

AirSpace Season 2, Episode 10

Night Witches

Emily:

Welcome to this episode of AirSpace. We're your hosts. I'm Emily.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Nick:

And I'm Nick. Today, we're going to talk about a chilling chapter from flight history. The Night Witches.

Matt:

No, this is not a Halloween special. Night Witches we're a real thing.

Emily:

Well, the pilots were real people. The pilots were all women, but they weren't actually witches.

Nick:

So today we're going to talk about the myths and the truths about how this all female flying force influenced World War II and the music that followed. That's coming up next from AirSpace, from the National Air and Space Museum, distributed by PRX. Matt, do you want to set the scene for us?

Matt:

Let's talk about Russia in World War II. The Soviet Union in World War II.

(singing)

At the beginning of the war, when Stalin saw that Hitler was getting aggressive over there in Germany, Stalin actually didn't want to fight in the war and so tried to stay out of the war. But then all of a sudden, the Nazis did a little sneak attack on the Russians, bombed their Air Force all to hell, which I probably can't say. And then the Russians had no choice but to enter the war.

Nick:

It's the Night Witches is episode, I think you can say it.

Matt:

Okay.

Nick:

This was Operation Barbarossa?

Matt:

So yeah, they bombed like 66 airfields throughout the Soviet Union and destroyed 80% of their Air Force. That was like almost 4,000 planes were destroyed in the first couple of weeks of the war.

Nick:

World War II was the biggest war in human history.

Matt:

Russia was fighting a war on two fronts, on the Western front and the Eastern front. They were basically one big front in a way for the Russians.

Nick:

Operation Barbarossa was sneaky on a geopolitical sense, but it was a major, major campaign. This was a big, big theater of war, right?

Matt:

Yeah, absolutely. It practically crushed the Russian Armed Forces.

Nick:

Against this backdrop is where the Night Witches story plays out. We're talking about chaos of warfare, sirens, bombs dropping. It was the most cacophonous imaginable environment. This is where these pilots, the Night Witches, were flying missions that were predicated on stealth and silence and the spooky sound that gave them their name.

Emily:

Yeah. The Germans were the ones that nicknamed these pilots the Night Witches.

Matt:

There aren't any recordings of what this was like. But one theory is that they were named the Night Witches because of the sound that the bombs made when they were dropped from the plane, which was sort of like a witch's broom.

Nick:

Like a whoosh.

Matt:

A whoosh sound. Exactly.

Emily:

Does anybody really know what a witch's broom sounds like?

Nick:

I bet if it was, it would have been young German soldiers in World War II because they grew up in the forest of Germany, which is where all fairytales come from.

Emily:

Grimm's fairytales.

Nick:

Emily, tell us who were the women of the Night Witches.

Emily:

I'm going to put my Matt hat on.

Matt:

Here, you can borrow mine.

Emily:

I can borrow your hat. Thank you. So Matt was talking about how the Russian sort of Aerial Forces were decimated by something like 80% at some point during the war. And that really is what set the stage for these women, these Night Witches, to make this case. Of course, they weren't Night Witches yet, they were to become Night Witches. To make the case to really be allowed to engage in combat roles in World War II.

Nick:

These were bad-ass women. In order to be a pilot at that time, you had to be bold and daring. In order to be a pilot as a woman, you had to be doubly so. There were not many opportunities. You had to seize them as they came or make your own way in the aviation world. Now we're setting that against the backdrop of the biggest war in history and the upheaval there and the political intrigue of Stalin's Soviet Russia. That's a lot, right?

Matt:

Yeah. There's a lot here. There's also the importance of World War II to the Russians, right? This is known in Russia not as World War II, but as the Great Patriotic War, because this is kind of known as a time when all Russians banded together, regardless of their background or political ideologies, and fought together for their home country.

Nick:

So in the United States, we had female pioneers in aviation, like Amelia Earhart and the Ninety-Nines. Later on, the Russians are mobilized for this war. And who did they have carrying that banner?

Emily:

The Russians had Marina Raskova, who was a total bad-ass. For a long time, she had been lobbying the government and lobbying Stalin to get women to be allowed into these combat roles.

Nick:

Yeah. So you're going to just march up to Stalin and ask the same question more than one time.

Emily:

Yeah. Bad-ass.

Nick:

That takes a chutzpah?

