their way into the nation's newspapers and magazines, and had considerable influence on the members of Congress, who would ultimately determine the fate of the female flyers. Representative James Morrison of Louisiana voiced particularly strong opposition to the WASP bill and entered the entire Ramspeck Report

¹³ Ibid., 81.

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

into the public record. Morrison used newspaper opinion pieces and editorials to bolster opposition to the bill. One article quoted by a congressman went so far as to allege that the USAAF was backing the WASP program only because Jacqueline Cochran had seduced General Arnold.

In the last week the shapely pilot has seen her coveted commission coming closer and closer . . . one of the highest placed generals, it seems gazed into her eyes, and since then has taken her cause celebre very much "to heart" . . . she's such an attractive composition of wind-blown bob, smiling eyes and outdoor skin nobody blames him.¹⁵

From a carefully guarded top-secret experiment, the WASPs had overnight become notorious in the country at large. Even some American servicemen seemed to enjoy the opportunity to harass a particular woman pilot. Having delivered a P-47 to North Carolina, WASP Jill McCormick was sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Raleigh reading while she waited for the departure of her commercial flight back to her home base in New Castle, Delaware. She was suddenly surrounded by a group of men in uniform who shouted at her, "Go back home WASP, we don't need you! You're in a crummy organization, it shouldn't even exist." Then they called her a slut.¹⁶ The WASPs were bewildered by the negative attention they were suddenly receiving. Despite the unsolicited attacks, the women knew that they had important duties to perform and continued to focus on their flying assignments.

On June 20, 1944 H.R. 4219, the Costello Bill, was introduced for consideration, and the following day debates took place on the House floor that centered primarily on

¹⁵ Congressional Record – Appendix, 17 June 1944, A3344. (Denton, Texas: Texas Woman's University Archives, The Woman's Collection).

¹⁶ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 303.

the dilemma of the male civilian pilots and not on the WASPs. The original purpose for the bill, to militarize the WASPs, seemed to be lost now in Congress's desire to placate the demands of the CAA pilots. Supporters of the WASPs now sensed that their battle was lost. A vote on June 21, 1944 quickly confirmed their fears, and the legislation that would have militarized the women pilots and made them legitimate members of the armed forces, was effectively killed in Congress by a margin of only nineteen votes. Social pressure, as well as cultural fears released by the anticipated end of the war, attributed to the defeat of the WASP bill. It did not help matters either that many of the congressmen were veterans themselves who identified with the plight of the displaced male pilots.

On June 26, 1944, upon his return from Europe after directing the air attacks for the D-Day invasion, General Arnold ordered that the WASP training program be discontinued as soon as those currently in classes finished. The next class of WASPs, who were scheduled to start training just four days after Arnold issued his order, were sent a telegram informing them that due to the recommendations of the House Civil Service Committee and the unfavorable action of the House of Representatives on the WASP bill, their orders to report for WASP training were cancelled.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the telegrams arrived too late for many of the trainees who had already arrived in Sweetwater, Texas. Betty Stagg Turner, who graduated in the second to last WASP class, remembered the women pilots who were forced to return home:

¹⁷ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 103.

When the girls that would have been in 45-I came in, and were told, it was terrible. Some of them had sold their homes, because they were going into the service; some of them had made arrangements for their children; and there were so many things that just broke our hearts. It was so sad for us.¹⁸

Until the WASPs were officially disbanded on December 20, 1944, they continued to receive harsh treatment in the press. In an October 1944 issue of *Contact*, a leading aviation magazine, nineteen-year-old Mary Elizabeth McConnell, who had the misfortune of having been accepted into the WASP program just as it was announced that it would be disbanded, wrote a letter to the editor in support of the WASPs. McConnell lamented the discrimination women faced in the area of aviation: "I know someday women will come into their own in the field of flying. However, it grieves me to think that even today with so much belief in 'women's equality,' so much opposition exists in the field of flying against them."¹⁹ Interestingly, the response to her letter by the magazine's editor, clearly illustrates the type of intolerance for the WASPs that continued late in the war. The editor wrote:

Opposing the WASP Training Program was a service to aviation and to our country. It just didn't make sense to have several thousand male pilots cleaning beer vats, tending bar, driving taxi cabs – yes, even several hundred of them on unemployment relief – all able, experienced pilots and at the same time be throwing away several million dollars to train young girls as pilots. Only a few ever qualified to handle big planes.²⁰

The magazine's editor went on to write: "Something else you may not know – twenty-three of these girls were killed. Something else you may not know – scores of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Voices From On High," (editorial on the WASPs) *Contact* (October 1944):16.

