



# Spotlight

## Lavochkin La-5

# FlyPast

Scrutinizes the history of...



# The Lavochkin LA-5

**Above**  
Lavochkin La-5FN  
'White 72' was  
equipped with the  
upgraded M-82FN  
powerplant.  
VIA VLADIMIR  
KOTELNIKOV

**A**s the fighting intensified on the Russian Front between the invading Germans and the Soviet defenders, the VVS (Soviet Air Forces) desperately needed a superior fighter. While there was no doubting the courage and skill of the Russian pilots, the Luftwaffe's latest versions of the Messerschmitt Bf 109 were proving to be tough opposition in the skies over Russia in 1941. From September 1942 they were joined by an even more potent attacker, the Focke-Wulf Fw 190.

Hitler's aim was to destroy the Soviet Union as a military, political and economic power – its defeat would yield vast resources to the German conquerors, including much-needed oil supplies. Given the vast size and population of Russia, German forces needed to move

as quickly as possible, giving the defenders no time to react. From a Soviet point of view, the longer they could remain in the fight, the more certain they could be of vanquishing an increasingly stretched invading army.

Its prodigious capacity for aircraft production was key. Over 9,000 Lavochkin La-5s were built, with a further 5,753 La-7s. Even these figures pale in comparison to the 36,183 Ilyushin Il-2 ground-attack aircraft that were built between 1941 and 1945. While numerous German fighter aces achieved remarkable 'scores' over Russia, the Luftwaffe ultimately had no answer to Soviet might and the increasing confidence of its pilots.

The La-5 was a significantly refined version of Lavochkin's LaGG-3 (of which over 6,500 were made). The

manufacturer had fallen out of favour with Stalin, with production of rival designs by Yakovlev (the Yak-1 and -7) given priority. Designers Semyon Lavochkin and Vladimir Gorbunov decided to trial a LaGG-3 with the more powerful Shvetsov ASh-82 radial engine. Effectively a prototype for a new fighter, it flew for the first time in March 1942, and the improvement in performance was immediately apparent.

Stalin ordered the type to be mass produced following an intensive period of testing in April. The first La-5s also included aerodynamic modifications and were found to be a good match for all German fighters at low level. Further developments included the rear fuselage being cut down to give the pilot better visibility. The definitive La-5FN was fitted with a fuel-injected engine and had other refinements.

The latter had a higher roll rate than the Bf 109G, and could out-turn an Fw 190A-8, giving it a distinct advantage in the skies over Russia. It consistently provided meaningful opposition to the Luftwaffe, which warned its pilots to avoid prolonged combat with the Lavochkins, particularly at low level. Most air

**SPOT FACT** A captured La-5 was flown by German test pilot Hans-Werner Lerche

## Origin & history



**Above**  
Front section of the world's only remaining La-5. COURTESY GERALD YAGEN-FIGHTER FACTORY

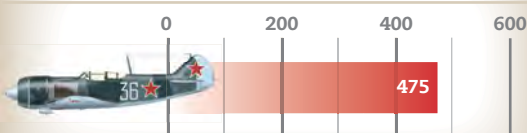
combat over the Eastern Front took place at altitudes of 16,500ft or lower, meaning the Soviet pilots could take full advantage of their new mounts. Soviet ace Ivan Kozhedub scored 45 of his 63 victories while flying an La-5.

The Lavochkin was far from perfect – among its faults was the tendency for exhaust gas to enter the cockpit due to poor insulation of the engine compartment. To overcome this, some pilots flew with the canopy open.

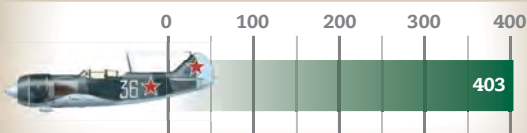
In all, 42 regiments were operating La-5s in May 1945. The type had been flown during 1943's Battle of Kursk and, towards the end of the war, was used in the Battle of Berlin and in the liberation of Prague. A number of Lavochkins were operated by Czechoslovakia after the conflict, but today only one, unrestored example remains extant – it is in storage at the Fighter Factory in Virginia Beach, Virginia, US. ●

### Lavochkin La-5FN

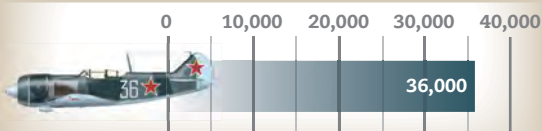
#### AT A GLANCE: RANGE (miles)



#### AT A GLANCE: SPEED (mph)



#### AT A GLANCE: CEILING (feet)



- Construction:** A total of 9,920 La-5s were built.
- First flight:** The prototype, essentially a conversion of the LaGG-3, flew in March 1942.
- Powerplant:** One 1,850hp (1,385kW) Shvetsov ASH-82FN 14-cylinder radial engine driving a three-bladed propeller.
- Dimension:** Span 32ft 2in (9.8m). Length 28ft 5in. Height 9ft 3in. Wing area 188sq ft (17.5sq m).
- Weight:** Empty 6,173lb (2,800kg). Loaded 7,407lb.
- Performance:** Max speed 403mph (648km/h) at 21,000ft (6,400m). Service ceiling 36,000ft. Initial rate of climb 3,600ft per min. Max range 475 miles (765km).
- Armament:** Two ShVAK 20mm cannon in upper cowling plus provision for underwing rockets or a pair of 220lb bombs.
- Crew:** One.

**Note:** performance and weights varied according to role and configuration.



# Spotlight

## Lavochkin La-5

# Russia's Answer



The Soviet Air Force at last found an equal to the Luftwaffe's fighters with the Lavochkin La-5.

**Aleksander Medved** explains

**N**ew versions of Luftwaffe fighters appeared in large numbers, outperforming their Russian opposition over the battlefield. In speed, rate-of-climb and hitting power, the Soviet air forces were suddenly outclassed; in the summer of 1942 the air war took a dramatic turn.

Enhanced armament – three cannons, plus two machine guns – allowed the shooting down of the Ilyushin Il-2 ‘Sturmovik’ ground-attack aircraft in a single strike.

Commander of the 1st Air Army, Major General S A Khudyakov explained the situation to Air Force Commander A A Novikov: “Undoubtedly, the causes include organisational drawbacks, omissions in the training of flight crews, errors in air tactics, etc. However, it would be a mistake to think that everything is at fault except our aircraft, which allegedly have excellent performance superior to that of German fighters, and the only problem is that our

pilots fail to use them properly...

“Systematic observation... shows that German fighters typically hold the combat initiative under their control and carry out attacks under favourable conditions. On the other hand, as soon as a situation becomes adverse, they disengage from action with impunity, often even without manoeuvring, simply climbing straight ahead.

