

Dive Bombers

Russian women combat pilots

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Kim Green

The Message

On July 18, 1944, a solitary Petlyakov-2 bomber dropped out of formation, circled low over the burning town of Borisov, Byelorussia, and tossed out a small container. Citizens of the ravaged town soon found a container with an odd message inside, hastily scribbled on sewn-together strips of towels. It read: "Today our air regiment overflew your town. We had been awarded the honorific of *Borisov* for our part in liberating it. We are westbound, to bomb the enemy's own territory." Mysteriously, it was signed, "M. Dolina". There had to be some mistake.

Fifteen years later, the Borisov newspaper began seeking the mystery airmen who had helped liberate their town, hoping to honor them in an anniversary celebration of that 1944 battle. They retrieved the message from museum archives and gaped at the impossible signature: "M. Dolina," the final "a" indicating a *feminine* last name. The bewildered reporters forwarded their inquiry to the Ministry of Defense and received the following reply:

In July 1944 Guards Captain Mariya Ivanovna Dolina, deputy squadron leader, bombed enemy men and equipment...to the north-west of Borisov. She fulfilled her mission, and her performance was rated 'excellent'...Her regiment was granted the honorific of Borisov, in recognition of its accurate and effective bombing strikes in support of friendly ground troops as they...liberated the town of Borisov.

"Captain Dolina," the report concluded, "was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, and the Order of Lenin, by order of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR."

The Pioneers

By the early 1930s, Soviet aviation had reached its golden age. Thousands of men and women learned to fly in military schools and paramilitary-style clubs during this time, taking advantage of the government's push to expand both civil and military aviation. What better way, Stalin thought, to connect the vast stretches of Soviet territory still inaccessible by road or rail?

Although the Soviets never actively encouraged women to pursue flight training, the schools couldn't legally turn females away; the professed ideology of the USSR claimed social equality for all citizens. So by 1941 nearly one quarter of the pilots trained in the air clubs were female. Some piloted in the military, still more became air club instructors, and a few made names for themselves as the nation's newest superstars: aerobatic pilots and long-distance record-

breakers, hailed as heroes by a Soviet government eager to propagandize technological successes.

The brightest of these rising stars hit the big time not as a pilot but as a navigator. Marina Raskova became the first female navigator in the Soviet Air Force in 1933 and the first instructor at the academy the following year, at the age of 22. Soon thereafter, she qualified as a pilot and flight instructor. And in 1938, as a navigator on the famous long-distance flight of the *Rodina*, (see sidebar) she captured the imagination of the entire nation...and its leader.

In June of 1941, Operation Barbarossa crushed the golden age of Soviet aviation to the sickening roll of bombs and artillery. In the war's first days, the Luftwaffe pounded Ukrainian airfields, reducing much of the USSR's magnificent air force to a smoking ruin. As millions of young Soviet men and women immediately rushed to enlist, in a massive patriotic wave, Marina Raskova made her move.

The Unprecedented Order

On October 8, 1941, the People's Commissariat of Defense released Order Number 0099, which directed that three women's aviation regiments should be formed by the beginning of December: one fighter, one dive-bomber, and a night-bomber regiment. The order came straight from the top. Raskova, in response to thousands of letters from young women pilots to her begging to fly missions at the front, had somehow won the ear of Stalin. The notoriously enigmatic Soviet archives do not reveal how she convinced him, but party elites whispered that the mad tyrant held a soft spot in his heart for the beautiful and charming navigator-hero.

As the Germans advanced to the very gates of Moscow, news of the incredible Order 0099 swept the city like a firestorm. "On October 10, all the university students were digging antitank trenches along the Belorussian Road near Moscow," recalled pilot Polina Gelman in 1992. "Among the students the rumor was going around that girls were being taken into aviation. The next morning I submitted the paperwork to the Komsomol Central Committee."

Thousands of women rushed to interview for assignments as pilots, navigators, mechanics, gunners, and armorers in the three regiments. So many volunteers packed into the Zhukovskii Air Force Academy that many were turned away, bitterly disappointed. Only the most experienced aviators earned the coveted piloting slots.

