**Q:** I understand that you have met some of the Night Witches and WASPs first hand. I would appreciate if you could describe the experiences. Which members of the Night Witches did you meet? And which WASPs?

**A:** I first met some of the WASP and one of the Soviet WWII aviatrixes at a Women in Aviation, International Conference in 2002, and then at several subsequent conferences. I then went to a Moscow “Aviatrissa” conference in 2005 and met quite a few more of the Soviet women veterans. It was a fantastic experience. Both he WASP and the Soviet airwomen seem to have a tight sorority of sorts, based on their incredibly unique shared experiences. The Soviet veterans tend to wear their medals and burst out into old wartime songs. The first Soviet aviatrix I met was Galina Brok-Beltsova, and then (of course) I spent an afternoon with Anna Timofeyeva-Yegorova in her apartment. Here are 2 essays I wrote about those experiences:

<https://aviatrixkim.wordpress.com/2011/10/12/back-in-the-former-ussr/> (note: This essay also contains info about a weird, traumatic experience I had in Russia many years ago—just a heads up.)

<https://redskyblackdeath.wordpress.com/about/>

Amy has met many of the WASP and can be of more help with this question. Just now, I can’t remember the names of the WASP I met. Vi Cowden, I think?

Note: Not all of the Soviet veterans are considered “Night Witches.” That refers to the night bombing regiment only, and of course, there were 3 regiments (plus women like Yegorova who flew in men’s regiments).

**Q:** Is there anything these women said or did which stood out to you (memorable moments) during your visits?

**A:** The singing stood out to me. Also, it’s interesting that some of them have an almost apologist view of Stalin’s rule. Their patriotism seems, at times, notably unexamined.  I remember Galina Brok-Beltsova waxing on about what a great leader Stalin was during the war, until an aerobatic pilot friend of hers had finally had enough. “He sent my father to the Gulag!” the other pilot said.

I think those veterans are like so many other war veterans: When you sacrificed so much, it’s painful to acknowledge that the regime you were fighting for might have been illegitimate or tyrannical. And when you consider that the Soviets were very much fighting against the annihilation of their nation, it makes sense that they might be relatively grateful (and uncritical) of the leader who brought them through that time.

As you may have noticed in Yegorova’s story, there are many times when she seems conflicted between her patriotism and belief in Soviet communism, and her feelings of betrayal after being treated as a traitor by the Soviet authorities (because of having been a POW). She never stopped struggling with that. When I spent the afternoon in her apartment hearing her stories, the only time she became emotional was when she recalled being interrogated by the Soviet secret police and treated with suspicion because she had been a prisoner of war. She’d been a war hero, and suddenly, the authorities took her medals away and treated her like a criminal. Even at 89, 91 years old, she would still shed tears when she spoke about this.

**Q:** How did the accomplishments of these women impact them and other women after the end of World War II?

**A:** I defer to Amy and other historians on this question, but I believe that the women were basically asked to go home, raise their kids, and forget the war. They were largely forgotten, and very few of them were able to have aviation careers after the war. Two good sources for answering this are Anne Noggle’s *A Dance with Death* and Reina Pennington’s book, *Wings Women, and War*…

For the WASP, the story may be a little different; but my impression is that by the end of the war, as male servicemen were coming home, the WASP found themselves summarily out of a job. (They were deactivated in 1944.) For years, they weren’t even considered veterans. Amy knows much more about this. (See her 2010 story for the Washington Post: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703862704575100082049276188>)

Also, it took decades for American women to be allowed to hold jobs in certain sectors of aviation even after the WASP had proved themselves so ably in WWII. A few friends of mine were some of the first women hired as pilots for major US airlines. This did not happen until the 70s!!

**Q:** How was Joseph Stalin convinced to form all-women air regiments during World War II? Who convinced him?

**A:** I don’t think anyone knows for sure. Historians like Raisa Pennington (and Amy) probably have some good guesses. I think he may have personally liked Marina Raskova, and perhaps she knew that she could influence him with her charm and her fame & popularity as a female aviation pioneer. He could always see the value in using legendary worker-heroes as motivational symbols (for propaganda purposes), and perhaps that’s what Raskova and her fellow aviatrixes were meant to be? This is just a guess. I don’t buy the theory that the female regiments were created because the Soviets needed every able-bodied person they could get (even though they pretty much did). Mostly because, after the first weeks of war when so many Soviet airplanes were destroyed on the ground by surprise attacks, the problem was, I believe, less one of a shortage of pilots than of a shortage of planes. 

**Q:** How did other women view Marina Raskova, Anna Yegorova, and other female aviatrix? How did men in the Red Army view these women?

**A:** There are a few stories in Yegorova’s book about how she had to win over her male comrades-in-arms. I think many viewed her with initial mistrust until she proved herself with her capability. Do you remember the story she told about the guy who didn’t want to fly with her because “a dame on a ship” was bad luck? IF I remember right, she came back to rescue him, and he changed his tune. (Go back and check the details—not sure of my memory.)

**Q:** What were some of Ms. Yegorova’s experiences in the war as a female aviatrix?

**A:** There are a ton! There are several great stories. I like the one about her being shot up and having to land in a small village (when she was still a liaison pilot flying the Po-2 biplane), and then realizing the village is already occupied. Instead of fleeing, she tows the plane to safety with a horse, then later,  drains the oil, gets a village lady to reheat it on the stove, and replaces the warm oil in the plane. She manages to take off and make it home in the damaged plane.

And then, of course, the most dramatic story is the one where she is shot down in Poland and taken prisoner.

**Q:** How were these Russian women treated during World War II? How were they treated post-war?

**A:** My impression is that after the war, they were mostly forgotten. I get the sense that there was a sort of return to gender traditionalism after the war, and that women were expected to pretend they had never been snipers, spies, or airwomen, and to keep quiet about their experiences.

**Q:** Many of these Russian female aviators are viewed as the equivalent of Amelia Earhart. Do you think this title reflects their accomplishments?

**A:** I think their accomplishments are wildly different than anything Amelia Earhart ever did. The early distance-record flights that Raskova did (with others) were analogous to Earhart’s famous long-distance flights, but their wartime flying is in no way comparable. Sure, Earhart did important things for women in aviation, but she also had the full force of a massive propaganda machine behind her. The Soviet combat airwomen had none of that, especially in the West. Most people I talk to about this topic know nothing about the Soviet women veterans. But everyone knows Earhart.

**Q:** Any other information from your travels?

**A:** One of my favorite moments ever in life was the afternoon I spent with Anna Yegorova, hearing her stories. She is one of the most incredible people I’ve ever met, and it was an incredible privilege to be on the small team of people who helped her to tell her story to the English-speaking world.