“The Germans have dramatically enhanced the quality of their fighters, both by means of improving aerodynamics and



**SPOT FACT** Mass production began just four months after the La-5's first flight

## La-5 in Combat



by increasing engine power. It is necessary to take certain steps to gain advantage over the enemy.

He added: "We should improve the performance of our aircraft and engines by upgrading the manufacturing quality, perhaps even at the expense of the quantity manufactured. I am hereby asking you to appoint a competent commission to identify the actual performance of our fighters in comparison with German ones directly in air-to-air combats."

On September 8, 1942, an operational Messerschmitt Bf 109G-2 force landed in Soviet occupied territory and not long afterwards a Bf 109G-2/R6 with two underwing MG 151/20 cannons was taken as a trophy. These 'Gustavs' had a maximum speed of around 313mph (505km/h) at 10,000ft (3,000m) and could sustain 403mph at 23,000ft. Most impressively, they could

climb almost vertically.

Mock combats confirmed how vulnerable the Soviet Air Force had become. The head of the Red Army Scientific Testing Institute of the Air Force wrote to Stalin on October 23, 1942: "To combat the new enemy, we need a fighter, which would, with a weight of not more than 3,300kg, have a speed of at least 550km/h near ground and 680km/h at an altitude of 7,000m. It should be all-metal with armour protection and self-sealing tanks with inert gas pressurisation."

### Operational trials

Factory No.21 had begun in August to manufacture the Shvetsov M-82A radial-engined Lavochkin La-5. The 49th Red Banner Fighter Air Regiment was the first to be equipped with Syemyen Alekseyevich Lavochkin's new fighter and the unit embarked on operational testing.

By the autumn of 1942, together with other units of the 1st Air Army, the 49th was taking part in intense battles near Rzhev, where the Red Army had launched a counteroffensive to prevent German reserves reaching Stalingrad.

Straight off the production line, these early machines suffered from workmanship and design defects. Of greatest concern, the La-5's take-off weight was nearly 7,500lb which made it very unresponsive.

From August 14 to 29, pilots of the 49th tried the La-5 in combat. During 180 sorties, totalling 130 flying hours, 16 enemy aircraft were shot down in 27 air-to-air battles, for the loss of ten La-5s.

The new machines demonstrated several advantages; automatic slats drastically improved manoeuvrability and the reliability of the air-cooled M-82A was much appreciated. The La-5s were also robust. On one example, cannon fire cut through both spars in the starboard wing and damaged the elevator and rudder trim tab control cables. Despite this, it managed to reach base and was back in action the following morning.

### Penal squadrons

These results encouraged the rapid deployment of the La-5 around Stalingrad. In little more than 20 days, the 287th Fighter Division (comprising the 240th, 297th and 437th Fighter Regiments) converted to the La-5. The rushed deployment and lack of preparation led to failure within ten days of entering combat. The 240th and 297th lost nearly half of its aircraft and most of its experienced pilots.

Both regiments were promptly withdrawn and the division was replenished by the 15th Fighter Regiment, which was also had Lavochkins. The 15th fared no better; in 513 sorties 23 La-5s and 11 pilots were lost and the regiment was withdrawn for restructuring on September 24.

**Far left**  
Pilots of the 240th Fighter Regiment were among the first to fly the La-5. The example in the background was purchased with funds collected by employees of the Bauman Moscow Higher Technical School and given as a present to Hero of the Soviet Union Lukyanov.

**Above left**  
Mechanics studying the engine of a La-5.

**Above**  
A La-5F pilot receiving a membership card for the All-Union Communist Party.

**Left**  
La-5Fs on 'ground alert' duty.

**SPOT FACT** Russian ace Ivan Kozhedub scored most of his 64 victories flying the La-5FN



air armies were created which were reinforced by Supreme Command Reserve air corps. Such units included fighter, bomber and ground-attack aircraft, all exclusively with new types.

In the autumn, the two-division 1st Fighter Air Corps, under General E M Beletsky was ready for combat. One of its fighter divisions, the 235th, comprising three regiments (3rd Guards, 181st and 239th) was equipped solely with La-5s, whereas the other, the 274th, flew Yakovlev

**Above**  
A La-5 built with funds collected by residents of the Gorky Area, and bearing the inscription 'Valery Chkalov Squadron'.

**Below**  
Pilots on the Leningrad Front in spring 1943.

The haste to put the La-5 into the frontline saw some sergeant pilots flying fewer than ten hours on type before facing the Luftwaffe. In defence of these inexperienced men, August and September 1942 were probably the most difficult months of air fighting of the entire war in the East. On the Stalingrad front, air regiments were burning away like tinder; it seemed that nothing could be changed, regardless of how many men and machines were committed to action.

It was in September 1942 that 'penal squadrons' were raised within the 8th Air Army. These were manned by pilots who, in Stalin's words, were accused of the "demonstration of self-interest" – attempting to avoid battles with German fighter 'aces'. Within two months this 'novelty' had been rejected, with personnel distributed among other units.

On the Kalinin Front the first combats between La-5s and Focke-Wulf Fw 190s, of Jagdgeschwader 51, took place in late October 1942. It turned out that

**Lavochkin Losses 1944**

Circumstances	La-5 M-82A	La-5F	La-5FN
Air-to-air combat	10	112	42
Anti-aircraft fire	8	69	33
Missing in action	30	420	256
Declared beyond repair	217	373	113
Non-combat accident	61	426	249

the La-5 and the Fw 190 had similar maximum speeds at low and medium altitudes. In climbing manoeuvres, the Lavochkin was slightly superior.

At speeds of over 250mph the Fw 190 excelled while the Soviet fighter was more difficult to control. In a dive, the Luftwaffe machine accelerated quickly and could easily shake off pursuers. Finally, the Fw 190 offered the undeniable advantage of armament, with four cannons and two machine guns against the La-5's two ShVAK cannons.

**Transport predators**

In the second half of 1942, the Soviet Supreme Command decided to radically revise the structure of the Red Army Air Force. Integrated

Yak-1s and Yak-7Bs.

The 3rd was among the first Soviet air regiments to be reorganised as a 'Guards' unit under a Supreme Soviet order of December 6, 1941. In August-September 1942 it converted to La-5s and joined the 235th Fighter Division. After a month of battles on the Kalinin Front, the 3rd Guards flew 74 sorties and lost two Lavochkins in combat and five in other circumstances. From November 5, it was operating directly over Stalingrad.

By the end of February 1943, the 3rd Guards supported Soviet troops which had encircled the German 6th Army, under the command of General Friedrich Paulus. During the blockade of the beleaguered enemy troops, the 3rd flew more than 1,000 sorties, losing ten pilots, 15 La-5s to combat and four to other



reasons.