Matt:

Yeah, I would say so, especially if she was doing this in the 1930s, when he was at sort of the height of his most terrible and unpredictable. Joseph Stalin had unleashed what historians call The Terror. he had actually purged a lot of high ranking military officers and also imprisoned and killed a lot of people at other levels within the military. When Russia entered the war, there was a huge leadership crisis within the military.

Nick:

Let's jump back to Marina Raskova's origin story. Where did she come from on the national aviation scene in Russia?

Emily:

During World War II, specifically women in Russia and women in the United States were in non-combat piloting roles. I think a lot of people would be familiar with the Wasps here in the United States.

Audio:

At Avenger Field Sweetwater, Texas, the Army Air Force is today training women pilots for many non-combatant duties. Officially, both during and after training, the pilots are the Women Airforce Service Pilots, and by the phonetic name, WASP.

Emily:

Neither Russian nor American female pilots were in the war as combat pilots until the Night Witches.

Nick:

It's important to note that there were women flying airplanes in service before then, and there were women flying in combat, but they were not flying the planes in combat.

Emily:

Right? Exactly. So what makes the Night Witches so especially badass is that they stepped in and said, "We want this role and you're going to give it to us." They really made that case, that they were accomplished pilots and they could contribute to the combat side of the war effort.

Nick:

And this would have appealed to Stalin. He was famously focused on aviation, even though he himself did not fly in airplanes, right?

Matt:

Yes. Stalin used airplanes and aviation as a symbol of modernity in Russia. The more airplanes that they were able to produce and put into service in the Soviet Union during peace time in between World War I

and World War II, the more he felt they were transforming the country from a backwards agrarian state, which was how they were often perceived by the outside world, to a modern technological state.

Nick:

And what could be more progressive and modern than gender desegregated Armed forces? Was it a matter of must or a matter of ideals?

Matt:

It's a little bit of both, right? The more people you have flying, the better off you are in that circumstance. But it also is maybe a reflection a little bit of the Soviet Union's attitude toward gender and towards egalitarianism, that men and women were supposed to be equal and have the same opportunities. This is famously a time when women were no longer bound by marriage. If you wanted to get a divorce, all you had to do is send a postcard to the courthouse and you could get a divorce. There were no proceedings. There was supposed to be no shame.

Nick:

Postcard divorces?

Matt:

Yeah. It was incredibly easy in the Soviet Union to get a divorce.

Emily:

Don't look at me. I don't know anything about this stuff. I was going to try and talk about airplanes and you wanted to talk about the mail. I don't know.

Nick:

Valid, that's valid. In 1938 Stalin, again, a fan of aviation, though he himself did not like to fly, commissioned a flight from Moscow to the far East with an all female crew as a demonstration or publicity stunt. This was known as the flight of Rodina or flight of the motherland.

Emily:

Yeah. And what I think is really interesting is that it was these three women, Valentina, Polina and Marina, and they actually broke the long distance record for female aviators, essentially crossing Russia.

Matt:

Yeah. They went all the way from Moscow to the Southeastern tip of Siberia in a nonstop flight. That's a distance of like more than 3,500 miles.

Nick:

It was very cold there and they had mechanical problems. They had the legendary General Winter in Russia.

Matt:

We know how combustion engines and diesel engines in particular can have a lot of trouble in cold weather, and they had that trouble.

Nick:

They started throwing everything out of the airplane.

Emily:

Yeah, and I think what's really extra cool about this flight in particular is this is still relatively early in the aviation history. Early enough that pilots had to have a very wide ranging knowledge, not only of flying an actual airplane and flying multiple kinds of airplanes, but they also had to really understand how these planes worked so that they could cope with these unpredictable conditions.

Nick:

And cope they did. When throwing equipment out and throwing provisions out of the airplane didn't save enough weight to keep their altitude up, Marina Raskova jumped out of the airplane. She took a parachute and she bailed out because they needed to shed a little bit of extra weight. That enabled the other two pilots, Valentina and Polina, to continue and complete the mission and land safely.

Emily:

Yeah. This kind of gave them sort of this rockstar status, when they eventually got back to Moscow. They were really national heroes.

Matt:

That's right. They got fan mail from all around the country, people who were celebrating their accomplishment.

Nick:

That's how Marina Raskova went on to become the first aviation navigator in the Soviet Air Force. That sets our scene in fair Verona.

Matt:

Okay, Shakespeare.

Emily:

After this historic flight, it was really sort of the linchpin to getting Stalin to essentially establish the 588th Night Bomber Regiment, which is the regiment that then became known as the Night Witches.

