

# Pioneering women pilots

by Suzanne Dee

Aviation is a field where every generation has its pioneers. Today, here on Washington Island, we have pioneers as young as 16 and as old as...well, we won't say...women who are stepping up to the great adventure of learning to pilot an aircraft.

The EAA Convention, which opens July 29th in Oshkosh, will be commemorating the pioneering efforts of women who served the U.S. Army Air Forces and the Air Transport Command from early 1943 to December 1944. Veterans of the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) will be on hand each day of the convention to tell about their experiences.

For those who are interested in the contribution of women pilots during World War II, the following two books, new to the Washington Island Library, describe in very interesting detail the experiences of women military aviators in the U.S. and Soviet Union.

*Women Pilots of World War II,*  
by Jean Hascall Cole

This book tells the story of American women in service to the Army Air Corps. Written from first-hand experience, the story follows one of the 18 classes of WASPs who were trained at Sweetwater, Texas, to serve in the Army Air Forces and the Air Transport Command. The author's recollections and those of her classmates have been organized into an easy-to-read account which paints a colorful and comprehensive picture of how these women got into flying as civilians, how they were trained by the Army Air Corps, and how they served the war effort after graduation.

WASPs worked as test pilots, checking out aircraft that were new from the factory or fresh from overhaul or repair. They ferried aircraft from the factories to bases where they were needed. They flew fighters and bombers in training missions for male pilots about to be shipped overseas to the War, towing the targets or being

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the targets for gunnery practice (real bullets in the first case, gun cameras in the second). Despite the hardships, it was a great adventure which many described, 50 years later, as the most rewarding period of their lives.

*Night Witches: The Untold Story of Soviet Women in Combat,*  
by Bruce Myles

While American women were serving as non-combat pilots, Soviet women were flying and working under vastly more challenging circumstances. In this book, author Myles documents in fascinating detail what had heretofore been tucked away in the official history of the Soviet Air Force in World War II – the remarkable accomplishment of over 1000 Soviet women pilots, navigators and mechanics who served on the front lines from the spring of 1942 through the end of the war in Europe.

These women, some only 18 or 19, others married and with children, stepped forward to help defend their homeland from the invading Nazi hordes. In the first months after Hitler's surprise attack, the Red Army and Air Force were decimated by the vastly superior German military machine. The Soviet Union's most famous women pilot was called on to

organize and train three all-woman regiments. Patriotic women from all republics of the Soviet Union responded and served with great distinction. One women's regiment flew night bombing raids against German frontline troops, braving anti-aircraft fire in light, training aircraft. Flying sortie after sortie all night long, they prevented the Nazi ground troops from getting any rest, and hence came to be known as the Night Witches.

The author was able to interview survivors of these regiments and has crafted a very readable, human-interest drama with enough technical details to satisfy the casual military historian.

Both books contain photo sections which show the individuals named in the text with their aircraft and in other scenes of daily life during their military service.