The damage inflicted on the Luftwaffe was incomparably greater. Transports were attempting to re-supply Paulus in early January 1943. Eighteen Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condors had been seconded to the airlift and within days of their arrival, La-5s had dispatched five of them. A pair of giant Junkers Ju 290s were also employed; one crashed, the other was hit by La-5s.

Young pilot P A Bazanov became one of the 3rd's luckiest transport 'hunters'. Directly over the regiment's home airfield, he shot down a Ju 52 trimotor which was laden with schnapps, tobacco, and specialty foods. On December 11, La-5s of the 3rd accounted for 18 Ju 52s; Bazanov shooting down three of them.

## Mounting score

The 1st Fighter Air Corps received the two-regiment 210th Fighter Division, comprising the 32nd

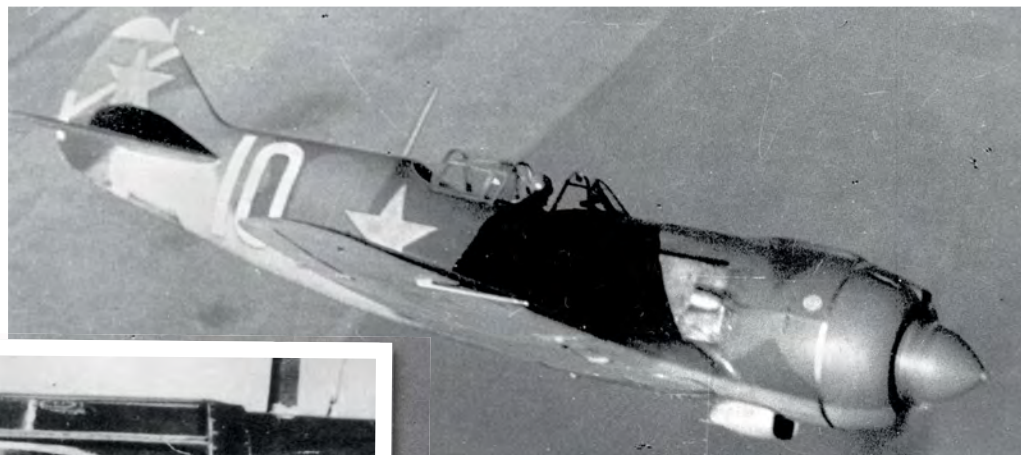
On the 29th, according to reports, the 210th obtained its highest success. Operating near Velikiye Luki, its pilots managed to destroy 23 enemy aircraft; Lt P A Grazhdaninov bringing down a pair of Ju 87s. One of the 'Stukas' was destroyed by cannon fire, the other was rammed; Grazhdaninov managing to return to base in his La-5.

Throughout December, the 210th Fighter Division's score grew by 53 victories. Division records noted: "Without knowledge of the La-5's

were frequently in a disadvantageous position in battles with Fw 190s even at low altitudes, where they should have had the advantage.

The uprated M-82F engine improved the La-5's overall performance, and rectified defects. The aircraft's power increased by 300hp (223kW) at low altitudes and by 120hp at high altitudes, compared with the M-82A. These modifications resulted in the La-5F.

In February 1943, La-5Fs were supplied to the 5th Guards Fighter



**Above**  
Pilots of the La-5F often preferred flying with the canopy open.

Regiment of the 207th Fighter Division (the other two regiments flew Yaks) which had previously been equipped with 'straight' La-5s. Prior to the arrival of the La-5Fs, during January the 5th had managed only seven victories at the cost of three aircraft.

The situation changed dramatically the following month. During operations near Barvenkovo, south of Kharkov, the regiment suffered no losses, whereas its pilots reported 40 victories. On the 2nd, four La-5Fs shot down two Ju 88s and a Heinkel He 111. Battalion Commissar Kiyachenko led four engagements, adding an Fw 189 reconnaissance type and two Ju 88s to the overall count.

On March 10, six La-5s led by the commander of the 5th Guards, Major Vasily Zaytsev, carried out one of the most successful sorties of the war. The Soviet pilots noticed three Fw 189s without fighter cover and in quick order three of the 'Frames', as the Soviets nicknamed the Fw 189, were downed.

Three groups of Ju 87s, 26 aircraft in all, were spotted about to go into a dive, assuming single-column formation. This was a gift for the Soviet pilots, who attacked them from beneath the tail. Six Stukas were shot down; two by Regiment Commander Zaytsev. Twice declared a Hero

**Left**  
Senior Lt Vladimir G Serov, who was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union posthumously on August 2, 1944, in a La-5 of the 159th Fighter Regiment.



Fighter Regiment with Yak-1s and Yak-7Bs and the 169th with La-5s. On December 6, 1942, it redeployed to the Kalinin Front and was in action 48 hours later.

According to Soviet documents, on that day the 210th was providing cover for advancing ground forces near the town of Bely. Eleven enemy aircraft were shot down; ten credited to the 169th. The division's own losses were minor; one La-5 brought down, one hit.

Lt P A Grazhdaninov was hero of the day, scoring three victories in two sorties. In one combat, he set an Fw 190A ablaze. This was probably the first of the type to be destroyed by bursts of cannon fire from a La-5. Led by Captain A A Fedotov, on December 16 five La-5s engaged a pair of Fw 190s, shooting both down, for no loss.

performance, the enemy attempted to combat us in the vertical plane and suffered a defeat, since, in terms of speed and rate-of-climb in vertical manoeuvring, the La-5 is as good as the Me 109 and the Fw 190." Losses incurred by the 169th Fighter Regiment were however, severe; six La-5s were shot down and four failed to return.

## Improved 'F'

Operational use of the first La-5 series revealed serious defects. For example, at maximum speed, the engine often overheated, even with the side cowl open. (The Fw 190 had experienced the same problem a year earlier.)

Cockpit ventilation was poor; pilots suffered in the heat and many flew with the canopy open. This led to a loss of approximately 24mph at any altitude. For this reason, La-5 pilots

**SPOT FACT** Semyon Lavochkin was given the honorary rank of Maj-Gen of Engineering/Technical Services in 1944

**Right**  
Captain A Lobanov (left) and Major A Pavlov of the 159th Fighter Regiment.

**Below right**  
Friends from the 176th Guards Fighter Regiment congratulating Deputy Regiment Commander I N Kozhedub on a double victory over Fw 190s on April 17, 1945.



of the Soviet Union, Vasily Zaytsev commanded the 5th Guards up to March 1944 and achieved 34 victories. Throughout the Great Patriotic War, as the USSR called its part in World War Two, 27 pilots of the 5th Guards were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. As well as Zaytsev, V I Popkov, with 41 air victories, was a double 'Hero'. According to official data, pilots of the 5th scored 657 victories in air-to-air battles and destroyed 82 enemy aircraft on the ground.