²⁰ Ibid.

them were on any number of occasions grounded for several days because they could not take off a grasshopper plane in a stiff wind.” In his condescending tone, he continued to discredit the WASPs, emphasizing their gender:

We do feel however, that glamour had something to do with the desire of many of them to displace these experienced men pilots. To those who are anxious to render service to their country . . . Uncle Sam is still desperately in need of nurses and cadet nurses to care for our boys who are falling in action all over the world. That is where the feminine touch is really needed – of course, there is no glamour – only downright rub and scrub work when you put on a nurse’s uniform.²¹

According to author Molly Merryman, the story of the disbandment of the WASPs is one in which ignorance and fear dominated decision-making, and in which cultural assumptions about gender had more influence than the facts surrounding the women’s actual involvement in wartime efforts.²² The issue, she points out, was clearly not about the WASPs as pilots, but about women who were going beyond culturally constructed boundaries of how women were expected to behave, and who were serving in what were perceived to be male roles. Despite the support of the War Department and the Army Air Forces, American society, as represented by Congress and the media, had determined that the war was all but over and that emphasis should now be placed on returning the country to a peacetime structure. In this ideological construction, there was no place for the WASPs because their continued existence would have symbolized a war that was not yet won, a shift in the roles allowed to women, or both.²³

²¹ Ibid.

²² Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 174.

²³ Ibid., 180.

Additionally, one cannot ignore the irony that the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the same organization that first gave so many women the opportunity to earn their wings before the war, would be the same organization that aggressively lobbied against the WASPs in 1944 and helped to take their wings away. Women flyers were not a threat, it was believed, so long as they filled a temporary void left by male pilots. Public favor turned against the WASPs when it was alleged that they would ultimately replace the men.

The WASPs were stunned and disillusioned when news reached them that they soon would be released from duty. "So we just had to go home," remembered Barbara Erickson London. The morning she left her base in Long Beach, California to go home, "there were fifty-one aircraft sitting on the runway that didn't get delivered that day." WASP Faith Buchner Richards added, "The war was still going on ... that was the thing that hurt. We couldn't contribute."²⁴

Jean Downey Harman flew only two months on active duty before the WASPs were sent home. "We were all brokenhearted," she recalled. "I don't know why we were really disbanded, but it was very disappointing. And worse than anything was just to leave us without anything, no GI Bill, no nothing."²⁵ It is interesting to note that the day after the WASP bill was defeated in Congress, on June 22, 1944, President Roosevelt signed into law the GI Bill of Rights. If the WASPs had achieved militarization, they too

²⁴ Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 78.

²⁵ Harman, interview.

would have been eligible to enjoy the benefits of this new law: life insurance, educational assistance, home mortgages and medical coverage.

It was particularly demoralizing to the women pilots that they were being deactivated at a time when their services were still needed in the war. On the day the women pilots were disbanded, hundreds of aircraft throughout the country sat on runways undelivered. WASP Jean Moore recalled:

When we were going to be sent home the pilots who had flown their missions and returned didn't want to do what we'd been doing. They wanted to fly their four hours a month and get their flight pay. They didn't want to take a BT up and test it. The day we were to leave, the twentieth of December, some depot called and said, "We've got five airplanes to be tested." We said, "Sorry, you'll have to get your little boys to do them." We were necessary . . . we were useful.²⁶

General Arnold and Jacqueline Cochran addressed more than one hundred WASPs on active duty who had returned to Sweetwater, Texas on December 7, 1944, exactly three years after the attack on Pearl Harbor, to attend the last WASP graduation. "The emotions of happiness and sorrow are pretty close together, and today I am experiencing them both at the same time, as well as the third emotion of pride," Cochran told the women pilots.²⁷ "What the WASPs have done is without precedent in the history of the world."²⁸ Arnold, who had led a valiant battle for the WASPs' militarization, had nothing but praise for the female flyers. "We of the Army Air Forces are proud of you; we will never forget our debt to you," Arnold told the pilots gathered at Avenger Field,

²⁶ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 135.

²⁷ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 331.

²⁸ Dora Dougherty Strother, "The WASP Training Program," *Journal of American Aviation Historical Society* 19, no. 4 (4th Quarter 1974): 306.

many of whom would never fly a single mission as a WASP. The commanding general went on to describe the merits of the WASP program:

I want to stress how valuable I believe this whole WASP program has been. If another national emergency arises – let us hope it does not, but let us this time face the possibility – if it does, we will not again look upon a women's flying organization as an experiment. We will know that they can handle our fastest fighters, our heaviest bombers; we will know that they are capable of ferrying, target towing, flying training, test flying, and the countless other activities which you have proved you can do.²⁹

After the emotionally charged graduation ceremony, the WASPs of 44-10 found themselves wandering around the airfield with nothing to do but pack their bags and prepare to return home. The following day, Colonel Roy P. Ward, Avenger Field's last commanding officer, ordered his women pilots in flying gear and assembled them on the flight line. "We're closing down the field, as you well know," he told the WASPs. "Those PTs and BTs out there have to go down to San Angelo to be stored. I have no written orders to ferry them, but you're trained ferry pilots, and you're going to have at least one flight to your credit."³⁰ It was a risky move that could have jeopardized his military career, but Colonel Ward saw in the delighted faces of the women pilots before him that he had made the right decision. Ward followed his WASPs in the official Avenger Field plane, a twin-engine transport called the *Fifinella*, with the Disney-designed female gremlin painted on its nose. An hour later all WASPs landed without incident at their destination, and Ward signed over the trainers to the operations office. The women pilots hitched a ride back to Sweetwater in the transport, and when the plane

²⁹ Tanner, "We Also Served," 47.

³⁰ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women*, 332-333.

reached Avenger Field, they did something they had always wanted to do – they buzzed the tower. This last defiant action by the WASPs came to symbolize the final flight of *Fifinella*.

