



Reina Pennington. *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001. xvi + 304 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1145-4.

Reviewed by Kathryn Spurling (School of History, University College, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy)

Published on H-Minerva (July, 2002)

## A True Adventure

### A True Adventure

To refer to Reina Pennington's book as a "true adventure" in no way detracts from its academic merit or historiographical value. It is a true adventure in the style of the boys' adventure books which dominated for generations. It is a true adventure insofar as through its pages it elevates us from our mundane lives to the larger-than-life exploits of individuals who pressed the boundaries of human endeavour. Like so many other books, it traces the adventures and sacrifices of those who took to the sky in defence of their homeland during World War II. Dissimilar to all but a very isolated few, this true adventure features heroes who just happened to be women.

Pennington opens her adventure with a short background on the tradition in Russia of strong combative women. She observes that perhaps more than in any other country this tradition has been evident. Ancient burial sites dating back to the fourth or third centuries were found to contain women buried with weapons. During World War I, 2,000 women were recruited and volunteered for the "Battalion of Death." Whilst the stated purpose of the battalion was to "serve as an example to the army and lead the men into battle ... to shame the men in the trenches by having the women go over the top first" (p. 5), by July 1917 the Battalion of Death was involved in front line combat and suffered heavy casualties. Russian women also gained pilot's licences from 1911 and several managed to participate during WWI as reconnaissance pilots. As Russia embraced socialism so it decreed capitalism, the class structure and gender discrimination, alien to the state. Between the wars universal military service involved women as well as men. Unfortunately, as the nation fell into the depths of Stalinism so too did Russian feminism become muted. Nevertheless, with war looming darkly on the horizon yet again, women were encouraged to join the rapidly expanding Soviet military and ironically, active support from Stalin

paved the way for women in Soviet military aviation.

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on 22 January 1941, only a few women served in military aviation units, but there were many qualified women pilots who immediately sought to volunteer. In 1938 the Soviet people had been enthralled by the adventures of Marina Raskova, Polina Osipenko, and Valentina Grizodubova. In a twin-engine ANT-37 (a converted DB2 long range bomber) named "Rodina," the aviators set an international women's straight-line distance record when they flew 5,947 km. Stalin realised the political capital in this and other aviation exploits just as a later Soviet regime would utilise the space race for much the same purpose. When Polina Osipenko was killed in an air crash in 1939 Stalin acted as a pallbearer. His support was crucial in the formation of women's combat air regiments. By 1941 Aviation Group 122 was formed. It consisted entirely of women volunteers and was commanded by Marina Raskova. Subsequently three regiments were formed under the auspices of Aviation Group 122: the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment (Yak 1 fighters), 587th Short Range Bomber Aviation Regiment (SU-2 bombers), and the 46th Night Bomber Regiment (PO-2 bi-planes).

The recruitment and training of aviators within Aviation Group 122 was challenging in much the same way as it was for other Soviet aviation groups. There was an abundance of volunteers who needed to be trained in the ways of the military and become transformed into competent pilots, navigators, armourers, and support staff. A command structure needed to be implemented. Volunteers needed aircraft, armaments, uniforms and supplies at a time of unprecedented demand in a rapidly deteriorating strategic position. But whilst other Soviet aviation groups faced the same challenges, for Aviation Group 122 the challenges were greater because they involved women. Very few of those in the newly installed command structure were military career professionals,

even fewer were trained military aviators. Volunteers sent for training found male instructors reluctant teachers. Uniforms were manufactured for men, and thus were ill-fitting and oversized for many women. Members of Group 122 faced derision, were not taken seriously, and their behaviour was closely scrutinised in the early stages. Training was stringent and demanding. Trainee mechanics spent up to fifteen hours a day in Russia's frigid winter conditions. The flight training programme which normally took three years was condensed to a physically and emotionally taxing six months.

Much of the ensuing success of the Soviet women's aviation programme was due to the exhaustive efforts of Marina Raskova. She unapologetically used her hero status and personal contacts in high places to attain more and better equipment for her aviators. When the male-dominated air force hierarchy wished to relegate women volunteers to obscurity in discarded and ancient flying machines, Raskova demanded equal combat opportunities and aircraft. She normally succeeded, as with the 24 new Yak 1 aircraft she attained for the 586th regiment and the PE-2s assigned the 587th. Her belief in the women volunteers in turn inspired them and their achievements rapidly dispelled the cynicism of non-supporters.

As the regiments became operational in early 1942 the 122nd group closed. Of the three women's regiments the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment (46th Guards from February 1943), would achieve the greatest degree of notoriety. This may be because they flew PO 2s, flimsy wood and canvas open-cockpit biplanes armed only with four small bomb racks. Crews were not issued parachutes. The commander of the aviation group assigned to this women's aviation regiment was totally unimpressed, remarking, "We've seen everything now. They're giving us some sort of little girls, and in PO-2s to boot" (p. 77). Their notoriety may have been due to the refusal of the women to accept any male assistance in the conduct of their duties, or their 24,000 bombing missions, or the nick name "The Night Witches" accorded them by the enemy they bombed, or the 27 percent flying personnel fatalities suffered. By the war's end, eighteen pilots and six navigators of the 46th had received the highest military honor, Hero of the Soviet Union.