### Battle of Kursk

Mass manufacture of the La-5F with a reduced cockpit fairing, known as the Type 39, was launched in the spring of 1943. Before the beginning of the crucial Battle of Kursk, the La-5FN (or Type 39FN) also began production. This was fitted with the direct injection M-82FN engine. Both types had reduced weight and offered conspicuous performance enhancement.

The first La-5FNs went to the 32nd Guards Fighter Regiment under Stalin's son, Colonel Vasily J Stalin. Previously flying Yaks, this was one of the strongest and best trained regiments in the Red Army Air Force. The first squadron and the command flight were equipped with the La-5FNs; the second and third squadrons had La-5Fs.

The 32nd carried out operational service tests of the new Lavochkins. Crews were given time to master their new mounts and discovered that, at all altitudes, La-5s fitted with M-82FNs, had a top speed considerably higher than the Yaks. At low altitude, the La-5FN could achieve 360mph – in the summer of



1943 this was deemed to be of very significant value.

Stalin removed his son from command of the 32nd on May 26 because of a bizarre fishing accident. Reckless young pilots found no better pastime than to stun fish by throwing RS-82 rocket projectiles into the water. One of these exploded prematurely, killing a person and injuring several more. Command of the regiment was given to Major B P Lyubimov.

As part of the 3rd Guards Fighter Division, the 32nd Guards Fighter Regiment had 75 operational and eight inoperable La-5s at its disposal in June 1943. It was covertly redeployed to advanced airfields on the Bryansk Front along with the 15th Air Division. This was a month before the dramatic Battle of Kursk.

At the northern segment of the Kursk salient at the end of June the Luftwaffe 1st Air Division had 186 serviceable Fw 190s, in four groups: Stab I, III and IV of Jagdgeschwader 51 and I/JG54. Lt I I Batov opened the Lavochkin's account against this formidable opposition on July 6 when he downed an Fw 190.

### Free hunting

On the 12th, troops on the Bryansk Front initiated a flanking attack against the German forces. Pilots of the 3rd Guards were entrusted with gaining air supremacy over the battleground. According to Soviet data, over the next 48 hours, when the situation was especially tense, pilots of the 32nd Guards Fighter Regiment alone destroyed 41 enemy aircraft, more than other air units in the division.

The best fighter aces began to practise 'free hunting' at high altitudes over hostile territory. For this task, first and foremost, the La-5FN was chosen. The Germans admitted the loss of

18 Focke-Wulfs, and about the same number severely damaged, throughout the period. Hero of the Soviet Union Snr Lt V A Orekhov of the 32nd Guards, was the most successful against the '190s, downing four. By the end of July, he had scored 14 victories including six Fw 190s.

Orekhov's regimental comrade Captain V A Lutsky flew 135 sorties, taking part in 75 combats and destroying 11 enemy aircraft, among them four Fw 190s. Two of these were downed during one engagement on July 20, northwest of Protasovo.

In battles along the Orel line, the first squadron of the 32nd Guards, led by Lutsky, conducted 165 sorties, making full use of the La-5FN's qualities by destroying 26 enemy aircraft without incurring any losses.

While Moscow was saluting the liberators of Orel and Kharkov on August 5, the 32nd Guards celebrated the day in its own manner with Snr Lt A I Markov dispatching two more Focke-Wulfs, thereby completing the La-5FN's operational trials.

The report on the new type was impressive: from July 6 through to August 5, 1943, in 25 combats, 14

# La-5 in Combat



## Soviet fighter production 1944



An 11th series LaGG-3. © ANDREY YURGENSON 2017

Type / Engine	Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec	Total
LaGG-3 M-105PF*	226	5	231
La-5 M-82A	635	-	635
La-5F M-82F	540	-	540
La-5FN M-82FN	1,371	948	2,319
La-7 M-82FN	71	1,663	1,734
Yak-1 M-105PF	1,106	82	1,188
Yak-3 M-105PF	112	1,775	1,897
Yak-7 M-105PF	368	57	425
Yak-9 M-105PF	3,097	2,910	6,007
Yak-9 M-107A	213	905	1,118

\* Syemyen Alekseyvich Lavochkin initially had a design bureau with Vladimir Petrovich Gorbunov and Mikhail Ivanovich Gudkov - hence LaGG.

guards' pilots shot down 32 enemy aircraft, including 21 Fw 190s. All this for the loss of only four Lavochkins.

## Fighter family

Unfortunately, in late summer 1943, the bulk of the Soviet Air Force Lavochkins were versions with M-82 and M-82F engines. Mass production of M-82FNs proved to be complicated and time-consuming. It was not until the autumn of 1943 that La-5FNs entered service in significant quantities and priority was given to guards' units.

As of November 1, the 64 combat-ready pilots of the 8th Guards Fighter

Division had just eight La-5FNs available. The 8th Guards comprised the 40th, 41st, 88th Guards and the 927th Fighter Regiments. Throughout the month, 453 sorties were flown from Vasilkov airfield; 29 air-to-air combats were conducted, 19 enemy aircraft were shot down and 14 damaged. Losses on the Soviet side totalled 15 La-5s; one of which was burnt out during an enemy raid, another was destroyed in a crash.

In a report on La-5FN losses the senior engineer of the 11th Guards Fighter Division, Major M P Kuzhelev noted that 34% of the losses were due

to pilot injury. The breakdown for losses resulting from airframe damage included the following: 31% due to fuel tank problems, 13% controls, 11% hydraulics and 9% the oil system.

Commanded by Colonel A A Silvestrov, the 295th Fighter Division (31st, 116th and 164th Fighter Regiments), part of the 17th Air Army, conducted 692 sorties throughout April 1944. Pilots claimed 28 enemy aircraft destroyed, including seven Fw 190s. Seven Lavochkins were lost in combat and in Luftwaffe raids.

