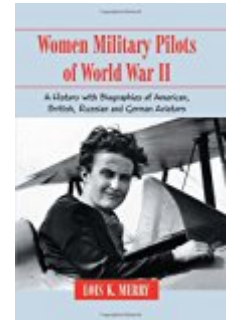


**Lois K. Merry.** *Women Military Pilots of World War II: A History with Biographies of American, British, Russian, and German Aviators.* Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2010. 220 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-4441-0.



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Today, women pilots serving in the U.S. military can fly every type of military aircraft, from cargo and reconnaissance planes to fighter jets and bombers. Women pilots have flown as members of the elite Thunderbirds and Blue Angels precision flying teams, become astronauts, commanded fighter squadrons, led combat missions, and recorded many “firsts” along the way. Lois K. Merry, however, reminds us that these pilots owe their winged heritage to the pathbreaking work of women who flew during the Second World War. In *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, Merry demonstrates how thousands of women, flying for different nations, contributed significantly to expanding roles for women aviators. The book provides a brief overview of the inception and experiences of women pilot units in Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States with some minor descriptions of several women pilots in Germany.

Merry’s work contains two parts, with the first section examining the formation of the units, selection of the women pilots, training, daily ac-

tivities, hazards, and demobilization. The second part contains nineteen brief biographies, which are divided between women leaders and selected profiles of women from each of the countries covered in this work. *Women Military Pilots of World War II* reveals that women ferried military aircrafts from factories to airfields as civilians, tested new unstable aircraft, towed targets for live gunnery practice, and performed as combat fighter and bomber pilots. Many lost their lives. By examining mainly autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs of women fliers, Merry compares the experiences of these aviators to understand how and why women in many parts of the world transitioned from civilian pilots to a military role, when previously there had been no precedent. While Merry’s title includes German women flyers, the majority of her work concentrates on the activities of women in the other three nations, who “served in aviation units created specifically for them” (p. 2).

The circumstance of war was the “catalyst that opened the door to military aviation for

many women” in the countries studied by Merry (p. 20). Yet the “level of peril perceived by the home countries” contributed to different roles assigned to women pilots in England, the United States, and the Soviet Union (p. 8). The most prominent difference was how the Soviet Union, suffering from severe losses and devastation from the Nazi invasion of their homeland, permitted the formation and use of women as combat pilots. The Soviets created one fighter and two bomber regiments exclusively for women, although depending on military needs, some women pilots were assigned and fought side by side with otherwise all male regiments. Over seven hundred women flew as combat pilots for the Soviet Union and over fifty perished. No other nation officially allowed women pilots in direct combat roles during World War II.

Unlike the Soviet case, the United States and England used women pilots as civilian noncombatants in order to release male pilots for combat. Great Britain mainly tasked women with ferrying every sort of military aircraft, “with the exception of ‘flying boats,’” because that would have led to a culturally unacceptable mixed gender crew (p. 84). While the British Air Transit Auxiliary was “represented by twenty-eight different nationalities,” the women’s division, though international in scope, totaled less than two hundred pilots (p. 37). In comparison, over one thousand women pilots comprised the U.S. units. While the major responsibility for Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) in the United States involved ferrying all types of aircraft, including jets and bombers, women also performed as test pilots, towed targets and simulated strafing for ground artillery crews, and provided flight instruction for many male pilots.

Merry argues that the formation of the women’s pilot units required more than the outbreak of war. In Merry’s view, an essential element was “the existence of a well-known and charismatic champion” willing to “promote the idea of em-

ploying women in uncharacteristic roles” with tenacity and vigor (p. 8). According to Merry, leaders Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Love in the United States, Marina Raskova in the Soviet Union, and Pauline Gower in England were largely responsible for the establishment of units that allowed women to fly military planes. The leadership of these four women provides the “unifying thread weaving throughout the narrative” (p. 2). Within their respective nations, they were directly responsible for recruiting, selecting, and promoting women as pilots for military aircraft. Each was a well-known celebrity aviator in her own right, and their standing as esteemed pilots gave them access to political and military leaders, which proved influential for creating separate women’s pilot organizations during the war.

Merry’s scholarship reveals that most of the women who flew military aircraft were young, but experienced pilots, because many had honed their skills in the decade leading up to the war. The Soviet Union, Britain, and Germany created “government subsidized air clubs,” which gave many women an opportunity to learn how to fly and obtain a pilot’s license (p. 19). While most of these aviation schools were active in the 1930s, the U.S. government project did not get underway until 1939 as part of the New Deal. The Civilian Pilot Training Program, however, more than quadrupled the number of American women pilots in less than two years, and provided many of them with extensive skills and experience.

Merry describes what led to the origin of the units, the key leadership role provided by Cochran, Love, Gower, and Raskova in promoting and creating separate pilot organizations for women. Merry portrays the initial resistance to these units and the rivalries within the programs, especially in the United States where Love established the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron just before Cochran set up the Women’s Flying Training Detachment. Eventually, these separate organizations were merged into the WASP under

the leadership of Cochran, but their aviators often remained loyal to their original group. Cochran denied all African American women pilots acceptance into the WASP program, so there were no female equivalents to the Tuskegee airmen. In addition to racial discrimination, Merry shows how most women pilots faced some level of discrimination and resistance from the male-dominated aviation culture; even as other male leaders, such as General Hap Arnold in the United States, supported the women, they fought unsuccessfully to include them as part of the Army Air Force. By describing the different war conditions and circumstances in each nation, Merry helps the reader understand that the experiences of these women pilots were not uniform.

Readers wishing to find detailed information about specific units will be disappointed, but Merry acknowledges that she did not set out to provide a comprehensive treatment of the pilots or their units, nor does she offer extensive analysis on the unconventional gender roles that women pilots symbolized. Instead, her work offers a "brief overview of the subject" that provides a snapshot of the women's military pilot projects (p. 1). Many useful nuggets of information, however, may provide new avenues for researchers to explore. For example, Merry reports that 27,258 women served in the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force, and although none were pilots, the women performed as flight mechanics, parachute riggers, and flight simulation trainers (p. 38). Scholarship on the women in the Australian unit is sparse.

Merry admits that her scholarship was limited to English-language sources; therefore, readers seeking a more comprehensive treatment of Soviet women's regiments during the war can turn to Reina Pennington's *Wings, Women and War*, published in 2001. Pennington combines Russian-language memoirs, autobiographies, and oral history interviews with primary source documents from Soviet newspapers, magazines, and regimental ar-

chives. Merry draws from Pennington's scholarship in her work.

The organization and limited analysis of the book leads to some confusion in connecting Merry's themes into a cohesive narrative. Merry does not provide a detailed analysis with each chapter that evaluates the differences and similarities for the women's units in England, the United States, and the Soviet Union. For example, why did the U.S. program provide more than six times more women pilots than the United Kingdom even as British leaders bemoaned "England's huge need for pilots" (p. 26)? Were 166 women pilots sufficient to release English pilots for combat? The other major question concerns Merry's biographies in her second section. While she makes clear that she provides the biographies of the women leaders because they were essential to the formation of these units, she is less clear on how and why she selected the other fifteen women. While these biographies offer a useful window into the lives of individual women pilots, Merry's analysis on the significance of selecting these women from the many profiles available would have been helpful.

By providing a multinational perspective, Merry's *Women Military Pilots of World War II* is an important contribution to the growing scholarship on the role and experiences of women pilots during the Second World War.

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