Five Hero of the Soviet Union awards were made to members of the 587th Bomber Aviation Regiment (125th Guards after September 1943). Aviators attached to the 587th/125th were trained on the Su 2 bomber but were then equipped with the new Pe 2 bomber, delaying their entry to active service. The Pe 2 was the top-of-the-line Russian combat aircraft but it proved a difficult aircraft to

master. The cockpit was structured to accommodate an average male pilot, taller than many of the women aviators. The Pe 2 pilot was expected to operate the throttles with the left hand and pull the stick back and get the nose up with the other hand. Taking off with a full bomb load was a challenge for any pilot. Women Pe 2 pilots needed to innovate, either having their navigators assist them to pull back the stick or brace the pilot's back during take-off. During the war, forty-six members of the regiment were killed but it was the first casualty which was the most undermining for regiment direction and morale. A combination of mechanical problems and bad weather resulted in the death of the commanding officer, Marina Raskova, who crashed in January 1943. Repercussions included the assignment of a male commanding officer and an increase in the number of male members accepted for service with the regiment. For those women aviators who had fought to maintain their autonomy it was a disappointment, though their missions continued to exemplify the standard of service they knew Raskova would have expected. In an attack on 2 June 1943 women aviators flying in support of the 37th Army in the North Caucasus were forced to descend to 1,000 metres due to cloud cover, separating them from fighter escort. During the target run they were attacked by eight Me 109s; they managed to shoot down four. The 125th Guards flew 1,134 missions and dropped 980,000 tons of bombs.

On the evening of 24 September 1942 Valeriia Khomiakova, a member of 586th regiment, in her Yak 1 shot down an enemy aircraft, the first woman aviator to do so. It was Khomiakova's first combat mission, and two weeks later she was dead. In April 1943 two members of 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, Raisa Surnachevskaia and Tamara Pamiatnykh, scrambled in their Yak 1 fighters to intercept two enemy reconnaissance aircraft. When they reached the area they found themselves amongst two groups of German bombers. They shot down four and scattered others. In all the 586th flew 4,419 combat missions and destroyed 38 enemy aircraft. It was not a women-only regiment and several of the most capable women aviators were transferred out of the regiment during the war to primarily male regiments. These included Liliia Litviak. During her war service Litviak was accredited with twelve personal kills and three shared kills before her death in air combat in August 1943. The Commanding Officer of the 586th, Aleksandr Gridnev, commented that "[o]ur experiences showed that women fighter pilots in the majority of circumstances, much better than men, endured g-loads to the body which arose during abrupt and sharp changes of aircraft attitude.... Also the women pilots had greater endurance than men

during high altitude flights without oxygen” (p. 124). His experience had proved the physical and psychological proficiency of the women aviators in his regiment. So too had their exemplary and fearless war service. Yet following the end of hostilities Soviet women aircrew were demobilised, women were banned from entering service academies, and in 1948 legislation was passed excluding women from combat. An isolated few remained in military service, another few were allowed to pursue careers in civil aviation, but by and large the conspicuous service of women aviators was relegated to the stuff of legends. The Soviet Government stressed that women were first and foremost wives and mothers.

Reina Pennington offers a rich tapestry woven with first-class research. Throughout the book this research, primarily undertaken in Russia, utilises not only manuscripts, letters, official publications, unit histories, newspapers, speeches, published memoirs and diaries, but also many interviews with male and female WWII veteran aviators. This adds significantly to the value of the book and to our understanding of the experiences of these women aviators. The interviews also permit us a rare intimacy with heroes. Interspersed with this wealth of narrative and well chosen photographs and maps, Pennington has woven answers to that most essential question, Why? She initially dissects the debate with the question, “Why women combat aviators?” Were women combat aviators intended as a propaganda tool? Certainly they were invariably portrayed as being feminine, as in the photograph shoot which had an aircraft handler holding a very large mirror for the pilot to adjust her coiffure prior to boarding her aircraft. But Pennington refutes this and shows that the dire straits the Soviet Union faced in the early war years made the contribution of the women aviators of the utmost importance. As

one woman recalled, “They didn’t recruit us we besieged them” (p. 25). Also proven within the book is that the determination of political leadership to preserve the patriarchy meant the subsequent return of women to the role of nurturer after the war.

The inside cover carries the formal publishers notation:

1. World War, 1939-1945-Participation, Female 2. Soviet Union. Voenno-Vozdushnye Sily 3. World War, 1939-1945-Aerial operations, Soviet. 4. World War, 1939-1945-Regimental histories-Soviet Union.

Unintentionally this edited list depicts one of the greatest strengths of Pennington’s book—its breadth of appeal. Unfortunately, many authors who have pursued the struggle women have faced in society generally, and the military specifically, to attain equality have hammered the purely theoretical line. They preach to the converted, reaching a limited audience, which of course in turn affects the beliefs of very few. Pennington’s *Wings, Women, and War* triumphs because it is a great read. Good primary research reproduced in an entertaining style with an underpinning theoretical framework offers incontrovertible proof that the barriers which deny women equal responsibility in the defence of their nations have little to do with human ability or psychological and physiological competence, and everything to do with cultural constraints. If a photograph is worth a thousand words, so too are the deeds of Soviet women aviators in WWII.

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net and MINERVA: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given. For other permission contact [MinervaCen@aol.com](mailto:MinervaCen@aol.com)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Kathryn Spurling. Review of Pennington, Reina, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6506>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net and MINERVA: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact [MinervaCen@aol.com](mailto:MinervaCen@aol.com) or the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).