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# FLYING FOR HER COUNTRY

The American and Soviet Women  
Military Pilots of World War II

*Amy Goodpaster Strebe*

Foreword by Trish Beckman



**PRAEGER SECURITY INTERNATIONAL**

Westport, Connecticut • London

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Goodpaster-Strebe, Amy.

Flying for her country: the American and Soviet women military pilots of World War II /  
Amy Goodpaster Strebe; foreword by Trish Beckman.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-275-99434-1 (alk. paper)

1. World War, 1939-1945—Aerial operations, American. 2. Women Airforce Service Pilots (U.S.)—Biography. 3. World War, 1939-1945—Aerial operations, Soviet. 4. World War, 1939-1945—Participation, Female. 5. Women air pilots—United States—Biography. 6. Women air pilots—Soviet Union—Biography. I. Title.

D790.G65 2007

940.54'49730922—dc22 2007016220

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2007016220

ISBN-13: 978-0-275-99434-1

ISBN-10: 0-275-99434-1

First published in 2007

Praeger Security International, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

[www.praeger.com](http://www.praeger.com)

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Mom—For always believing in me



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# FOREWORD

As a young girl growing up in Huntsville, Alabama, I was influenced by the space program and interested in all things mechanical: repairing automobiles, building model rockets, and flying radio-controlled airplanes. I loved math and science. During my twenty-eight years of active duty in the U.S. Navy, I earned a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in aeronautical engineering, completed flight training as a Naval Flight Officer, graduated from U.S. Naval Test Pilot School (and later instructed there), and was lucky enough to fly in sixty-seven types of military aircraft. The job I enjoyed the most was when I was responsible for the production of F/A-18C/D aircraft in St. Louis. It was very satisfying to fly as a Weapon Systems Operator in the F/A-18D, and to use my engineering skills to research issues related to the production process. It was also rewarding to see all the aircraft, for which I had responsibility during production, return home safely from the armed conflict known as Operation Desert Storm.

If it weren't for the women who went before me, in the civilian equal rights movement and in military aviation, I would not have had such rewarding professional opportunities. Even so, during most of my military career, men who were less qualified than I was (in education, physical ability, and experience) were allowed access to aircraft that were denied to me. By law, those who genetically possessed the tiny little y-chromosome were given precedence when aircraft assignments were made; men were presumed to have the exclusive right to fly combat aircraft.

When my Navy career began in 1970, I encountered some negative attitudes toward women in military aviation. Almost thirty years had passed

since American women had flown military aircraft, long enough for the men involved to conveniently “forget” the contributions made by women aviators in World War II. Only three years after the war ended, Congress enacted Combat Exclusion Laws that made legal the discrimination against women aviators.

My generation had to prove we could fly all over again. Fortunately, we had women role models and mentors to help us do this. The women who were my role models in the 1970s—and who became my mentors in the 1980s and later, when I was lucky to finally meet them—were the Soviet airwomen, the WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots), and the female Navy navigators of World War II.

During the 1970s, race and gender rights were hotly debated. I remember one discussion with a young sailor who arrogantly asked me, “If women are as good as men, then why are there no famous women chefs?” I was taken aback by that question; “famous chefs” were not my area of interest or expertise (I had not yet heard of Julia Child), what did that have to do with the military, and how could he not know that “denied opportunity” might be a cause?

I believe the sailor intentionally picked that question in order to imply that “chef” was a career where only men were worthy, and that women (who do most of the cooking on the planet) were not capable of being “chefs” on par with men because men were superior in every possible way. But, if he had said that women were not capable of being military aviators I would have known exactly what to say: “You are wrong, wrong, wrong! Let me introduce you to the women who flew during World War II.”

Before they were “officially” allowed to serve, women disguised themselves as men and served with the U.S. military beginning as early as the Revolutionary War. The first women to serve officially in the U.S. armed forces were in the Army Nurse Corps beginning in 1901, and in the Navy Nurse Corps in 1908. In 1917, the U.S. Navy was the first military service to enlist women in fields other than as nurses; women also served proudly in the Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

In 1915, following the sinking of the British hospital ship *Anglia*, the newspaper headlines called for the right to vote for heroines as well as heroes. The debate at the time was whether “the vote” was a reward for women’s wartime loyalty. British women over the age of thirty were given the right to vote in 1918, and all women in Britain over the age twenty-one gained suffrage in 1928.

Similarly in America, women’s service during World War I was part of the debate in Congress, which in 1919 approved the Nineteenth Amendment (women’s right to vote). American women had proved they were willing to serve in the military (Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard), even before they could vote. The Amendment became law in 1920 following ratification by the States.