Many of the WASPs hoped to continue flying in some capacity after the war, but for the majority of them, their wings had been forever clipped. Jacqueline Cochran herself was at a loss as to what the women pilots would be able to do after they no longer were flying for the military. “The future of women in aviation will not be on the airlines,” she admitted in a *New York Times* article on November 5, 1944, “but perhaps on feeder lines, in aerial photography, crop dusting and instructing.”³¹ Cochran also saw her pilots being utilized to help sell aviation to the women of America who still made up a small percentage of airlines travelers. Although still involved in her cosmetics business, Cochran was hired as a director of North East Airlines in December, to help attract more female passengers, a position similar to what was filled by Amelia Earhart fifteen years earlier at Transcontinental Air Transport. It appeared that one of the world’s most daring and accomplished female aviators was again being relegated to the airlines’ marketing department.

The airlines did offer jobs to the former WASPs, but they were usually recruited as stewardesses. “I was as qualified as some of the guys,” recalled WASP Barbara Erickson London. “But the airlines just sent me back an application for being a stewardess.”³² WASP Jean Downey Harman applied to American Airlines after the war,

³¹ Ibid., 322.

³² Nathan, *Yankee Doodle Gals*, 78.

but was told she too would be considered only for a stewardess position. "Airlines companies were hesitant to hire young women in those days because they thought they might get engaged and then would quit their job," Harman said.³³ Not until the 1970s would small numbers of women begin to pilot planes for commercial airlines and the U.S. Air Force.

The WASPs who returned home continued their studies at university, began careers outside of aviation, married, had children, and some continued to fly recreationally throughout their lives. In 1947 when the Air Force was created as a separate branch of the armed forces, several WASPs joined the Air Force Reserves as officers. Although they were not allowed to fly, the women wanted to continue serving their country in the military. According to WASP Anne Noggle, in 1949 the Air Force offered commissions to all former WASPs, and one hundred fifteen women accepted the commissions, and twenty-five of them went on to become career officers.³⁴ Women would have to wait another thirty years before they would again be allowed in the cockpits of military aircraft. WASP Ruth Woods, who continued flying after the war, recognized the important precedent she and her fellow female flyers set for women aviators of today:

We opened the door for the present women in the Air Force and other women in aviation. We opened that door so that they would be accepted and not sneered at. We laid the groundwork. We followed behind people like Amelia Earhart, who

³³ Harman, interview.

³⁴ Noggle, *For God, Country, And the Thrill of It*, 14.

were loners. We came in as a body, a group – any group can exert more pressure than a single individual. I personally feel that was our greatest accomplishment.³⁵

³⁵ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 136.

CHAPTER 7

DEMOBILIZATION OF THE SOVIET AIRWOMEN

On May 9, 1945 Germany surrendered, signaling the end of the war in Europe. At ten past one in the morning the voice of Radio Moscow's chief announcer, Yuri Levitan, announced: "Attention, this is Moscow. Germany has capitulated . . . this day, in honor of the victorious Great Patriotic War, is to be a national holiday, a festival of victory." Stalin spoke briefly to the jubilant crowds that evening: "My dear fellow countrymen and women. I am proud today to call you my comrades. Your courage has defeated the Nazis. The war is over . . . now we shall build a Russia fit for heroes and heroines."¹

Not long after the war ended, a decree was issued demobilizing all Soviet women from military service except for a few specialists.² For the most part, women were rapidly discharged from the Soviet military after the war, and were subsequently banned from service academies, which was virtually the only way to become a military pilot and/or officer in the USSR. As is often the case when peace is established after a period of national upheaval and crisis, there was a tendency to revert to old hierarchies. There was no change in the cultural perception that, except during emergencies, war (and therefore military service) was not women's work.

¹ Vladimir Karpov, *Russia at War 1941-1945*. (New York: The Vendome Press, 1987), 230-231.

² Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War." In *Female Soldiers – Combatants or Noncombatants?: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Nancy Loring Goldman, ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1982), 78.

In July 1945 President Kalinin spoke to a group of recently demobilized women soldiers. Although he recognized their strength and bravery, he made no mention of continued military careers; his primary concern was that they find civilian jobs. His closing remarks to them were:

Equality for women has existed in our country since the very first day of the October Revolution. But you have won equality for women in yet another sphere: in the defense of your country arms in hand. You have won equal rights for women in a field in which they hitherto have not taken such a direct path. But allow me, one grown wise with years, to say to you: do not give yourself airs in your future practical work. Do not talk about the services you rendered, let others do it for you. That will be better.³

By his words, Kalinin claimed that the Soviet women veterans had achieved equal rights as soldiers in the war, implying that there would be a role for them to play in the postwar military. Yet Kalinin cautioned that the women should disregard their experiences in combat and let others [presumably men] talk about their accomplishments. It is improbable that such a speech was given to male soldiers returning from the front. Despite their impressive record in combat, the Russian women soldiers were still perceived as short-term solutions rather than full-fledged members of the male-dominated Soviet military. After the war, women were dissuaded in continuing their service in the armed forces.