Nick:

So even then it wasn't necessarily easy for you to March in as a woman to join the Soviet Air Force, but luckily Marina Raskova, one of the most famous aviators in the country, has been campaigning Stalin for a long time before this, and now there's an actual need. So he authorizes the creation of three, all female flight regiments. One of whom is the 588th, which is the Night Witches.

Emily:

It's a group of very young women. While they're very experienced, they're 17 to 26 years old. I mean, these aren't women who've been flying for decades. And they had to do it at night in particular, which is why they're the Night Witches. They were kind of sitting ducks.

Nick:

Highly flammable aircraft, we'll call them, made of wood and fabric.

Emily:

The characteristics of these little biplanes that made them so dangerous to fly and made these combat missions so harrowing was also what made them so successful. By being such small, lightweight aircraft, they could fly really low and glide, which made them also very silent and thus terrifying because you had no idea that they were coming.

Nick:

Yeah. They could fly really low. They could glide. They were really slow, which made them very dangerous to fly, but also made it really hard to fly against in combat. Because if your plane is going three or six times faster than the airplane that you're trying to catch, it makes it kind of difficult to intercept, right?

Matt:

Yeah. You get your one shot and then you've blown past the other plane.

Nick:

So they were slow, low and silent. Were these airplanes particularly quiet or was that part of the myth that the German army built up, that they would fly in on these silent wings of terror?

Matt:

Yeah. So that's the other theory about why they might've been called the Night Witches, is that it was not actually the sound of the bombs dropping, but of these planes when the women would turn off the engine of the plane and glide over the front lines where they would drop their bombs. The plane itself may have made that whooshing sound.

Nick:

Were they famous in Russia at the time?

Emily:

As Night Witches?

Nick:

Yes.

Emily:

I mean, they must've been famous as pilots in the same way that many of the founding members of the Ninety-Nines were famous pilots.

Matt:

And they famously contributed to breaking some of the big sieges of World War II. There were these great sieges against Russian cities by the Germans during World War II. There was the Siege of Leningrad and the Battle of Moscow. If you know anything about Russian history, you know that in the terrible winter conditions of Russia, a lot of the people in these cities were starving and eating shoe leather and other things that you wouldn't normally eat, like wallpaper, because they had run out of all other food. The Night Witches we're locally celebrated for having helped to end these sieges and fight off the Germans during that. Unfortunately, after the war, they received no real recognition for what they had done.

Emily:

Of course, this is something that all women after World War II, no matter what country essentially you were from-

Nick:

We weren't much better at.

Emily:

We weren't much better at it. Women now who served during World War II are still trying to get recognition in some cases for their efforts the Night Witches we're no different just because they're from a different country.

Nick:

The surviving Night Witches, the surviving women of the 588th get together every year at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow to swap war stories, just like World War II veterans in the United States. Their terror was so long-lasting that the German media still covers it.

There's a death metal song about them. Death metal, is a death metal? It's just heavy metal.

Matt:

I don't know. I don't know the difference between death metal and heavy metal. Neither one of them is really my cup of tea.

Nick:

There's a Swedish metal band that wrote a song about the Night Witches, and the band is called Broden.

Matt:

What does that mean?

Nick:

I don't speak Swedish. There may be emphasis on a syllable that I'm getting wrong.

Matt:

Sure. Emphasis.

Nick:

Yeah. The lyrics are pretty impressive. The excerpt that I wanted to share is
(singing).

"Canvas wings of death, prepare to meet your fate. Night Bomber Regiment 588."

Matt:

That's not bad.

Nick:

No, it's pretty good.

(singing)

Emily:

You know what's crazier than this incredible music homage to the 588? Women in Russia are still not allowed to fly as combat pilots. Here in the US, women only got the opportunity to fly as combat pilots as recently as the 1990s. But in 2017, Russia did begin to allow women to enter fighter pilot training. So while women in Russia were allowed to fly eventually for the war effort back in the '40s, they still haven't gotten back to that point.

Nick:

The fight for gender equality in military aviation continues.

Emily:

Slowly.

Nick:

It does.

Emily:

That's it for this episode of AirSpace. We'll be back in two weeks with a new episode.

Nick:

AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer, Jocelyn Frank and Michelle Harven, with help on this episode from Ellen Rolfes.

Matt:

Mixed by Tarek Fouda.

Emily:

Special thanks to Jason Jason Orfanon, Genevieve Sponsler and John Barth.

Nick:

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