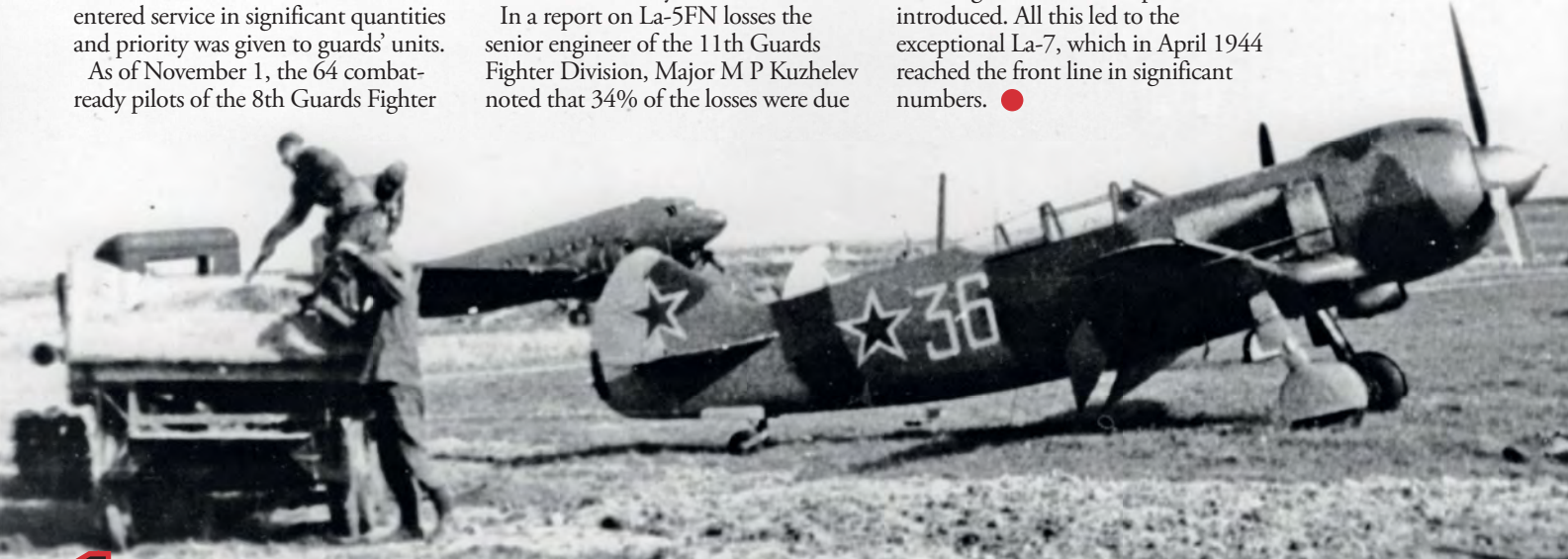
As of May 1, there were 74 operational and 26 out-of-service La-5s at the 295th's disposal. In that month, during a staggering 1,257 sorties, the enemy lost 60 aircraft. Losses of the 295th were estimated at 14 La-5FNs and seven pilots.

Tests of La-5FN production examples showed that the speed and rate-of-climb were slightly lower than those of the prototype. Despite this, Lavochkin was manufacturing the best Soviet fighters, considerably superior to principal Luftwaffe types in most combat situations.

Syemyen Alekseyvich Lavochkin was unwilling to rest on his laurels. In co-operation with the Central Aerodynamics and Hydrodynamics Institute he further improved the aerodynamics, the oil and exhaust systems. The centre section was re-configured and metal spars introduced. All this led to the exceptional La-7, which in April 1944 reached the front line in significant numbers. ●

**Above**  
A Lavochkin La-5F in 1943.  
© ANDREY YURGENSON 2017

**Below**  
A La-5FN with a Lisunov Li-2 transport behind.  
ALL PHOTOS VIA AUTHOR



**1** aircraft ended up in Polish hands





# Spotlight

## Lavochkin La-5



# Seeing Stars

**Andrey Yurgenson** artwork of a Lavochkin La-5FN that saw combat over Russia

**Artwork**  
Lavochkin La-5FN  
*'White 36'* of the 139th  
Fighter Air Regiment,  
13th Air Army,  
Leningrad Front,  
during the summer  
of 1944. ANDREY  
YURGENSON-2017

**T**he sheer numbers of Soviet aircraft put into combat over the Eastern Front caused severe problems for the German invaders. By the summer of 1944, the Luftwaffe had more than just numbers to worry about. The latest Russian fighters, including the La-5FN, were as good or better than anything the Reich could field.

The La-5 was first flown in

combat near Leningrad in early 1943 – at that point, the fighter only made up a small proportion of the overall Soviet defences, lagging behind various Yakovlev fighters. Later in the war, the much-improved La-5FN was being built in large numbers and was proving so effective that German pilots were warned not to engage them in prolonged combats.

Our subject is La-5FN *White*

36 which flew with the 13th Air Army's 139th Fighter Air Regiment on the Leningrad Front in 1944. The 28-month blockade of the city was broken in January of that year, after which Russian forces continued to push the Germans back. This eventually led to the Baltic Offensive which resulted in the Red Army finally enclosing the remaining enemy forces in Latvia's Courland Pocket. ●