There appears to have been a deliberate policy in place to downplay the role of Soviet women in combat even before the war ended. In March 1945 Olga Mishakova wrote in *Pravda*, "In the Red Army . . . women very energetically showed themselves as

³ M.I. Kalinin, *On Communist Education: Selected Speeches and Articles* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 428.

pilots, snipers, automatic gunners [etc.] . . . But they don't forget about their primary duty to nation and state, that of motherhood."⁴ No matter how outstanding a woman soldier's performance had been during the war and how badly she was needed in her civilian job, she was reminded by Soviet society that her most important place was in the home.

According to Reina Pennington, the rapid demobilization of the women pilots from military service and their virtual exclusion thereafter was largely due to pronatalist governmental policies and the need for workers in the civilian sector. The Soviet Union experienced a significant labor shortage after the war, and homes and families were turned upside down during the five-year conflict. Russia's women were now urged to return to their jobs and homes and create a stable domestic life. Even a year before the war ended, in 1944, awards were given to women who had seven or more children, in an effort to raise the birthrates and encourage adoption.⁵ The USSR, crippled by the millions of human lives lost in the war, longed for a return to the relative stability of the prewar days. Women were faced with a dual obligation. While the Soviet government emphasized that women were "first and foremost wives and mothers," they were also workers, and in late 1945 women constituted sixty-three percent of the workforce in Moscow.⁶

⁴ Reina Pennington, "The Propaganda Factor," 31.

⁵ Kirschenbaum, "Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families": Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda," 846.

⁶ Gregory Malloy Smith, "The Impact of World War II on Women, Family Life, and Mores in Moscow, 1941-1945" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1989): 333.

Most of the Soviet women veterans hoped to return to the jobs they held before the war, or continue their university education that had been interrupted. Many of the women also had a strong desire to start families, which was typical of women in their early twenties in the 1940s. The war had taken a heavy toll on the women pilots' health, and many of them who hoped to fly in civil aviation, failed the medical examination. "I had undermined my physical and mental health at the front," remembered pilot Maria Smirnova. "I was completely exhausted by the four years of war and combat."⁷

In March 1945 the regimental commander of the 46th Regiment made the decision to send two of its female pilots – Maria Smirnova and Ekaterina Riabova – to the Zhukovsky Military Aviation Academy in Moscow. Both women were recipients of the prestigious Hero of the Soviet Union medal. When Smirnova and Riabova arrived, they were called into the commanding general's office. Believing that the women's bodies were too weak to study aviation, he recommended they seek other academic pursuits:

You are real heroes of our Motherland. You have already proved what Soviet women are capable of when their help is essential. But the conditions of study in a military academy take a heavy toll on the female body. You lost a lot of strength and health in the war. We must protect you. Enroll to study in a civilian university instead.⁸

It is interesting, although not surprising, that the commanding general used the women's gender to dissuade the two pilots from entering the aviation academy that was considered male territory and off limits to them. As Smirnova confirmed above in her own words, the airwomen's health was undermined by the hardships of the war, but

⁷ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 37.

⁸ Pennington, "Do Not Speak of the Services You Rendered," 168.

despite her apparent handicap, Riabova went on to complete her undergraduate studies, travel throughout Europe and Asia on speaking engagements as well as give birth to a daughter and enroll in graduate school – only two years after the war. In light of these accomplishments, it is certain that Riabova possessed the necessary strength to have successfully completed her aviation studies at the academy.

A small number of women veterans continued flying in the Air Force for a few years after the war, despite the social pressure to quit their careers in military aviation. “My flying was the best thing I’ve had in life,” said fighter pilot Klavdia Terekhova. Antonina Bondareva-Spitsina, a bomber pilot in the 587th Regiment, remembered her flying days with affection: “I often have dreams about aircraft – of flying. It is my favorite dream.”⁹ Like the WASPs, a lot of the women pilots married male military pilots or instructors after the war, returned to their homes and started families. The female veterans who were interviewed after the war, said although they believed women to be capable of military duty, they were of the opinion that there was no reason for their service in peacetime. Performance, according to author Reina Pennington, was not the issue, but practicality. In the Soviet Union, military life is particularly arduous, and since Russian men are notorious for rarely doing housework and assisting with childcare, Soviet women found it especially difficult combining family with a military career. Irina Rakobolskaia, chief of staff for the 46th Regiment, saw other opportunities for women who wanted to continue flying after the war. “I think that there is no need for women to serve in military aviation at the present time,” she said. “Why would they want to? A

⁹ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 109.

passion to fly can be satisfied in sport aviation.”¹⁰ Rakobolskaia went on to say, “I think that during the war, when the fate of our country was being decided, the bringing in of women into aviation was justified. But in peacetime a woman can only fly for sport ... otherwise how can one combine a career with a family and with maternal happiness?”¹¹

War-weariness and the tremendous work involved in rebuilding a nation that had been devastated by war contributed to the reasons the women pilots did not actively protest their exclusion in the postwar military. Nadezhda Popova remembered the suffering that continued in the USSR even after the Nazis had vacated their country: “We came home to face all the destruction and severe food shortages,” she said. “We worked eighteen hours a day to reconstruct. Maybe that is why we didn’t have much post-combat stress – we didn’t have time to reflect on our personal experiences in the war, we were too occupied by the present.”¹²

Postwar Soviet women were encouraged to fulfill many roles in the reconstruction of their country. No longer needed for their skills as soldiers, women were now being called back into the workplace and the home. Pennington in her book *Wings, Women, and War*, summed up the three roles the Soviet women pilots were expected to play following the Second World War:

Any image of the new Soviet woman as military officer and pilot that resulted from wartime experience was far outweighed by the overwhelming official emphasis on the Soviet woman as mother, wife, and builder of society. Where the

¹⁰ Pennington, “Do Not Speak of the Services You Rendered,” 164.