On October 17, as hundreds of thousands of Muscovites evacuated the seemingly doomed city, the three new regiments of Aviation Group 122 boarded a train headed east (wearing their new, comically large men's uniforms). Nine days later, on a miserable rainy night, the filthy and exhausted recruits arrived at their new training base at Engels, 500 miles east of Moscow on the Volga River.

Several veterans have remembered in memoirs the stirring speech Raskova delivered to the 122nd on November 7, as the women began their brutal course of training on that windswept steppe:

History remembers those women who participated in battles. But all of these women were individuals, and they fought in men's units. Such were conditions then. We are Soviet women, women of a free socialist nation. In our constitution it is written that women have equal rights in all fields of activity. Today you took the military oath, you vowed to faithfully defend the homeland. So let's vow once more, together, to stand to our last breath in defense of our beloved homeland.

"Study persistently, with perseverance," added Raskova on that frigid November day. "The examination will be given on the field of battle."

The 587th Bomber Aviation Regiment

As the crews selected for the dive bomber regiment struggled to learn the old, slow, and troublesome Su-2 light bomber that winter, Raskova, who had decided to command the 587th herself, once again began to work her string-pulling magic. It worked; in July of 1942, twenty shiny new Soviet-made Pe-2 bombers arrived, one for each pilot. Although the crews exulted over the coup of acquiring new aircraft for the regiment, a rarity even for veteran pilots at the front, the women felt anxious about their ability to master the notoriously challenging Pe-2.

Pilot Ekaterina Musatova-Fedotova considered the aircraft, with its "heavy stick" and fast landing speed, "complex and difficult for women to fly, especially small women who were slim and hungry." Most women flew it with two or three pillows behind their backs, and many required an extra push from the navigator on takeoff because of the extreme force required to get the tail up. And because the Pe-2 required three crewmembers (the Su-2 needed only two), additional crewmembers had to prepare in a hurry. Raskova decided to accept men into the regiment. It would be many months before the grumbling on both sides ceased.

Raskova supervised the training with superhuman energy, sometimes sleeping at her desk without bothering to undress. The women in her command revered her, calling her the "grandmother of Soviet aviation," and they knew that only her initiative and influence could have brought the women's regiments into existence. Tragically, Raskova never made it to the front with them.

After endless months of delays for additional training in the new Pe-2s, Raskova and her impatient 587th finally departed for Stalingrad in December of 1942. Severe winter storms and engine trouble left airplanes stranded along the route for weeks. Finally, the weather broke on the morning of January 4, and the frustrated Raskova took off with two other Pe-2s toward the front. But by that afternoon, the weather had closed in again. With clouds and fog reducing visibility to nearly zero and darkness coming on, the three airplanes attempted forced landings; two crews survived, but Raskova's plane crashed, killing everyone aboard. The regiment was stunned. Her life and death had achieved the status of myth for the women of the 122nd. "We have a sign here in Russia," said armament mechanic Yevgenia Zapolnova-Ageyeva years later. "If a dog is howling for a long time, weeping and sobbing, a terrible

misfortune is sure to happen. Before Raskova perished, a dog was howling for several days, and we asked ourselves, 'What is going to happen?'"

The New Commander

Already rankling at the compromise of male soldiers into their midst, and wondering how their regiment could continue without the steel will of Raskova behind it, the 587th would now have to accept a male commander. Major Valentin Markov, an experienced combat bomber pilot, shared their misgivings...even resentment. When he initially told friends about his new assignment, "they looked at me with obvious pity," he admitted. The relationship – and the regiment – seemed doomed.

"Behind his back we called him 'bayonet,' wrote Fedotova of Major Markov. "In our hearts we mutinied against the new commander," she added. Resentful of his criticisms and strict discipline, they couldn't help but compare him to their beloved Raskova. But as the women and their new commander worked together, mutual skepticism melted away. Markov gained their trust with his flying skill and his attempts to adapt to a more "woman-like" style of leadership; and the women earned his respect by simply doing their jobs. "By the summer of 1943," he said in a 1990 interview, "we had become real, true combat friends... They respected the truth and fair treatment towards them. They never whimpered and never complained and were very courageous."