**SPOT FACT** Some later La-5FNs were equipped with two 20mm Berezin B-20 cannon

La-5  
in profile



**15 to 17** aircraft were being built every day by Autumn 1943



## Lavochkin La-5

# Twice a Hero

**Aleksander Medved** profiles the spectacular career of Soviet fighter ace  
**Nikolai Skomorokhov**

**Right**  
Skomorokhov near  
his La-5.

**Below right**  
The first enemy  
aircraft shot down  
by Skomorokhov, a  
Focke-Wulf Fw 189.

**Below**  
Sgt Nikolai  
Skomorokhov scored  
his first victories  
flying a LaGG-3.



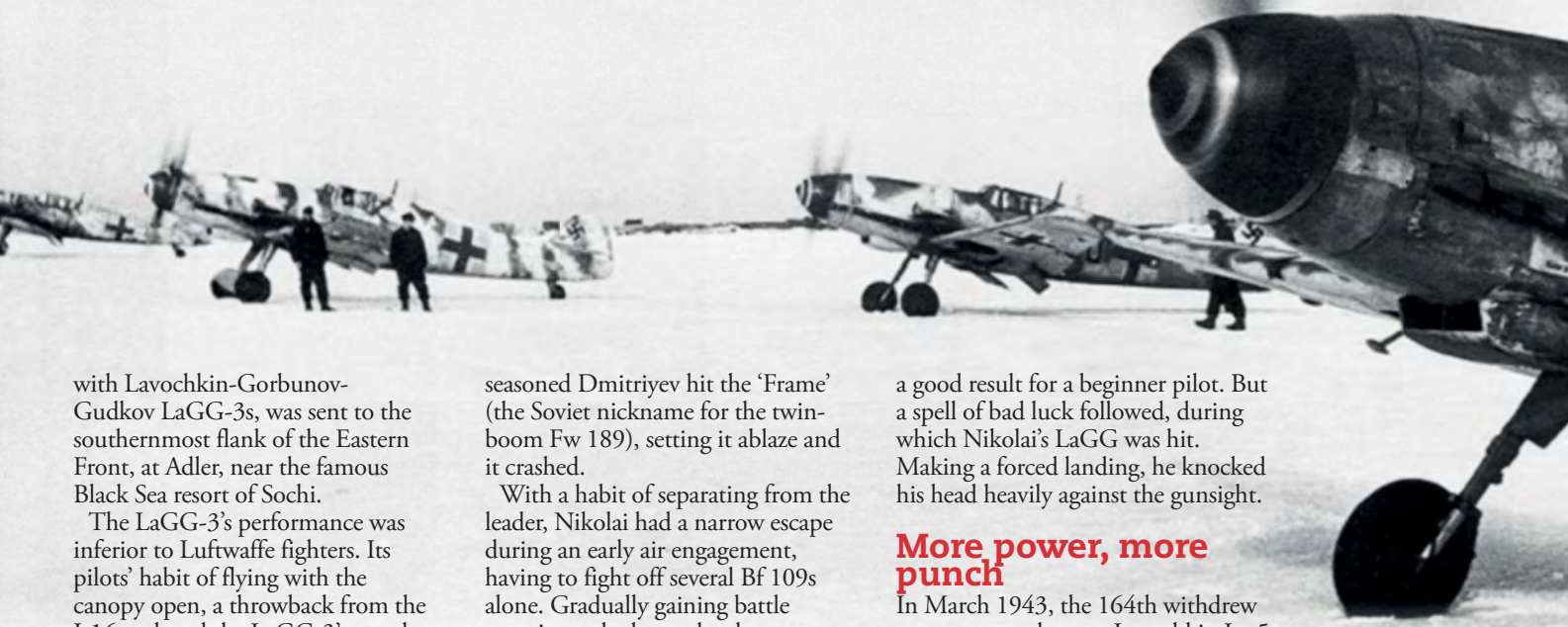
the aviation school at Bataisk. As with the rest of the student pilots, the 21-year-old was billeted in tents near the airfield. A shortage of fuel and trainer aircraft meant the syllabus was taking longer than the usual nine months.

Having mastered the Ishak, Sgt Skomorokhov arrived at the front line in late November 1942. His 164th Fighter Regiment, equipped

**A**ccording to the old hands, if you could master the Polikarpov I-16, you could convert to other types with ease. Known as the Ishak (donkey), the stubby monoplane fighter was a constant challenge. Pilots had to be forever alert for sudden nose-down or nose-up pitching in flight or a sharp yaw to left or right on take-off or landing.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Nikolai Mikhailovich Skomorokhov was at





with Lavochkin-Gorbunov-Gudkov LaGG-3s, was sent to the southernmost flank of the Eastern Front, at Adler, near the famous Black Sea resort of Sochi.

The LaGG-3's performance was inferior to Luftwaffe fighters. Its pilots' habit of flying with the canopy open, a throwback from the I-16, reduced the LaGG-3's speed. According to Nikolai, only two pilots in his regiment (squadron leader Mikhail Dmitriyev and himself) flew with their canopies closed. Only flight and squadron leaders had aircraft equipped with RSI-3 radio transmitters, the others had receivers only.

Shortly after arrival at the front line, the young pilots of the 164th experienced German 'free hunting' tactics first-hand. They watched as an Ilyushin Il-2 'Sturmovik' was caught by surprise and set on fire, its assailants leaving with impunity.

During his first operational sortie, to Tuapse, Nikolai was among the first to spot a Focke-Wulf Fw 189. He fired on it from a long distance and, of course, missed. But the

seasoned Dmitriyev hit the 'Frame' (the Soviet nickname for the twin-boom Fw 189), setting it ablaze and it crashed.

With a habit of separating from the leader, Nikolai had a narrow escape during an early air engagement, having to fight off several Bf 109s alone. Gradually gaining battle experience, he learned to lay accurate fire on determinedly evasive enemy aircraft.

His first confirmed 'kill' came in January 1943 when flying with fellow pilot Yevtodiyenko as a pair. Nikolai attacked an Fw 189, set both its engines on fire and observed, with unconcealed happiness, the enemy crash into a mountainside.

On February 22, Nikolai shot down a Junkers Ju 87 'Stuka' near Novorossiysk, with two more of the dive-bombers were credited to his comrades. Several days later, on the way back from a reconnaissance sortie and acting as Kubarev's wingman, Nikolai carried out a head-on attack and downed his first Messerschmitt Bf 109.

Three victories in three months was

a good result for a beginner pilot. But a spell of bad luck followed, during which Nikolai's LaGG was hit. Making a forced landing, he knocked his head heavily against the gunsight.

### More power, more punch

In March 1943, the 164th withdrew to convert to the new Lavochkin La-5 with the air-cooled M-82F engine. It had noticeably superior performance to the LaGG-3 and, with two ShVAK cannon, was better armed. On completion of conversion, Nikolai became a flight commander, but wasn't commissioned.

Returning to the front line, the 164th flew to Nizhnyaya Duvanka on June 14. Seven Fw 190s escorted by eight Bf 109s strafed the airfield that day, and only Nikolai and his wingman managed to get airborne under the hail of bombs. Catching up with the Messerschmitts, he attacked from below and behind, and shot one down.

The rest of the Luftwaffe escorts turned on them and the pair entered cloud and continued to climb. ➔

**Above**  
During the winter of 1943/1944, Bf 109G-6s of JG52 had frequent encounters with the 31st Fighter Regiment.

### Nikolai Skomorokhov's victories



Jan to Jun 1943	1/2 Fw 189, 2 Bf 109s, 1 Ju 87
Jul to Dec 1943	5 1/2 Bf 109s, 2 Ju 87s, 1/2 Ju 88, 2 Fw 189s
Jan to Jun 1944	2 Bf 109s, 1 Fw 190
Jul to Dec 1944	2 Bf 109s, 5 Fw 190s
Jan to May 1945	6 Bf 109s, 11 Fw 190s, 1 Ju 52

A Ju 87 dive bomber destroyed by pilots of the 31st Fighter Regiment.

These details are as recorded in the operations record book of the 164th and the 31st Fighter Regiments. Documentation of the special purpose 'hunter' squadron has been lost. Skomorokhov's individual logbook lists 46 personal and eight 'shared' victories.

**SPOT FACT** In July 1942 Stalin demanded that all incomplete LaGG-3 airframes be converted into La-5s



**Above**  
Future Heroes of the Soviet Union: Skomorokhov and Kirilyuk of the 31st Fighter Regiment.

**Right**  
After the autumn of 1943, Fw 190s mainly undertook ground-attack roles.

**Below**  
The La-5F, the first Soviet fighter to pose a serious threat to the Luftwaffe.

Breaking out into clear sky, they found themselves behind still more Bf 109s. In a classic surprise attack, another Messerschmitt was finished off by Nikolai's wingman, his quarry spinning earthwards.