¹¹ Ibid., 166.

¹² Saywell, *Women in War*, 157.

Americans had Uncle Sam, the Soviets had Mother Russia. Soviet women were constantly reminded – and many believed – that their true place was on the home front, not the battlefield.¹³

In present day Russia women are not permitted to fight in combat in the armed forces. This restriction also includes the flying of fighter aircraft. According to Jennifer G. Mathers, a lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the University of Wales, “the possibility that women soldiers could serve in combat is almost never mentioned. Combat duty is apparently so obviously not women’s work that no one bothers to discuss it.”¹⁴ Today Russian servicewomen continue to be viewed by their country as a temporary solution to a current problem and not as equal members of the armed forces.¹⁵ As an increasing number of young Russian men evade conscription in the Russian Army, the military has been forced to rely more on its female members. Only a small percentage of women, however, have managed to hold officer rank.

Tatyana Mamonova wrote about the plight of Russian servicewomen in her book *Russian Women’s Studies: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Russia*:

A woman with a great desire to participate in the military service may enlist in the army, but she will soon find that only a few units will admit her, and the best she can hope for is to be a secretary and “serve” by bringing coffee to the captains. The heroism of Soviet women in World War II, when they distinguished themselves as snipers, fliers, parachutists, is forgotten. How many of them perished in the fighting! About the only ones who are remembered at all are the nurses. But during that time Soviet women opened up their personalities to the

¹³ Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War*, 174-175.

¹⁴ Jennifer G. Mathers, “Women in the Russian Armed Forces: A Marriage of Convenience?” *Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military* 18, nos. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2000): 138.

¹⁵ Herspring, “Women in the Russian Military: A Reluctant Marriage,” 53.

significance of the world. How tragic that they were so soon closed again, even more confined.¹⁶

In light of the limited role women are permitted to play in the Russian military today, and the continued ban on women pilots in combat, the achievements of the Soviet airwomen of World War II are that much more significant. One wonders if the pilots of Marina Raskova's 46th Regiment ever considered the possibility that they would be their country's first – and perhaps last – female military pilots who would be allowed to engage in aerial combat. In the 1960s a Soviet film titled *Wings* was released with Maya Bulgakova in the starring role. Tatyana Mamonova described the movie's female protagonist: "A heroine – not a beauty – she was a wartime aviator. She had a passion for airplanes, but she was not allowed to indulge in her beloved activity. And so, one day, she took an airplane from the hangar and flew it into the sky."¹⁷

¹⁶ Tatyana Mamonova, *Russian Women's Studies: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Russia* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 150.

¹⁷ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The decade that followed World War II ushered in a robust and prosperous American economy. Even though the United States lost four million female workers in the postwar demobilization,¹ many women who wanted to continue working were able to do so, despite social pressures that encouraged them to return to the home. With the precedent the WASPs had set in the 1940s, coupled with favorable economic conditions, it was logical perhaps to presume that women in aviation would move to a new stage of becoming professional pilots. Nothing of the sort happened. The airwomen were excluded from taking part in the emerging postwar field of aviation and seemed to vanish without a trace. Only in the 1970s would women pilots begin to compete with men for professional flying positions.

Jacqueline Cochran, in contrast to the WASPs, continued to make headlines after the war. In the summer of 1945 Cochran became the Pacific correspondent for *Liberty* magazine. She witnessed the Japanese surrender in the Philippines, and she was the first American woman inside Japan following V-J Day. Cochran traveled extensively throughout Europe, Asia and Africa, and attended the Nuremberg war-crimes trials in Germany. When she returned to the United States at the end of 1945, she was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for her contributions during the war. In 1949 Cochran received the French Legion of Honor.

Cochran kept busy with her cosmetics business and began air racing, setting records again. In 1953, with test pilot and World War II "ace" Colonel Chuck Yeager as

¹ Jaros, *Heroes Without Legacy*, 119.

her coach, she became the first woman to break the sound barrier. Three years later Cochran made an unsuccessful bid for a congressional seat from California. She campaigned by piloting her own plane around the district. Before Cochran retired in 1970, her longtime ambition was realized when she was promoted to full colonel in the USAF Reserves. She continued flying for many years until a heart condition grounded her. Giving up flying was difficult for Cochran, whose competitive nature pushed her to fly faster and more technically advanced aircraft. America's most accomplished woman pilot passed away at her home in Indio, California, on August 9, 1980. The fearless record-breaking aviator, who had created the first training program for women military pilots in American history, was buried in a simple pine coffin with her childhood doll. During her memorial service three days later, several jets streaked overhead in a final – albeit unplanned – tribute to a woman who marked her achievements above the clouds. Jacqueline Cochran raised the bar for future generations of airwomen, and left an indelible imprint on the history of aviation.

