



Flying for Her Country: The American and Soviet Women Military Pilots of World War II

Amy Goodpaster Strebe

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During the Second World War, women pilots were given the opportunity to fly military aircraft for the first time. In the United States, famed aviatrix Jacqueline Cochran formed the Women Airforce Service Pilots program, where over one thousand women flyers ferried aircraft from factories to airbases throughout the United States and Canada from 1942 to 1944. The WASP operated from 110 facilities and flew more than 60 million miles in 78 different types of aircraft, from the smallest trainers to the fastest fighters and the largest bombers. The WASP performed every duty inside the cockpit as their male counterparts, except combat, and 38 women pilots gave their lives in the service of their country. Notwithstanding their outward appearance as official members of the U.S. Army Air Forces, the WASP were considered civil servants during the war. Despite a highly publicized attempt to militarize in 1944, the women pilots would not be granted veteran status until 1977. In the Soviet Union, Marina Raskova, Russia's Amelia Earhart, famous for her historic Far East flight in 1938, formed the USSR's first all-female aviation regiments that flew combat missions along the Eastern Front.

A little over one thousand women flew a combined total of more than 30 thousand combat sorties, producing at least 30 Heroes of the Soviet Union. Included in their ranks were at least two fighter aces. More than 50 women pilots were killed in action. Sharing both patriotism and a mutual love of aviation, these pioneering women flyers faced similar obstacles while challenging assumptions of male supremacy in wartime culture. Despite experiencing discrimination from male aircrews during the war, these intrepid airwomen ultimately earned their respect. The pilots' exploits and their courageous story, told so convincingly here, continue to inspire future generations of women in aviation.

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