Soon afterwards Nikolai was appointed deputy squadron commander and sent on a training course. This was unusual for a senior sergeant (a junior commander), as at that time only pilots of officer rank could attend such classes. He managed a brief visit to his village, Lapot, on the River Volga, before returning to his unit. This was timely as the dramatic Battle of Kursk was unfolding, the turning point for the entire Great Patriotic War.

### Inverted danger

Once more, Nikolai had to take off during an enemy attack. He remembered: "Having taken my seat in the cockpit, as usual I fastened only the waist belts. Shevyrin and I began



taking off under the bombs. Their splinters hit the right wheel of my fighter. However, I did not abort the take-off.

"Nobody else from our group managed to get off the ground. So the two of us had to fight over Nizhnyaya Duvanka. The previous time, we had done away with the enemy; but what had the future in store for us?

"There were about eight Messerschmitts. I cut behind a group of four. The pilot of the trailing German aircraft dived down. The rest of his group arrowed upward. Shevyrin and I pursued them.

"We drew up with them and came near. The Messerschmitts made an energetic roll and dived. We followed them and made an entire cascade of aerobatic manoeuvres. Meanwhile, the space around us was slashed by bursts of tracer shells.

"When the German fighters pitched nose-down, I assumed a 'lying on the back' position and began to observe the general situation while keeping inverted in level flight. And here I got into trouble because of my poor

knowledge of the aircraft's peculiar features – the La-5 had a limited time of flight in the inverted attitude: as soon as the time expired, fuel feed was cut off. I had been keeping it 'wheels up' for too long and the engine shut down. I tried to restart it but in vain.

"The altitude was a thousand metres. There was a threat of crashing into the ground. I examined the terrain. There was no suitable field to land in; furthermore, the Germans would not give me that chance.

"I threw open the canopy,



unfastened the belts and removed my feet from the pedals. Then I raised myself a little, and suddenly began to feel some unusual lightness. What was the matter? In a split second I shuddered, remembering I had not donned the parachute!”

Almost hopelessly, Nikolai attempted to restart the engine. Miraculously, he was successful. Keeping close to the ground, he accelerated and then zoomed.

Attacking from below at high speed, he shot down a Messerschmitt and subjected another to a fusillade, Shevyring later finishing it off. Finally, having levelled out, a string of cannon shells from Nikolai's aircraft brought down a third Bf 109.

Several days later Nikolai heard a pleasant feminine voice in his headphones: “Skomorokh, Skomorokh, your airfield is being strafed by the Junkers. Fly there immediately! Immediately!”

The voice was not familiar to Nikolai, so he asked for confirmation: “Skomorokh speaking. Which airfield is being strafed by the Junkers?” The same voice promptly replied: “It's Nizhnyaya Duvanka airfield. Proceed there immediately.”

This was an enemy ruse to remove Soviet fighters from the route of Luftwaffe dive-bombers. The air corps direction centre managed to break in: “Skomorokh, don't obey any such instructions. Proceed according

to the desperately tired Skomorokhov to report to the Front Headquarters. “First I was introduced to the Chief Intelligence Officer. He meticulously and painstakingly enquired about everything I had seen. Then he left, and soon I was invited to see the Chief of Staff. Again, detailed enquiries followed. Every word I said was put down by special mission officers.

“I elaborately drew the line of our troops' contact with the enemy, the arrangement of our tanks (I had detected a total of 11), the system of defences and the fire emplacements. The general took the scheme I had drawn, ordered his personal assistant to see that I had proper rest and left.”



“Almost hopelessly, Nikolai attempted to restart the engine. Miraculously, he was successful. Keeping close to the ground, he accelerated and then zoomed”

## Seductive spoof

At an award ceremony on July 30, 1943 for pilots of the 164th Fighter Regiment, Nikolai Skomorokhov – with six victories and two ‘shared’ – became a recipient of the Order of the Red Banner.

August brought losses for the 164th. In Nikolai's squadron, four pilots were killed and squadron leader Ustinov wounded. Regiment commander Melentyev made an extraordinary decision: Senior Sergeant Skomorokhov was appointed as acting squadron leader, but not promoted. This injustice became known to the Commander of the Air Army, General Khryukin, and in late August, Nikolai became a junior lieutenant.

to the plan.” Several minutes later nine Ju 87s, under the cover of six Messerschmitts, appeared from the west. An air-to-air battle ensued.

The following morning Nikolai and his wingman, Ovchinnikov, flew seven reconnaissance missions at very low altitude and were repeatedly subjected to enemy fire. Ovchinnikov's La-5 was damaged three times by light flak; each time, he changed aircraft and continued to cover his comrade.

The persistent pilots managed to find locations occupied by Soviet forces to identify their boundaries – the conflict was so fluid at this stage of the war it was vital to ascertain the exact location of forward troops.

At twilight a Polikarpov U-2



## Changing tactics

In early 1944 it was decided to form a combined, free-ranging hunter squadron to be manned by pilots from the 31st, 116th and 164th Regiments. Famous ‘ace’ Major Nikolay Krasnov would lead it with Lt Skomorokhov as his deputy.

The appearance of the hunters surprised the Germans who had become accustomed to Soviet fighters following rigid guidance from control centres – much of which was line of sight, so they had to stay close to their bases. This had enabled the Luftwaffe to choose routes for its bombers that reduced the possibility of interception.

Now all that changed, and they would encounter a pair or a group of four, free from the shackles of convention. In the hunter squadron's first combat sorties, Krasnov and Skomorokhov each shot down a Bf 109. Meanwhile the Germans began to use radar, mounted on railway wagons in western Ukraine.

Soviet pilots had a vague notion of this innovation and knew detection could be avoided by flying extremely low. Once the hunters had penetrated the enemy lines they would climb to deliver a downsun attack. If no German aircraft were found, Soviet ➔

**Above**  
Senior Lt Skomorokhov with his comrades – pilots of the ‘hunter squadron’ – in front of a La-5FN.

**Left**  
Nikolai Skomorokhov alongside a Lavochkin displaying ‘kill’ markings, which appear to have been applied at a photo lab.

**SPOT FACT** *The La-5F was the first version to have a cut-down rear fuselage*



**Above**  
Lavochkin La-5 of the 164th Fighter Regiment, flown by Skomorokhov in December 1943. © ANDREY YURGENSON 2017

**Right**  
Twice Hero of the Soviet Union Skomorokhov at his parents' house in the village of Lapot in the summer of 1945.

pilots strafed ground targets at their discretion.

After scoring several more victories, Krasnov became Deputy Commander of the 31st Fighter Regiment and Nikolai assumed command of the hunter squadron. But the divisional leaders opted to disband the unit and disperse its experienced pilots within the considerably depleted regiments.