After the Ferry Division's women pilots were demobilized, Nancy Love finished up her wartime service with another women's aviation first. She went on a flight around the world, during which she was at the controls at least half the way, including the leg going over the Hump – the 20,000-foot-high supply route over the Himalayas that had claimed the lives of 850 airmen during the course of World War II.² In July 1946, Nancy and her husband Robert Love, became the first couple in history to be decorated at the same time for their military service. Nancy was presented with the Air Medal for her

² Verges, *On Silver Wings*, 229.

pioneering work with the Ferry Division, and Robert was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. Love withdrew to private life, had the first of three daughters in 1947, and stayed active sailing and horseback riding. She continued flying after the war when she and her family moved to Martha's Vineyard, but according to author Marianne Verges, her flying was limited to mostly taking her children to doctor and dentist appointments off-island.³ Love passed away from cancer on October 22, 1976 in Sarasota, Florida. Despite being overshadowed by the more-visible Jacqueline Cochran, Love is considered by many to be one of the most talented women pilots in American history. Sadly, there is little information on her achievements in print or in museums, and history for the most part, has largely forgotten her.

In 1972 a thirtieth anniversary reunion was held in Sweetwater, Texas, and more than three hundred WASPs, former flight instructors and Army staff attended. Bruce Arnold, the general's son and a retired Air Force colonel, came from Washington, D.C. in place of his father who had been an important advocate for the women pilots during the war. Even Jacqueline Cochran drove into town for the occasion in a fancy mobile home. At this historic reunion the WASPs made two important decisions. The first was to promise to get together every two years. The second decision, remarkably more ambitious than the first one, was to right the wrong that had been done to them twenty-eight years earlier and pursue a new militarization bill in Congress. With the women's movement in full swing, and the offer of assistance by Bruce Arnold, who had been a

³ Ibid.

legislative liaison for the Air Force, the former WASPs believed that the timing was right for them to achieve finally their goal.

By the mid-1970s American women were signing up for the all-volunteer armed forces. For the first time in history, women were being admitted to the nation's elite service academies. In September 1976 ten women began training for the U.S. Air Force and were touted as the "first women military pilots."⁴ The WASPs, who knew better, were insulted by their country's short-term memory, and they worked even harder to bring their case to Capitol Hill and prove that they had been America's first women military pilots, and were deserving of the recognition that accompanied this achievement.

Within a few months an amendment was added to a veterans' bill on the floor of the U.S. Senate that would grant the WASPs full military status and make them eligible for veterans' benefits – thirty-two years after they had been deactivated. Senator Barry Goldwater, a former World War II Ferry Division pilot, who had been based at New Castle AAFB and had flown with the women ferry pilots, sponsored the bill. It did not take long, however, for veterans' organizations to come out against the amendment, as they did in 1944. Protective of their benefits, they argued that other groups, like the Merchant Marines and the Civil Air Patrol, who also served during the war, might make similar claims to veterans' rights. Collapsing under pressure, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee killed the proposal. Senator Goldwater and Bruce Arnold promised the WASPs they would keep up the fight and not give up the battle in Congress.

⁴ Ibid., 232.

In March 1977 the WASP bill was reintroduced. This time, every woman member of Congress cosponsored the legislation. The WASPs' cause caught the attention of the media, and all across the country WASPs circulated petitions and organized letter-writing campaigns. The former women pilots who gathered in Washington, D.C., worked hard to show members of Congress who and what they were, with scrapbooks, correspondences, photos, and official documents saved and treasured for more than thirty years.⁵

Two months later, former WASP Dora Dougherty Strother, who after the war went on to earn her doctorate and worked as chief of human factors engineering at Bell Helicopter, testified before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. The testimony Strother gave on May 25, 1977, was reprinted in *Stars and Stripes*. During her talk she outlined for the first time before Congress the history of the entire WASP program, highlighting the arguments that supported militarization. "This is the first time the rank and file members of the WASP have had a chance to tell their story," she said. "We have waited many years for this opportunity."⁶ Strother went on to say to the members of Congress:

It is our hope that you, as elected representatives of the people of our country and those in whom our trust lies, will listen to our request with an open heart and open mind, unaffected by the bias and wartime emotions which influenced those in the past who considered our program.⁷

⁵ Ibid., 234.

⁶ "Dora Dougherty Strother Testifies For WASPs Veterans' Status," *Stars and Stripes* (2 June 1977): 3.

⁷ Ibid.

Strother continued to point out the many aspects of the WASPs' training as well as flying assignments during the war that were strictly of a military nature. She cited examples such as serving on restricted military bases, having access to military information unknown to civilians, obtaining membership in officer's clubs, and receiving military decorations, which by regulation could not be awarded to civilians.⁸ The testimony Strother gave to Congress undoubtedly helped to clear up many misunderstandings that existed about the Women Airforce Service Pilots during World War II.