Perhaps the battle-scarred Markov even turned out a better battle commander than Raskova would have been. Gunner Antonina Khokhlova-Dubkova believed that his experience contributed greatly to their very survival. "He chose routes so that we evaded the ground attacks of the anti-aircraft guns and also the German fighters," she recalled. "He knew the situation very well." And he taught them to stick together in formation to better protect each other from fighter attacks.

As the women came to trust their staunch defender in battle (as well as at the base), the women secretly changed Markov's secret nickname to "Batia", or "Daddy". He remembers the moment he noticed his growing pride in the regiment under his command: "I was very gratified to overhear a commander scolding some pilots like this," he recalled after the war. "You made a lousy landing today. Well? Have you watched the girls landing? How will I face them now?"

The women had won the admiration of their commander, the comradeship of their fellow male soldiers in the regiment, and even the grudging acceptance of their brother regiments. But as for their trial by fire.... "The examination," they remembered, "will be given on the field of battle."

The Front

"According to Tolstoy," said pilot Mariya Dolina in 1991, "war and women are things that don't go together – they exist apart." Dolina, the oldest of ten in a poor Siberian family, never

wanted to be a soldier. As a young girl, she took glider lessons, then went to aviation school, hoping to become a professional pilot. "But when I witnessed all the atrocities of 1941, the death of my friends and relatives, peaceful civilians, I wanted to help liberate my people from the enemy...I want you to underline in red that it was the cherished dream of (us) girls to liberate the land, but none of us wanted to fight – to kill."

But fight they did, and at great risk. "Every flight in the Pe-2 was a game with death, a very dangerous game," said Guards Major Mariya Dolina in a 1991 interview. And she should know. Dolina flew seventy-two combat missions in the "Peshka," bombing ammunition dumps, transport lines, artillery batteries, and enemy strongholds. Luck and skill saw her through the war.

On one (as Dolina understatedly called it) "most difficult flight," German Messerschmitts shot down five of the nine bombers in her formation on a mission at the North Caucasus Front – including her own. With one engine burning, Dolina's aircraft began to trail behind the formation. While the other damaged planes limped back to the base airfield, one bomber remained behind with her to cover her retreat across the lines to friendly territory.

"It was only because of my friend Tonya Skoblikova that we remained alive," recalled Dolina. "Tonya held off all the German fighters with machine gun fire to protect and save us." But after Tonya's plane was hit, Dolina and her crew faced the German firestorm alone.

With both engines now afire and the navigator and tail gunner out of ammunition, a lone German fighter pilot flew right up beside Dolina, taunting her. "I could see his face," she said. "It was full of freckles. He showed his teeth, ferociously smiling at me, his face distorted with hostility, and he showed me his fingers, gesturing one, two...He was asking, 'How would you like me to shoot you down, in one attack or two?'"

As navigator Galina Dzhunkovskaya and the gunner (name unknown) desperately shot flares at the fighter, he mysteriously turned and flew away, perhaps assuming that the burning Pe-2 would never make it back. But Dolina, with flames licking at her face and chest, nursed the crippled bomber back towards the front line. If they jumped from the burning aircraft, the wind would carry them behind enemy lines – a Soviet soldier's greatest fear; assuming you survived the German concentration camp, interrogation and even punishment for desertion awaited on your return home - a fine reward for risking your life.

Back at the base, the regiment scanned the skies for the missing airplanes, sick with fear. "It was the first time that an aircraft in our crew did not return from a mission," remembered Antonina Lepilina, the mechanic of armament for Dolina's and Dzhunkovskaya's plane. "I cannot describe my emotional experience at the thought that my friends might have perished."

Fortunately, Dolina had managed to belly land the Pe-2 just two kilometers across the line. "It was the tail gunner who saved their lives," added Lepilina. "He got out of his cockpit, crawled along the fuselage, forced the canopy open, dragged them out, and rushed them away from the aircraft. They were no more than fifty meters from the plane when it blew up."

