



# THE WHITE ROSE OF STALINGRAD



MANY WOMEN FILLED THE FRONTLINE RANKS OF SOVIET ARMED FORCES DURING WORLD WAR TWO. ONE SUCH COMBATANT WAS FEMALE FIGHTER PILOT LIDIYA LITVYAK, AS MALCOLM V LOWE DETAILS

**Above right** 'Lilya' Litvyak became something of a pin-up when her prowess as a fighter pilot began to reach a wider audience. There is evidence she had a romantic attachment to one of the pilots of the 73 GvIAP, who himself was killed in a flying accident. VIA NIKOLAY BARANOV

**T**he conflict on the Eastern Front became known to the Soviet Union's people as the Great Patriotic War and it is still seen in that way by modern-day Russians. It was a grim, total conflict, with little mercy being given by either side. Within this cauldron of death and destruction, which lasted from June 1941 until May 1945, a tough and very specific breed of combatants came to the fore on the Soviet side.

## UNIQUE AVIATORS

The Soviet Union was the only major participant during World War Two to allow women to regularly serve as frontline troops and aircrew. And it was no publicity stunt. The contribution of the 'fairer sex' to the Soviet war effort was significant and was tragically marked with much hardship and sadness. In the air war over the Eastern Front, female aviators were in the thick of the fighting and one remarkable young woman was to gain lasting fame due

to her exploits at the controls of an iconic aircraft from that theatre, the Yakovlev Yak-1.

Born on August 18, 1921 in Moscow, Lidiya Vladimirovna Litvyak is generally regarded as being the first woman ever to shoot down an enemy aircraft in aerial combat and one of just two female pilots to achieve 'ace' status with five or more confirmed victories in the air. She flew in the often-frantic air skirmishes over the Eastern Front and participated in two major engagements, the Battles of Stalingrad and Kursk. That she was able to achieve any of this was remarkable, but her family's troubled background also made her achievements doubly outstanding.

At the time of her birth, Moscow was only just emerging as the capital of the new Soviet Union following the chaos of the civil war that had gripped the former Tsarist Russia in the wake of World War One. Litvyak's father was a railwayman and

her mother a shop worker; the family had no connections with aviation. Nevertheless, Litvyak was fascinated by the lore of flight at an early age, impressed by flying displays and interested in the possibility of taking to the air herself. She unofficially and surreptitiously managed to receive piloting lessons at a local flying club while still 14, and it is now widely believed she made her first solo flight at the age of 15 in a Polikarpov U-2 biplane.

This was an excellent achievement, but her family then faced tragedy. Her father became a victim of the notorious and totally unnecessary purges of the later 1930s, being branded an enemy of the state – even though he was a comparatively lowly administrator. This could have ended Litvyak's budding aviation ambitions, but somehow her remaining family struggled through the calamity.

In the Soviet Union it had become generally accepted – although many

**Below** The famous Yak-1 'Yellow 44' that Litvyak flew in some of her early combats. Though comparatively lightly armed, the type was an excellent fighter that gave Soviet pilots the chance of flying on roughly equal terms against Luftwaffe Messerschmitt Bf 109s. MALCOLM V LOWE COLLECTION



male pilots were against the idea – that women had a part to play in aviation. Several notable females made a name for themselves during the inter-war period, among them Marina Raskova who excelled at long-distance flying.

One very important task that women pilots fulfilled admirably during the 1930s was that of the instructor. It was a role that Litvyak appears to have easily grown into, teaching not just male but also female student pilots of which there was a growing number by the late 1930s. Teaching at the Kalinin flight school, she was already an experienced aviator when World War Two began.

### GERMAN AGGRESSION

The Soviet Union was involved in the fighting from the start, attacking Poland during September 1939 and later waging a separate war against Finland. However, it was Nazi Germany's offensive against the Soviets starting on June 22, 1941 (Operation Barbarossa) that brought the country fully into the war. From the first day, the USSR was plunged into a deep crisis due to the immediate success of the German attack. Soviet aviation assets suffered massively at the hands of the Luftwaffe in the air and especially while on the ground during the early phase of the German offensive.