Despite strong opposition to the WASP bill by the American Legion and the Veterans' Administration, the House passed the WASP amendment to the GI Bill Improvement Act of 1977 on November 3, 1977. The next day the Senate also approved the legislation. For the former airwomen who had worked hard to be recognized for their achievements during the war, 1977 would be called the year of the WASP. Tears rolled down the cheeks of one WASP watching from the visitors' gallery who had worn her Santiago blue uniform and her silver wings for the historic occasion. Bruce Arnold reportedly reached over and shook her sleeve and told her, "Stop that! You're in uniform," he said, smiling.⁹

According to Marianne Verges in her book *On Silver Wings: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II, 1942-1944*, Arnold may be the individual credited in saving the WASP bill in the eleventh hour. Just before the vote, Arnold was putting

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Verges, *On Silver Wings*, 236.

together an information packet for the members of Congress, when he discovered in one of the WASPs' personal papers a discharge notice that read, "Honorably served in active Federal Service in the Army of the United States."¹⁰ With this official military discharge in hand, Arnold was able to help convince the conservative members of both veterans' committees to support the legislation.

President Jimmy Carter signed the WASP bill into law on Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 1977. On May 21, 1979, thirty-four years after the end of World War II, the U.S. Air Force offered official recognition by issuing the first honorable discharge to a WASP. Then Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Antonio Chayes, stated, "the efforts and sacrifices of a talented and courageous group of women have been accorded [retroactive] status as military veterans . . . and inspire the 47,000 Air Force women who now follow in their footsteps."¹¹ In 1984 each woman pilot was awarded the Victory medal, and those who had been on active duty for more than a year also received the American Theater medal.

Although grateful for their victory in Congress, there were a few WASPs who felt that the benefits they were now afforded under the new militarization law came too late. Barbara Erickson London, who was one of the first WAFS, was not impressed by what the women pilots received in the way of veterans' benefits. "The only thing we can get is a flag on our coffins," she said. "We can go to a military hospital if we're old enough, poor enough, and there's room enough, and we can get, I think \$250 for a headstone, and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tanner, "We Also Served," 49.

that's about it." ¹² London also said she resented the fact that veterans' status was granted to every woman who went through WASP training – even those who washed out and did not graduate. "If a guy went to school and washed out, he was not going to be a veteran," she said. "However, every girl that even went to Sweetwater was on that list. In fact, if you look at this book [WASP roster], if it says trainee after it, those are girls who didn't graduate. That's my only objection." ¹³

Former Women Airforce Service Pilot Jean Downey Harman commented on the WASPs' legacy in an interview with the author. "The WASPs proved that women could do just about anything they set out to do, and that we were really quite capable . . . it took the United States a long time to realize that," she said. "Because even getting the veterans' status was like pulling teeth. They had to lump us in with the overseas telephone operators." ¹⁴

Almost sixty years after the WASPs were released from their World War II flying assignments, the women pilots, many of whom are now grandmothers and great-grandmothers, are still making headlines. A recent article in the *Washington Post* brought to America's attention the plight of the daughter of deceased WASP Irene Englund, who was told her mother was not entitled to receive military honors or a U.S. flag when her remains were scheduled to be inurned next to those of her husband, also a

¹² Gail M. Gutierrez, *Forgotten Wings: An Oral History of Women Airforce Service Pilots, the WASPs*. (Fullerton, Calif.: Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton, 1992), 101.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Harman, interview.

World War II veteran, at Arlington National Cemetery. Julie Englund, the daughter of the WASP in question, wrote a letter to the editor in the *Post* protesting the situation. After reading her letter, Reginald Brown, the Assistant Secretary of the Army who oversees Arlington National Cemetery, reportedly asked for a review of the rules. It was shocking to discover that almost twenty-five years after the Defense Department implemented the WASP legislation granting them veterans' status, the U.S. Army presumed that the law did not apply to them. On June 1, 2002, the Army announced that they had reconsidered. "This was the most appropriate thing to do to honor these people's services," said Martha Rudd, an Army spokeswoman.¹⁵ Englund, the Army concluded, would be provided "standard honors." Standard honors are provided to enlisted personnel while "full honors" are provided to officers. WASP Irene Englund was interred on June 14, 2002 on Flag Day, and the USAF honor guard conducted the ceremony. The *Washington Post* story that reported on Englund's burial, concluded: "The decision will not allow the WASPs and other groups to be buried in the ground at Arlington, which is running low on plots. Instead, the civilians now qualify for inurnment in the cemetery's columbarium complex, which houses cremated remains."¹⁶

The postwar story of Russian women in aviation is a short one compared to the accomplishments of today's American female military pilots. The Soviet airwomen's experiences in combat were brief, and to date, limited to the Second World War. Perhaps the pilots' exclusion in Russia's present day air force derived from the fact that many of

¹⁵ Steve Vogel, "Civilians Allowed Military Honors at Arlington," *Washington Post* (1 June 2002): A09.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the country's pioneering women aviators did not live to see the end of the war. If Marina Raskova had survived, maybe she would have gone on to become an influential advocate for women military pilots. Or she may have done what so many of her fellow women flyers did after the war, given up aviation all together, choosing instead to return home and raise her young daughter. The emphasis on motherhood and domestic life for women in Soviet Russia remained strong in the years after the war.

