

...they were called **Night Witches**

The Night Witches (*Nachthexen* in German, *Ночные ведьмы* in Russian) was the nickname the Germans gave to the World War II Soviet Air Forces Night Bomber Regiment, called **the 46th Taman' Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment**, a women-only combat regiment.

The regiment flew harassment bombing and precision bombing missions from 1942 to the end of the war. At its largest size, it had 40 two-person crews. It flew over 23,000 sorties and is said to have dropped 3,000 tons of bombs. Ten of the girls were students of Moscow Universities who volunteered for the Red Army and served in the regiment.



It was a highly-decorated unit in the Soviet Air Force, each pilot having flown over 1,000 missions by the end of the war and twenty-three having been awarded *the Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union*. Thirty-one of its members died in combat.

Because of their performance these women soon won the respect of their adversaries, and the Germans started calling them "Night Witches."

Hauptmann Johannes Steinhoff, the commander of II./JG 52 on September 2, 1942, wrote: *"We simply couldn't grasp that the Soviet airmen that caused us the greatest trouble were in fact WOMEN. These women feared nothing. They came night after night in their very slow biplanes, and for some periods they wouldn't give us any sleep at all."*

The regiment flew in wood and canvas Polikarpov Po-2 (U-2) biplanes, a 1928 design intended for use as training aircraft and for crop-dusting.

On most occasions, the small bomb load and poor navigational devices of the "Night Witches" prevented them from dealing heavy material damage to the enemy. But on the night of 25 October 1942, a lucky bomb strike set a fuel depot at the airfield of Armavir ablaze. The fire spread, and six Ju 88s and He 111s of Stab and II./KG 51 were destroyed. Only one aircraft escaped damage. This led to the quick withdrawal of II./KG 51 to the Kerch Peninsula.





As a counter-measure, Fliegerkorps IV organized an improvised night-fighter unit of 10./ZG1. Operating with the support of searchlights, the Bf 110s of this unit took a heavy toll of the slow and brittle Po-2 biplanes once they encountered them in the air. The Po-2 aircraft was easily set on fire by either the anti-aircraft or machine-gun tracers, and the plane was almost always doomed.

The most successful night-fighter pilot of 10.(NJ)/ZG1 during this period was Oberfeldwebel Josef Kociok. During a single night he destroyed four Po-2s in a row. Serafima Amosova witnessed this event: *"One night, as our aircraft passed over the target, the searchlights came on, the anti-aircraft guns were firing, and then a green rocket was fired from the ground. The anti-aircraft guns stopped, and a German fighter plane came and shot down four of our aircrafts as each one came over the target. Our planes were burning like candles. We all witnessed this scene. When we landed and reported that we were being attacked by German fighters, they would not let us fly again that night".*

References:

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_Witches
2. *"We were called Night Witches"* by I.Rakobolskaya, N.Kravtsova. Moscow. MGU. 2005 ISBN 5-211-05008-8
3. *"Night Witches"* P.Gelman, N.Meklin-Kravtsova, N.Popova, N.Raspopova, I.Rakobolskaya. A&F 09 (1270) March 2, 2005.
4. *"Night Witches"* R.Aronova. Memoirs. Moscow. Sovetskaya Rossiya. 1969.
5. *Marina Raskova and Soviet Female Pilots*. Written by [Harold Stockton](#), [Dariusz Tyminski](#) and [Christer Bergström](#).

The War

From the memoirs of R.Aronova [4] :

...The enemy could not comprehend what sort of plane the Russians had: it stopped above the target, as though anchored, and dripped, dripped bombs. Neither AA guns nor projectors were designed for such a "slow plodder", and the PO-2 successfully escaped them. But, in time, the enemy adapted. Our techs spent more and more time patching holes. A change in strategy was in order.

We began flying in pairs. The first plane approaches target, draws enemy fire, while the second, calmly and without interference, hits the main objective. The first, meanwhile, drops bombs on the projectors and AA gun arrays.



But it was not always possible to fly paired. Then we resorted to a trick. Approach the target at much higher altitude than required for bombing. Idle the engine. The plane silently glides down, and just as silently moves away from target. Only after moving to a more-or-less safe distance, rev the engine again. This tactical maneuver became very dear to the entire regiment, and was rightly called one of the most reliable and effective.



Excerpt from *"We were called Night Witches"* by I.Rakobolskaya, N.Kravtsova. [2]:

However – and there is always a 'however' – at night, without radio, with no cover or backup, with full camouflage on the ground, we nevertheless needed to accurately identify the target and destroy it; then, without guiding lights, we had to find our airfield, where the runway was most often marked with lamps open only on one side. Our pilots quipped: "We need to land by the light of the commander's cigarette."



...

Boys from the house where the headquarters had been set up ran to get a glimpse of the “pilots”, and came back disappointed: “Those aren’t pilots... girls...”

...