Apparently, Lepilina wasn't the only soldier anxious for the crew's return. She recalled, "When the girls were brought back burned and injured, Valentin Markov himself carried Galina out of the plane and over to the vehicle to bring them to the regiment. Then we all knew his feelings for her. They were married after the war."

The Warrior Within

March, 2002: In a cozy hotel suite in Nashville, Tennessee, former 587th navigator Galina Brok-Beltsova bustles about the sitting room and small kitchen, serving crackers and hot tea to her guests. The coffee table bursts with sweets lugged across the ocean from Beltsova's home in Moscow. A Russian never lets a visitor go unfed. She and friend Galina Korchuganova, an aerobatic pilot and president of the Russian women pilots' club, *Aviatrixa*, have come to Nashville to appear at the 2002 Women in Aviation, International Conference.

The seventy-six-year old veteran effortlessly summons energy belying her age and the many difficult miles traveled - in war and also the painful years after it was won. Her blonde-grey curls bounce merrily as she chatters, bringing us parades of old photos and medals. At one point she and Korchuganova launch into a patriotic hymn, marching around the room in time. "Raskova, she was our hero, our ideal," says Beltsova. "We all admired her so. And Stalin - our father. We hung on his every word."

"Nonsense," shoots back Korchuganova, too young to have fought in the war. "He murdered friends and family of mine. He was a devil."

Late that evening, Beltsova stands at the head of a tableful of new friends, including the husband-and-wife restaurant owners she's effortlessly charmed. It is her third, or perhaps seventh toast tonight, and she seems the only one unaffected by the copious amounts of vodka and wine we've drunk. "This beautiful red wine," she announces, "is like the blood of our courageous airwomen who gave their lives in the Great Patriotic War." She gestures towards us: "And we are all courageous, we women who fly, who take to the skies for the love of it." "And you," she adds with a grin and a wink at the young restaurateur/chef sitting next to her, "you need a good Russian woman!" Even the man's wife laughs.

It's difficult to imagine the perpetually cheerful Beltsova behind a machine gun. Except for a powerful dose of charisma, she seems no more superhuman than any other woman. After the war, she worked briefly for the KGB, then studied to become a history professor at a Moscow technical college. I close my eyes and try to picture Beltsova as a spry young woman as she describes one particularly harrowing flight: after watching the overloaded bomber just in front of theirs fail to clear a hangar on takeoff, Beltsova's equally heavy airplane attempted to clear the now burning building.

"You have to forbid yourself from thinking that your plane will end up the same way," said Beltsova in a 1991 interview. "It was a victory - not over the German troops but over ourselves. You fight your own cowardliness."

The women of the 587th, later designated the 125th Guards Bomber Regiment for extraordinary service, seem to have won their battles with the fear within. An estimated forty-seven flying crew members perished during the war, a casualty rate approaching fifty percent. But not only did these women risk their lives daily; perhaps even more amazing are the years of toil, discomfort, and exhaustion they volunteered to endure. They spent years living in flooded and rat-infested dugouts or camping under their aircraft's wing, working often under miserable sub-freezing conditions, and ignoring serious wounds and frostbite to avoid being sent away from the front. Many left husbands and children behind.

But extraordinary times call for extraordinary actions. For Soviets citizens in 1941, life could hardly be called comfortable. The Germans had occupied much of Ukraine and adopted a scorched-earth policy on their retreat, Leningrad starved and froze under a brutal 900-day siege, and a famine swept the countryside. To the average Soviet, war was a constant and immediate reality. The Nazis, bent on their destruction as a nation, planned to reduce the Slavic people to a race of slaves. It was a struggle to the death; there could be no holding back, no relaxing.

Galina Beltsova and those of her sister-veterans who remain gather annually in May at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater to remember that struggle – and to remind others. "The feeling of all these women in our regiments who remain alive," said Dolina in 1991, "and of all the people who had to undergo the hardships of war, is that all people should work for the peaceful existence of all countries so that war does not come to any land...We had to bear twenty million losses, so we call on all the people of the world not to let that happen again."