

The Soviet Union was the first nation to allow women pilots to fly combat missions. During World War II the Red Air Force formed three all-female units - grouped into separate fighter, dive bomber and night bomber regiments - while also recruiting other women to fly with mostly male units. Their story, fully recounted by Reina Pennington, honours this group of fearless and determined women. Pennington chronicles the creation, organization and leadership of these regiments as well as the experiences of the pilots, navigators, bomb loaders, mechanics, and others who made up their ranks, all within the context of the Soviet air war on the Eastern Front. These regiments flew a combined total of more than 30,000 combat sorties, produced at least 30 Heroes of the Soviet Union, and included at least two fighter aces. Among their ranks were women like Marina Raskova (the Soviet Amelia Earhart), a renowned aviator who persuaded Stalin in 1941 to establish the all-women regiments; the daredevil night witches who flew ramshackle biplanes on nocturnal bombing missions over German frontlines; and fighter aces like Liliia Litviak, whose 12 kills are largely unknown in the West. Here, too, is the story of Alexander Gridnev, a fighter pilot twice arrested by the Soviet secret police before he was chosen to command the women's fighter regiment. Pennington draws upon personal interviews and the Soviet archives to detail the recruitment, training and combat lives of these women. Mixing anecdote with analysis, her work should find a wide readership among scholars and buffs interested in the history of aviation, World War II, or the Russian military as well as anyone concerned with the contentious debates surrounding military and combat service for women.

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