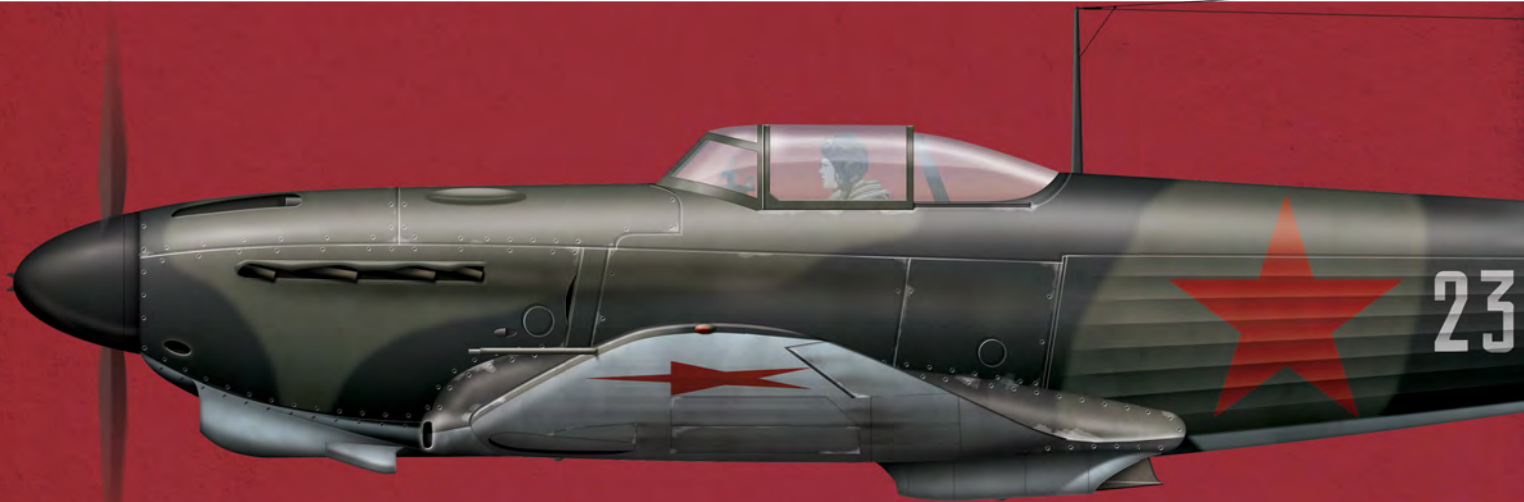
This caused an immediate emergency and required as much input as possible from all able-bodied personnel, female as well as male. Litvyak, like many young people of her generation, was fiercely patriotic and willing to work for the survival of the Soviet state. This was true even considering the demise of her father during the excesses of its sometimes-brutal rule. She applied for entry into the Soviet air force (VVS) but was turned down because she truthfully admitted her total flying time, which was below the required 1,000 hours. But she re-applied, this time falsifying her flight hours, and was accepted.

A patriotic speech by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin during November 1941 called to arms women as well as men to defend against the German invaders, and Litvyak like many other young women was enthusiastic to take up the challenge. During this time the famous Soviet aviatrix Marina Raskova succeeded in using her influence with the country's hierarchy to encourage the creation of several all-female combat units within the VVS.