Current information on the status of women in the Russian Air Force is difficult to obtain. Even the foremost scholars on the subject communicated their frustration to this author as they struggled to respond to queries on Russian women pilots in today's armed forces. According to Tina DiGuglielmo in her 1992 article "The Role of Women in Soviet Armed Forces: Past, Present, and Future," "The role of women in the Soviet armed forces has been like a pendulum, swinging upward during wartime and back down during peacetime."¹⁷ According to the figures provided by the Soviet Embassy in 1991, women made up 1 percent of the Soviet military, compared to 8.5 percent of women serving that year in the United States.¹⁸ More recent statistics are needed to accurately assess servicewomen's participation in Russia's modern day military. One wonders how cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, who became the first Russian woman in space in 1963, was able to break through the glass ceiling of this male-dominated occupation, even advancing to the rank of colonel, an extremely rare feat for a Russian servicewoman.

¹⁷ Tina DiGuglielmo, "The Role of Women in the Soviet Armed Forces: Past, Present and Future." In *Beyond Glasnost: Soviet Reform and Security Issues*. David Thomas Twining, ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992), 40.

¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

According to DiGuglielmo, the role of women in the Russian military can be summarized by comments made by two male officers, one American, and the other Russian. The officer from the United States, a Soviet specialist, stated that women in the Soviet military have no positions of authority and the Soviets say this will remain the case. The Soviet officer said that the special role of women in the Soviet military applies only in wartime.¹⁹ One wonders if a decade of change in the former Soviet Union has altered this way of thinking. As the United States leads the world in giving women military aviators an opportunity to hone their skills in combat, it would appear that Russia has chosen instead to utilize its women pilots only in periods of national crisis.

Despite being allies in the Second World War, the WASPs and Soviet women pilots seemed by many to be worlds apart in their ideology, wartime aerial missions, and military status. During the war the airwomen only heard rumors of the other group's existence. Forty-five years after the end of the war, the American and Russian women aviators met face-to-face in a historic reunion in Moscow. The women who were at the 1990 meeting have commented on the strong bonds of sisterhood they experienced with their female counterparts. Even the use of translators did not inhibit their feelings of camaraderie that transcended cultural differences. Forty-five years after the end of the war, the women veterans' close ties touched the American women. Former WASP Anne Noggle interviewed nearly six-dozen Soviet women veterans from 1990-1992. As she remarked in the conclusion of her book *A Dance With Death*, "They had gathered as a remembrance, a celebration. They are sisters, they will tell you – closer to one another

¹⁹ Ibid., 57.

than to their own relatives. Ultimately their *memento mori* is one of survival, haunted by the ghosts of those not so fortunate.”²⁰

The dangers and risks inherent in the women pilots’ wartime flying assignments, coupled with their patriotic spirit and love of aviation, drew them close together in a way that only individuals who have faced fear and death intimately can know. Gender was the defining factor in both the creation and dissolution of both groups of airwomen. They suffered discrimination and prejudices from male aircrews and military personnel, and they also earned their respect. The women flyers’ very existence in wartime aviation challenged the assumptions of masculine authority and attempted to redefine existing gender boundaries. But as is often the case during a time of war when society is turned on its head, once stability and peace were reestablished, the American and Russian women pilots were told that their services were no longer needed. The return to prewar societal roles was emphasized in both countries, and the aviators who had sacrificed and achieved so much during the conflict, were prohibited from taking part in the postwar military.

The accomplishments of women pilots in the 1930s’ “Golden Age of Aviation” set an important precedent for the World War II airwomen to follow. Although it took another thirty years for American women to be allowed into the cockpits of military aircraft, and an additional twenty years before they would be allowed to fly in combat, without the achievements of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, it is unlikely that women’s presence in modern military aviation would have been assured.

²⁰ Noggle, *A Dance With Death*, 317.

For the Soviet women pilots, their participation in the Great Patriotic War resulted from a way of thinking that persists in Russia today. Perceived as temporary solutions to current problems, Russian servicewomen are not on a par with their male colleagues. Discouraged from seeking combat roles, little evidence exists to show that women military pilots have been allowed to fly since 1945. In modern day Russia, despite its deeply rooted socialist past that boasted gender equality, the idea of women soldiers is an anomaly. According to author Ellen Jones, men in Russia are nurtured in a world dominated by females. She concludes that the inclusion of more women in the Russian armed forces may perhaps have a negative effect on the socialization process of males – influencing the male role model and the resultant masculinity of men.²¹ Many men in Russia view the military as the last bastion of male superiority in Russia today.

What sets the two military cultures apart is choice. In the United States armed forces today, women pilots who wish to serve their country are given the opportunity to fly military aircraft and train to become combat fighter pilots. Women aviators in Russia it seems are not afforded this same chance. As has been mentioned in this thesis, many of the Soviet women veterans expressed relief when it came time for them to relinquish their flying responsibilities during the war. There were some Russian airwomen however, like many of the WASPs, who yearned to keep flying and serving their country. Both groups of skilled pilots were not allowed this possibility in the years following World War II.

²¹ Ellen Jones, *Red Army and Society: Sociology of the Soviet Military* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 103.

In many ways, the experiences of the American and Soviet airwomen were exactly how one WASP described it: “a magical bubble – a lucky accident in history.”²² The women pilots did not immediately change the course of aviation history nor were they successful in altering the societal norms of their day. But by their courage, professionalism, and determination, the first women military pilots in history, who spread their wings in World War II, will continue to inspire future generations of women in aviation.

²² *The WASPs: Women Pilots of World War II.*

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