Some women seem to forget whose shoulders they walk upon, ignoring the sacrifices of the pioneers who paved the road ahead of them. I often wonder how many American women, on their way to the polls to vote, know that many Suffragists were imprisoned and some died in the struggle that eventually gave American women the right to vote in 1920. I also wonder how many American women appreciate the fact that military women, willing to defend our nation before they could even vote, helped women in the United States gain the right to vote.

In World War II, over 400,000 women served in all branches of the U.S. military. Women proved they could not only fly every type of fighter and bomber aircraft as the male pilots, but they could also build and repair the airplanes, among many other nontraditional jobs.

Until and throughout World War II, women were only welcome in the military during wartime when the threat of danger was more imminent. Ironically, it was in peacetime that men vocally professed their belief that women should be “protected and kept out of harm’s way.” In my opinion, what they really meant to say was that men needed to be “protected from equal competition with women” during peacetime.

It should come as no surprise that, as a compromise for allowing women to serve in the U.S. military during peacetime, Congress passed the Combat Exclusion Laws in 1948 to prevent women from serving in “aircraft engaged in combat missions” in the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force. Navy women were also prohibited from serving on combat ships. There has never been, however, a law restricting the assignment of Army women; only by policy have there been restrictions.

Following World War II, the number and types of jobs for servicewomen quickly dwindled. When I enlisted in the Navy in 1970, I was not permitted to be an aircraft mechanic or avionics technician (jobs that were previously held by Navy women in the war). As the Vietnam conflict ended in 1973, the U.S. military embraced the concept of an All-Volunteer Force (the men’s draft ended), and women became integrated into the military services. More jobs were opened permanently to women, including the opportunity to train as military pilots (Navy in 1973, Army in 1974, and Air Force in 1976).

Women were still limited to noncombat aviation roles, which only hindered their promotion potential but did not keep them out of harm’s way. American women served in Panama, Grenada, and Desert Storm. They could be targets, but they were not allowed to shoot back. Yet they continued to serve faithfully.

During Operation Desert Storm the American people recognized the dedication of military women aviators, and in 1991 both houses of Congress voted to repeal the Combat Exclusion Laws. The policy finally changed in 1993 under the Clinton Administration. Since then, American military women have flown aircraft engaged in combat missions, being allowed

to shoot back—as Sabiha Gökçen did in Turkey in 1937 and Marina Raskova’s three Soviet women’s aviation regiments did in World War II.

As a military volunteer, I know why I was motivated to serve my country. While I cannot be sure what motivates other women and men to serve in the armed forces, I believe that Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed it well in his poem “Voluntaries” over 140 years ago:

... In an age of fops and toys,  
Wanting wisdom, void of right,  
Who shall nerve heroic boys  
To hazard all in Freedom’s fight...

... So nigh is grandeur to our dust,  
So near is God to man,  
When Duty whispers low, Thou must,  
The youth replies, I can...

It is unlikely that Emerson envisioned that “heroic boys” could someday be replaced by “heroic girls” willing to risk their lives in “Freedom’s fight.” Let us give Mr. Emerson the benefit of the doubt and assume he did not have access to any documentation suggesting that women, often disguised as men, had risked their lives in armed conflicts by the mid-1860s. But whether such documentation was missed, or dismissed, women had in fact served in combat.

By the beginning of the 1940s, women no longer had to disguise themselves as men to serve in combat. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet women took up arms in a variety of combat roles during the Great Patriotic War, including aviation. Some Soviet women flyers were so effective and feared that they were nicknamed “Night Witches” by their German foes.

American women aviators did not get the opportunity to serve in combat in World War II. Navy women, however, instructed men in the science of navigation, both on the ground and in the air. The WASP were civilians who flew ferrying missions and performed every duty inside the cockpit as their male counterparts aside from combat. It was not until 1979—thirty-four years after the end of the war—that the WASP achieved their long overdue, retroactive military veteran status. Had American women faced the same threat to U.S. soil as Soviet women faced in their own country during World War II, they would have served in combat willingly, I have no doubt. The women pilots’ love of country and their love of flying were their passions—passions which we younger American military women have proudly “inherited.”

While several books have been written about the Soviet airwomen and the WASP, this is the first scholarly endeavor to weave together the women’s wartime efforts within their historical context, while also boldly examining

the gender roles of women during this period. Meticulously researched with the women veterans' own words as witness, this exceptional book pays tribute to the invaluable contributions made by the American and Soviet women pilots during World War II.

In the pages to follow, Amy Goodpaster Strebe will transport you into the extraordinary lives of the world's first women military pilots—to help you better understand what motivated these heroic female aviators to risk their lives in “Freedom’s fight.”

*Trish Beckman*  
*Commander, U.S. Navy (Retired)*