[One day] our planes stood, camouflaged by nothing. An enemy pilot, returning from assignment, first strafed us; one plane caught fire, a mechanic was hurt. And then he returned with backup, and they stormed us in earnest. Never before have we been attacked by day. Only then did we understand what infantry troops must feel when, above them, planes roar past, and they see the smiling faces of pilots, and bombs flying toward them... I lay in some kind of a ditch on the edge of the field. No, I was not remembering my life or saying goodbye to my mother. There were two precise thoughts: “Why am I so big?” and “Let it be quick”... But the attackers did not return: our fighters took to the skies, a dogfight began, and the Germans left.



August 1. 1943. BLAULINIE.



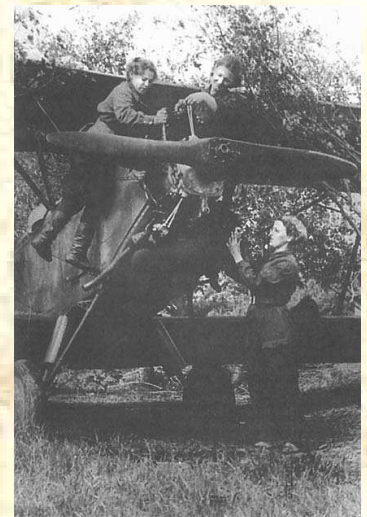
From the memoirs of R.Aronova [4]:

The enemy fought fiercely for their last fortified stretch in Kuban, holding tenaciously onto the notorious “Blue Line” (BLAULINIE in German). The line bristled against us with a great many projectors, snarled with the discordant barking of the AA guns. Losses in the regiment became more frequent.

The night between July 31st and August 1st, 1943, became a tragic page in the history of the regiment. In less than half an hour, four planes had burned. And without a single shot from the ground.

I.Rakobolskaya, N.Kravtsova recall [2]:

The most frightening of our battle nights was the night of 1 August, 1943. We flew on the “Blue Line”, which the Germans considered impregnable. For the first run, 15 planes flew out. The target was close, we could see the projectors, waiting to catch our machines. Suddenly we see: a plane flares, and falls, slowly, in a ball of fire. We consult the flight journal: who’s on fire above the target? ...The first plane returns, the team reports that they saw a plane burn at 22:18; another team – saw a machine burn at 23:00, and no sound of AA guns. Why? And just like that, four fires at different times. Out of 15, only 11 returned – those who, already above the target, understood that the Germans had sent against us their night fighters; that was why the AA guns were silent, afraid to hit one of their own. Our little machines, caught in the lights of the projectors, were ideal targets for a fighter, and one shot was more than enough...



Our girls, evading the projectors, began quickly losing altitude, leaving almost at hedge-hop, which the fighters, at their speeds, could not match. That was how they survived, those who understood and managed. But eight people died – burned.

Excerpt from the book [3] by P.Gelman, N.Meklin-Kravtsova, N.Popova, N.Raspopova, I.Rakobolskaya:]

Certainly, the PO-2 could not lift many bombs. The strength of these little planes was in something else: they dropped their loads with exceptional accuracy. Of course, small bombs did not always bring significant harm to the enemy. Nevertheless, every night we kept the Germans tense, did not let them sleep. Once the patience of their commanders snapped – from the Western front they sent up twin-engine night fighters “Messerschmitt-110”.



That night, 1 August 1943, we will never forget. Then, in but a few hours, the German night hunter burned above the Taman four of our planes, and eight young women lost their lives. We had encountered such an enemy for the first time, but quickly learned to distinguish his presence. If in the region of the target projectors were blazing, yet the AA artillery was silent – then, somewhere close by, a German “nighter” was patrolling the skies.



From the memoirs of R.Aronova [4]:

Soon the entire Taman peninsula was freed. Our regiment, too, had contributed to this. On October 9th we found out that our regiment would be given the name “Tamanskii”. Fourteen girls died here, on this damned “Blue Line”.

“Night Witches” Mission.

Kuban. Taman Peninsula.
October 2nd. 1943. 3:30AM.

RED side:

U-2 night bombers: attack and destroy enemy headquarters, fuel storage, and fortifications in and around *Vishestblevskaya (E16)*. Our friends behind enemy lines have promised to set up marker flares near the targets where possible.

Fighters from 16-GVIAP and 116-IAP: protect the light bombers.

Seek and destroy the German Night Hunters. “Blue Line” is broken. It’s payback time.

BLUE side:

Our intelligence service reports that the Russians are planning a joint strike. The “Night Witches” with fighters’ support will attack at the crack of dawn.

JG52 with help of SG1: protect ground over *Vishestblevskaya (E16)*.

ZG1 Night Fighters: seek and destroy Russian light night bombers.

They will not withstand another blow.

As you already guessed this is a “What If” mission with emphasis on a dogfight. Good luck!