It must have been a considerable effort on Raskova's part because Soviet decree NKO SSSR No.0099 of October 8, 1941 was enacted to create three all-female combat units, one of which was to be instrumental in taking Litvyak to the frontline – the 586 IAP (IAP – Istrebitelnyy Aviatsionnyy Polk, or Fighter Aviation Regiment). This unit was receiving pilots in early December 1941 and it became fully operational in the first half of the next year. Litvyak was to become one of its rising stars. Interestingly, the 586 IAP was equipped with the new and potentially successful Yakovlev Yak-1 fighter. This manoeuvrable warplane was the best available to Soviet pilots by the second half of 1942 and Litvyak and her fellow female flyers were indeed fortunate to be equipped with this excellent little fighter from the outset. Their unit was initially sent south to Saratov, a strategic port city north of Stalingrad, where the

Below Litvyak photographed with a Yak-1B, presumably in the summer of 1943 while flying with 73 GVIAP. This handsome portrait contributed to the considerable folklore that gathered around her at that time.  
VIA NIKOLAY BARANOV





**“Three days after arrival, on September 13 Litvyak is generally regarded to have become the first ever woman in history to shoot down an aircraft in combat...”**

**Above**  
The Yakovlev Yak-1B ‘White 23’ of 73 GVIAP flown by Lidiya Litvyak in the summer of 1943. Technically the term ‘Yak-1B’ is not an official designation, because all main production examples of the Yak-1, with or without the cut-down rear fuselage, were known to the manufacturer as Yak-1 fighters. It is believed Litvyak was shot down in this aircraft on August 1, 1943. ANDY HAY-FLYING ART

**Right**  
Three thoughtful female pilots use the tailplane of a Yak-1 to study a map or other paperwork. Litvyak is on the left. Those who knew her were impressed by her prowess as a pilot and her quiet professionalism. NIKOLAY BARANOV COLLECTION

female pilots were tasked to provide air defence. However, although there was some air combat, that area was not the ‘hottest’ part of the front.

Litvyak was ill at ease with the comparative lack of combat opportunities, as were her squadron-mates. It was particularly frustrating because at that time there were several key battles taking place over and in the vicinity of Stalingrad. This vitally important Soviet city was of strategic and symbolic importance to the nation, and under siege by German forces. It rapidly became one of the key battlegrounds of World War Two. The female pilots’ frustration came to the notice of Marina Raskova, who was able to use her considerable sway to convince the VVS to allow eight 586 IAP female flyers to be sent as reinforcements, to bolster the all-male fighter units around Stalingrad. Litvyak and fellow pilot Yekaterina ‘Katya’ Budanova were among those selected as replacements to join the 437 IAP. This unit was equipped with the Lavochkin-Gorbunov-Gudkov LaGG-3 (and later the La-5), but the women could take their coveted Yak-1s with them. Together with their ground support personnel they joined the 437 IAP in September 1942 and according to some Russian historians at once caused ‘Yak-envy’ on arrival, the Yak-1 already being regarded as a superior fighter to the more ponderous and often poorly built LaGG-3.

### HISTORIC COMBAT

This move put Litvyak genuinely on the front line for the first time,



and from then her exploits became the stuff of folklore. The newly arrived female pilots were soon in action. Three days after arrival, on September 13 Litvyak is generally regarded to have become the first ever woman in history to shoot down an aircraft in combat, when she brought down a Junkers Ju 88 (although some sources claim her victim was a Heinkel He 111). This was rapidly followed on the same day with her shooting down the Messerschmitt Bf 109G flown by Uffz Erwin Meier of I Gruppe, Jagdgeschwader 53 (I./JG 53), one of the premier Luftwaffe fighter wings over the Eastern Front. Meier was a prize indeed as he was one of the unit’s established aces.

He parachuted to safety and a popular tale has developed in subsequent years regarding his disbelief at the news of having been shot down by a female. He asked his Soviet captors to allow him to meet the pilot but had to accept it was indeed Litvyak when she

described to him the exact details of their dogfight.

However, the often chaotic nature of Eastern Front air combat has led to many controversies in recent times, thanks to missing or misleading records. At least one historian has claimed that Litvyak’s first aerial victory was not achieved until September 27, which would make her the second female to shoot down an enemy aircraft, fellow woman pilot Valeriya Khomyakova of 586 IAP having destroyed a Ju 88 of 7./KG 76 (KG – Kampfgeschwader or bomber wing) on the night of September 24, 1942. It was widely publicised at the time that Khomyakova’s achievement was the first-ever aerial victory by a female, which could explain the actual confusion as to who achieved the initial victory. What is certain is that Khomyakova’s shoot-down was the first nocturnal ‘kill’ by a female.