In three months, the hunter squadron had shot down dozens of enemy aircraft and destroyed many ground targets and, in Nikolai's opinion, the decision to disband was wrong. At the suggestion of the Commander of the 31st Red Banner Fighter Regiment, Grigory Onufriyenko, he was appointed a squadron leader within the unit.

### Getting even

In the autumn of 1944, Bulgaria and Romania, previously German vassals, joined the USSR in the struggle against the Nazis – giving pilots of the 31st an opportunity to evaluate Bf 109s and Fw 190s operated by their new allies.

Skomorokhov arranged training combats with Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs versus the Lavochkins, which proved very useful. At the same time, Soviet pilots familiarised themselves with the radar fitted to Bf 110G twin-engined fighters.

During battles to liberate Yugoslavia, an opportunity arose for pilots of the 31st to get even with the Germans for the bitter losses inflicted during the summer of 1941. Aerial reconnaissance had detected an airfield crowded with Heinkels, Junkers and others. Early one morning all three squadrons of the regiment strafed the airfield from low level. Despite flak, each squadron made two or three runs, destroying at least 20 aircraft and leaving a petrol depot blazing.

The Germans then launched a counter-offensive near Lake Balaton in Hungary, and the air corps guidance station set five La-5FNs to engage a group of Bf 109s and Fw



190s. Skomorokhov and his wingman climbed to get into a favourable position, leaving the three led by Lt Maslov. The Luftwaffe undertook a well-tryed gambit: the lead aircraft's wingman moved off to one side and slightly lower. Nikolai knew well that if the Soviet pair attempted to pursue this easy prey they would come off worst.

On Skomorokhov's command, his wingman separated: his task was to watch his German counterpart carefully while Nikolai pursued the lead Messerschmitt, whose pilot attempted to draw his Soviet opponent to a higher altitude where he theoretically had the edge.

The wingmen were left behind. The German could not engage Skomorokhov from behind and switched over to head-on attacks. At just below 30,000ft (9,000m) the fighters flew large radiuses, trying not to fall into a spin. Skomorokhov's oxygen system had failed and he was almost losing consciousness. Oxygen was rarely used by Soviet fighter pilots so maintenance personnel seldom checked the apparatus.

Finally, during a third frontal attack, Skomorokhov managed to hit the Bf 109's engine while dodging its fire. After this he blacked out – but brought to his senses in his spinning fighter by a loud cry in his

headphones: "Lavochkin, pull out, pull out!"

With difficulty, he levelled out and asked the guidance station operator where his quarry was. He got a prompt response: "It fell ablaze to the ground; on the right you can see its pilot parachuting."

### A wing and a prayer

In December 1944 Skomorokhov received a new La-7. It took him only a couple of flights to master it. With his wingman, Filippov, he soon managed to demonstrate the advantages of the latest Lavochkin.

Encountering ten ground-attack Fw 190s flying line astern, strafing Soviet troops near Székesfehérvár, they split them up and shot down the rearmost aircraft. Another group of Fw 190s appeared, eight this time, and the Soviet pilots bagged one each.

When a third group of eight loomed up, two more fell to the La-7's guns – one coming down near the guidance station, where Air Corps Commander General Podgorny was present. As soon as Skomorokhov and Filippov landed they received Orders of the Red Banner.

On Red Army Day, February 23, 1945, with his score at 32 victories, Nikolai Skomorokhov was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

In war, successes are often followed



by misfortune. In mid-March, Nikolai was engrossed in pursuit of a Messerschmitt when his Lavochkin was hit, deep in enemy territory. Rudder and elevator control had gone and he had to consider baling out.

His total unwillingness to be taken prisoner made him search for other ways to control the aircraft. Pulling the control stick back and increasing the revs saw the fighter gradually climb. Fortunately, the ailerons still worked. With his wingmen providing protection Skomorokhov headed for the home airfield, alternately climbing and descending.

“At a high speed I flew over the airfield, throttled back smoothly, almost skipped the entire field, plopped down onto the edge of the runway, rolled right into the ditch and assumed a nose-down upright position. I didn’t know what to do. I was afraid to leave the cabin: the aircraft would certainly fall backwards and that would be a catastrophe. Finally, a technician came running and a truck arrived. The tail was carefully lowered into the body of the truck, which was lined with mattresses.”

An anti-aircraft shell had hit the tail, damaging the elevators and jamming the rudder. Skomorokhov had arrived ‘on a wing and a prayer’, as the American wartime song goes.

## Changing roles

In April 1945 Nikolai was credited with eight victories. On the 10th, along with five other experienced

pilots, each leading flights, he went ‘free hunting’. Luckily, just in time he noticed at least five flights of Fw 190s and Bf 109s were going to engage a large group of Soviet ground-attack aircraft.

The battle was decided by the 31st’s aces’ experience and the excellent performance of the La-7. Skomorokhov’s group shot down eight of the enemy, three falling to his guns. Of the Soviet ground-attack force, only one Il-2 was hit, landing in friendly territory.

With the war fast reaching its conclusion, the Russians took Vienna by storm on April 13 – the same day that a document was signed recommending the award of the title of ‘twice Hero of the Soviet Union’ to Nikolai.

During the final battle for Berlin, on May 1, 1945, Skomorokhov shot down a Focke-Wulf 190 attempting to engage Soviet ground-attack aircraft – his last kill – and gave a chance to wingman Lt Sokha (who had joined the regiment shortly before) to open his score. The two pilots exchanged roles: Sokha attacked another Fw 190 while Skomorokhov gave him advice and repelled other German fighters. Finally, the burning Focke-Wulf crashed into woodland.

At dawn on May 9, gunfire awoke the personnel of the 31st Fighter Regiment. The sleepy pilots dressed, grabbed their guns and rushed outside. Signal rockets were

illuminating everything around and anxiety gave way to exultation: Germany had signed the Instrument of Surrender.

The celebrations turned out to be premature. Pilots of the 31st had to fly four more sorties with the task of stopping columns of German troops attempting to retreat to territory controlled by Britain and the US. Warning fire from the Lavochkins was not enough: the fighters had to shoot in anger.

During the war the 31st flew 17,301 operational sorties, conducted 608 air-to-air combats and destroyed 350 enemy aircraft – 28 of them accounted for by Nikolai, whose total number of victories was 46 and eight shared. The regiment lost 54 pilots and 175 aircraft.

On June 24, Nikolai Skomorokhov took part in the Victory Parade in Moscow. All of the comrades shared more than the honour of having taken part in the Great Patriotic War, they were all Heroes of the Soviet Union. ●

**Above**  
Lavochkin La-5F of the 31st Fighter Regiment flown Lt Col G F Onufrienko in 1944. © ANDREY YURGENSON 2017

**Below**  
A Ju 87 is inspected by Soviet soldiers after being shot down. ALL PHOTOS VIA AUTHOR

