

WOMEN AND WAR

Females in Flight

Facts:

- In World War II, American Women Airforce Service Pilots, WASPs, logged 60 million miles in 78 kinds of planes including B-26s and B-29s.
- The British Air Transport Auxiliary delivered into service 300,000 aircraft of 51 different types. 166 pilots were female; 20 died in service.
- 17,308 women served in the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force during World War II; 591 were officers.
- 1000 Russian women flew combat missions during World War II. The all female 586 Fighter Air Regiment had 38 kills.

Before the Readings:

- Women delivered planes, supported the war in the air, held officer positions, flew combat missions and died while in the service of their respective Air Forces. Why do you know so little of their history?
- Discuss what you know about Amelia Erhardt and Roberta Bondar. Why have these women made history and not the women of World War II?
- Once the 'genie was out of the bottle', why was it difficult for women to return to the roles they filled before World War II?

Reading 1 – Reactions

In spite of being dressed in a uniform that carried an official American Air Force patch with a band on the cuff indicating a Lieutenant's rank, female pilots had difficulty being taken for what they were. WASP Byrd Granger recalled that members of the public took her for a senior Girl Scout. Once when Byrd said she was a ferry pilot, she was asked if it was the Staten Island Ferry. When she followed up to say she ferried airplanes for the U.S. Air Force, the puzzled person wanted to know who really flew the planes. Stating that she really flew the planes, the person asked with exasperation, "Well, then who helps you?"

In another instance, two female pilots were ready to ferry a C-47 from a California base to the mid-west. The women, in full flying gear, stepped up to the Crew Chief to announce they were ready to go. The Crew Chief,

assuming they'd talked someone into letting them go along for the ride, told the young women that he was waiting for the pilots. "We are the pilots," the women replied. Shortly thereafter, the big twin-engine transport gained the sky in a flawless take-off with the two females at the controls.

A puzzled Texas operator in the control tower of an Army airfield heard what appeared to be a woman's voice asking for landing instructions. He knew that the plane couldn't be flown by a woman as it was a B-25. The bomber rolled in at 110 mph and came to a stop. "I'll be damned," said the control tower operator when a female pilot stepped out of the cockpit.

After the Reading:

- What caused the misunderstandings these women experienced?
- In what fields or areas do women still face such misunderstandings?
- In which areas would men experience this same type of gender stereotyping?

Reading 2 – The ultimate sacrifice: an American friendship

Elizabeth Magid and Marie Robinson met and became good friends at Avenger Field in Sweetwater Texas while training for the WASPs. They promised one another that should one die, the other would go to the bereaved mother.

After their 1944 graduation, the young women were stationed together as air craft ferry pilots at Love Field in Dallas. Later when Elizabeth went to Georgia to fly overhauled basic and advanced trainers, Marie went to California to Victorville Air Force Base where she flew twin-engine bombers.

Sadly, in October 1944 Marie was killed in the crash of a B-25. She was 19 years old. Elizabeth finished her last flying duties while awaiting transportation to Michigan for Marie's Memorial Service. Above the cumulus clouds, she felt Marie's presence. As Elizabeth recalled their training days, for a moment, the friends were together again. Back on the ground, Elizabeth wrote "Celestial Flight".

Elizabeth shared the words of the poem with Marie's mother after the memorial service, thereby fulfilling the promise the two had made to one another - a promise neither had dreamt would have to be kept.

The ultimate sacrifice: The White Rose of Stalingrad

At 16 years of age Lilya Litvak, a petite, grey-eyed beauty with the long hair typical of a Russian maiden, crept off to take flying lessons as part of the paramilitary flying clubs sponsored by the state. Due to the activities of these flying clubs, many young girls had more flying time than young men.

On the first day of the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Germans destroyed 1136 planes; by the week's end, 4017 aircraft lay in ruins. Young men and women were desperate to avenge the attacks. Initially the female volunteers were rejected but then the Soviet government relented to create three female air regiments. All personnel were female, including the mechanics, armorers and ground staff.

Lilya helped establish the all female 586th Fighter Air Regiment. The 586th fought with fury. They flew over 4,000 combat sorties in three years. German Major Bruno Meyer described the female pilots as brave daredevils with a sure flair for German weaknesses. Lilya made her first kills on her second combat sortie taking out a German Bf109 and Ju88 when she was 21 years of age.

Lilya was described as strikingly beautiful, in spite of having to cut her hair to no more than the allowed 2" length. She was fond of wildflowers, often carrying them with her on missions. She is said to have painted a white rose on each side of the cockpit of her Yak 1, earning her the name, "The White Rose of Stalingrad".

Eventually Lilya served with two different male units. Several times she was shot down but returned to combat. She was injured a third time July 18, 1943.

On August 1, 1943 the weary Lilya took to the air for the fourth time that day. She had claimed two kills on her previous flights. She did not return. Despite an intensive search by ground forces, Lilya's plane was never found. Legend had it that she was shot down by eight Bf109s.

In 1979 Lilya was found buried beneath the wing of her aircraft. During an official state funeral in 1990, President Mikhail Gorbachev posthumously awarded Lilya Litvak the Hero of the Soviet Union and a Gold Star. Although she died alone, her courage and daring were celebrated by many.

After the Readings:

- Describe three qualities or character traits that the stories of Marie, Elizabeth and Lilya illustrate. Are any of these traits stereotypically 'male' or 'female'?
- What, if anything, surprised you about these two stories of sacrifice?
- *Flying Higher* by Wanda Langley tells the story of Marie and Elizabeth and the WASP program in more detail. *Hwelte* by Roy McShane is a fictional account of Russia's female fighter pilots. Locate these books to read selections for Reading and Remembrance.

Extensions:

- Put together a report on female aviation pioneers: Baroness de Laroche, Harriet Quimby, Elizabeth (Elsie) MacGill, Roberta Bondar, Valentina Tereskova, Amelia Erhardt to read to fellow students for November 9.
- Download the poem "Celestial Flight" at www.womenofcourage.com to read for November 9. Write your own poem to celebrate all those unsung women who served their countries in their air forces during World War II.