Litvyak’s tenacity and skill as a fighter pilot was not lost on the



**Left**  
Wearing full flying clothing, Litvyak was photographed with a Yak-1 in this publicity photograph. At the time of her death in early August 1943, she had risen to the rank of senior lieutenant and was a well-known and highly respected fighter pilot. NIKOLAY BARANOV COLLECTION



**Below left**  
Probably the most famous portrait of Litvyak is this image, one of the first (if not the first) to be published in the Soviet Union. It started to connect her to a wider audience in other countries when her fame became more widespread. The fact that female pilots were in the front line over the Eastern Front caused considerable dismay and interest among Western Allies. VIA NIKOLAY BARANOV

Soviet authorities but she had the tendency to upset her superiors with insubordinate exploits sometimes deemed unacceptable. She would occasionally 'beat up' her home airfield

on returning from a sortie and engage in low-level aerobatics, in contravention of official orders. She also became something of a fashion trendsetter, by making colourful flight scarves from parachute silk.

As part of the legend that has grown around her, in the later stages of the war and subsequent years Litvyak has been called by various nicknames including the 'White Rose of Stalingrad'. This is sometimes modified to 'White Lily of Stalingrad' due to the claim that she had a white lily painted on the cowling of her aircraft. No photographic evidence for this adornment has ever appeared, although several artists have painted a supposed emblem of that type on their depictions of her Yak-1.

Litvyak did apparently like to have flowers in the cockpit of her aircraft, and the nickname 'Lilya' was also associated with her.

She definitely shot down a Ju 88A on September 27, 1942, possibly an aircraft of I./KG 3. During the following month Litvyak and her long-time colleague 'Katya' Budanova were moved to an elite male Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment, 9 GvIAP (sometimes written as 9 GIAP), also defending Stalingrad, where Litvyak frequently flew against incoming Luftwaffe air raids. Sometimes she partnered with Budanova, and at other times with male pilots.

### FIGHTING BACK

The success of Soviet forces in lifting the siege of Stalingrad and defeating German forces in that area was a major turning point in the war on the Eastern Front. After that, the Soviet Union was able to take the initiative. This was particularly true of the air war, and the women fighter pilots alongside their male counterparts were able to increasingly take the fight to the Germans. ➔

**Below**  
'Katya' Budanova (left) photographed with Litvyak in this iconic image showing the only two female aces in history. Sadly, post-war controversy has challenged the war record of both young women, with the debate among historians on both sides of the former Iron Curtain continuing to this day. MALCOLM V LOWE COLLECTION



**FEMALE COMBAT AVIATORS**



The considerable influence exerted by Marina Raskova on the Soviet hierarchy, backed up later by a patriotic speech of Stalin's calling on Soviet women to defend their homeland, were catalysts in the creation and staffing of three regiments of female aviators for frontline combat.

These were the fighter regiment 586 IAP, with which Litvyak initially flew, together with the 587th Bomber Aviation Regiment (587 BAP, equipped with the Petlyakov Pe-2 light/dive bomber), and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment (588 NBAP, Polikarpov Po-2/U-2). The latter unit operated at night, harrying German ground forces, its personnel gaining the nickname 'Night Witches' from their enemies - although that term is nowadays often used erroneously to describe all Soviet women aircrew and personnel.

**FINAL FLIGHT**

It was during the Kursk battle that Litvyak's story also tragically came to a premature end. On August 1, 1943 within days of reaching the age of 22, she was flying in the vicinity of Krasniy Luch, now in modern-day Ukraine. A huge dogfight ensued in which she apparently shot down a Messerschmitt Bf 109G, but was then spotted disappearing into cloud with her aircraft seemingly damaged and being pursued by more Messerschmitts. She was never seen again.

Over the years there have been many claims and counterclaims as to what happened to Litvyak.

in 1979, near a village in the area where Litvyak was last sighted. A young female pilot was claimed to be buried there, and examination of the remains confirmed it was indeed Litvyak.

In May 1990, the final President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, posthumously awarded Litvyak the prestigious title Hero of the Soviet Union.

**CONTINUING ARGUMENTS**

Nevertheless, controversy persists as to Litvyak's actual fate. Indeed, there is a completely different thread that has emerged from several researchers, who claim that



Her combat score is also open to debate. Many historians are satisfied she achieved 11 or 12 'kills', plus several shared. But at least one writer suggests just five solo shoot-downs. What does not seem to be in doubt is her status as an ace with at least five confirmed victories. This makes her one of just two females to attain this status, alongside her friend Budanova. Some contemporary writers even dispute whether Budanova was an ace and might have herself achieved just three solo successes.

Amid all this argument, the true heroism of the female pilots has been seriously at risk of being diminished and underrated. Following World War Two, Litvyak's mechanic, Inna Paspornnikova, made an exhaustive search for the truth behind Litvyak's disappearance. Joined by archaeologists and other interested parties, Paspornnikova's searches unearthed various crash sites, leading to several lost flyers from the war being identified. But Litvyak's fate remained a mystery. However, a breakthrough appeared to be made

far from being killed in action on August 1, 1943 Litvyak was instead taken prisoner by the Germans and eventually appeared in Switzerland following World War Two. Like so many other theories, no concrete evidence to support this claim has been presented.

Whatever happened on that fateful day at the start of August 1943, it cannot be denied that Lidiya Litvyak was an accomplished pilot who achieved much in the several months she flew in combat. The frantic and often undocumented nature of warfare during that time has led to many arguments among historians and no consensus exists as to this heroic pilot's exploits and eventual fate. That is a great shame, and it has sometimes tended to diminish her undoubted achievements.

*Author's Acknowledgement: Grateful thanks to several of my Russian friends and fellow historians for their advice and input, especially Nikolay Baranov for photographic assistance. ●*

**Above**

Marina Raskova was a well-known female aviator prior to World War Two due to her long-distance flights. She had considerable influence in the upper tiers of Soviet hierarchy and her insistence led to the creation of the all-female 586 IAP, as well as two other combat regiments staffed by women.

MALCOLM V LOWE COLLECTION

Litvyak and Budanova were transferred to 296 IAP during late 1942 or early 1943, with this regiment soon gaining elite Guards status and becoming 73 GvIAP in March 1943.

During that period Litvyak and Budanova began flying 'free hunter' sorties, seeking out German aircraft, and their fame gradually spread. Wounded during a dogfight in March 1943, Litvyak, while recuperating in Moscow with her family, appears to have been recognised as one of the Soviets' top fighter pilots. This event helped lead to publicity and at last she started to gain the respect and popular acclaim she so richly deserved.

By the summer of 1943 the Soviet forces were able to launch a major offensive against the increasingly beleaguered Germans. Successfully blunting the German Operation Citadel, the Soviets went on the offensive. The result was the famous Battle of Kursk, a major clash famed for its tank-versus-tank engagements, in which air power played a significant - if largely unrecognised - part towards eventual Soviet victory.

By then Litvyak was regularly flying a new Yak-1B. This revision of the basic layout featured a cut-down fuselage spine behind the cockpit and was arguably the best of the series. Up to that point she had achieved several solo victories, in addition to shared claims, and during May 1943 brought down a German observation balloon, which had previously defied all attempts by the Soviets to destroy it.

Sadly, on July 19, 1943 Budanova was shot down and killed during a major air battle with Luftwaffe fighters.

**Right**

Women pilots from the all-female 586 IAP. Second from right is Valeriya Khomyakova, whom some historians credit as being the first female pilot to shoot down an enemy aircraft. Behind them is a Yak-1, a type that 586 IAP flew during its combat career. MALCOLM V LOWE COLLECTION