

## Correspondence between Reina Pennington and Polina Gel'man, 1992-1993

### RJP notes

In June 1992, I learned that another graduate student, Richard Harrison, was going to be in Moscow doing research on the Great Patriotic War. I gave him a questionnaire I had prepared for any female aviation veterans of the war he might encounter, or to be passed on to anyone who might know them.

### 29 June 1992 / 15 July / 28 July

I first wrote directly to Gelman on 29 June 1992, using an address from her reply to my questionnaire. I told her that I was a graduate student working on a thesis about women pilots in the Great Patriotic War, and that before I became a historian, I served for nearly ten years in the Air Force. That gave us something in common as Air Force veterans and professional historians. I also told her that I had been asked to write an article for the 50th anniversary of the formation of the women's regiments for *Air & Space Smithsonian*. I had some questions for her to help with both of these projects. I attached a questionnaire I was distributing to women veterans like her, which she answered on 15 July 1992 by mail, and asked four specific questions, which she answered on 28 July 1992, dictating them to a friend of mine.

### On 15 July 1992, Gelman's reply to my questionnaire.

*Gelman mailed Richard Harrison a two-page typed response to the questionnaire -- the original is in the Gelman folder & scanned*

Brief wartime bio: During the years of the Great Patriotic War a navigator, senior squadron communications officer of the 46th Guards (588 bomber) aviation regiment. From 1941-45 completed 860 combat flights (bombing, reconnaissance, supply drops, etc.).

• *Before the war, did you want to serve as a military pilot? Did you ever imagine you'd fly in combat?*

— I didn't intend to devote myself to aviation. From childhood I was keen on the social sciences. But I also studied the natural sciences with pleasure.

When in the mid-1930s aviation industry was being built in the country, and they appealed to the youth to enter aviation schools, I joined the airclub in the Belorussian city of Gomel. I combined my studies in the last two classes of school with studies at the airclub. I finished the school for gliders and parachutists — I jumped from an aircraft. I started to learn how to fly an aircraft. But when in 1938, upon completing middle school it was necessary to determine a continued path in life, I chose the humanities — I entered the history department at Moscow State University. I parted with aviation with great regret. I dreamed of eventually returning to a sport aviation school.

• *What did your friends and family think when you started to fly? What did they say when you joined the military?*

— The Fascist aggression which instigated the Great Patriotic War, called forth an unprecedented patriotic enthusiasm in the country — everyone was striving to take part in the battle against fascism. But in the first months of the war, they did not take women into the army.

The announcement in October 1941 of a recruitment of women-volunteers for aviation regiments I considered to be great good luck for me. My dream came true of participating in the battle with fascism and I returned to aviation, which I had managed to fall in love with while I was still in school. All of this brought great satisfaction and a feeling of pride in the recognition that you could directly take part in the great struggle for the freedom of your homeland.

• *What was the hardest thing about flying during the war? What was the worst thing you experienced? What was the best thing?*

— Among the difficulties of the war, the colossal physical and moral/ethical obligations stick in my mind. The area of combat activity was constantly shifting. Without a break in the course of three years, without rest or leave, I flew on average 5-10 combat flights a night in the fire of ground batteries and in the blinding beams of searchlights. But that's the way it is in war. Whoever didn't want to be there could leave. There weren't any people like that in our regiment. Only the dying and the wounded left. And the wounded, after the hospital, even despite the protests of the doctor returned to the regiment and continued to fight and even to perish.

- *How were you treated by your superiors? By male pilots?*

All of this was seen by the male colleagues who worked with us at the same airfield. Because of this, both the senior officers and the ordinary pilots treated us with great comradely respect.

The regiment was not only equal to the men's regiments according to effectiveness and other indices, but was among the first. In this obviously played a role female thoroughness and sense of responsibility.

OF THE THREE WOMEN'S REGIMENTS FORMED FROM THE 122ND AVIATION GROUP, ONLY THE 46TH GUARDS TAMAN (588 BAP) REMAINED PURELY FEMALE UNTIL THE END OF THE WAR. IN THE OTHERS, SOME MEN SERVED ALONGSIDE THE WOMEN. [caps in original]

- *What happened to you after the war? What is your life like today?*
  - I returned to the humanities. I finished the military institute.
  - In 1956 I resigned from service with the rank of Guards Major.
  - I successfully defended a dissertation. I became a Candidate of Economic Sciences.
  - Senior lecturer (docent) in the department of Political Economy.
  - I married. My husband is a retired Lieutenant Colonel. My daughter is a historian; she attended MGU. My grandson — in my view he's the most charming little boy in the world. He's very much like Huckleberry Finn.

I simply can't answer many of your questions, for example those about Lily Litviak. I know that she was very brave and possessed the highest skill in flying, but I was not personally acquainted with her.

I want to list a few books in which they write about us:

- 1) *Night Witches* by Raisa Ermolaevna Aronova. (I flew in the same aircraft with Raisa Ermolaevna). 1969, 1980 by Sovetskaia Rossiia, Moscow.
- 2) *Heroines of the War*, tales of women-Heroes, 1963, Politizdat.
- 3) *Heroines* in two volumes. 1969, Politizdat.
- 4) *The Real Truth*, profiles of Soviet Jews. 1986, Raduga Publishers, Moscow (see p147 about Polina Gelman).

**28 July 1992, Gelman's dictated replies to my specific questions for her in my letter of 29 June 1992.**

*RJP: I recently became acquainted with Anne Noggle; she kindly allowed me to read all the interviews that she did with women veterans. You told her that in October 1941 you learned that women's regiments were being formed. How did you learn about this? Did you read an announcement, or was it in the newspaper? Did you hear it on the radio or from friends? Was there a general call? Or was it just by word of mouth?*

PVG: The day before 11 October 1941 all the students were digging antitank ditches along the Belorussian road near Moscow. Among the students the rumour was going around that girls were being taken into aviation. My girlfriend was studying at the Moscow Aviation Institute. She said that she had already received orders. The next morning, I submitted all the paperwork to the Komsomol Central Committee.

*RJP: I read article about you (Vigushin and Igantovich, "Unforgettable Wings," Viguchin, S., and E. Ignatovich. Komsomol'skoe znamia, 18 December 1987, 1-2) that says you were the PartOrg of the regiment. What were your duties? Did you do that work on a daily basis?*

PVG: Since I was the only one who had studied history at the university, after I joined the party, they selected me to be the party organizer for the squadron (not the whole regiment). This was not a duty, but merely public work, for which they didn't pay anything and which did not bestow any sort of privileges. Formally, the party organizer was supposed to be an example to the others, but this wasn't necessary in my case, since the regiment was entirely staffed with volunteers and everyone was a patriot.

I had to conduct political lectures and classes on party history. In order to make things interesting, we organized a philosophical circle. Zhenia Rudneva was a student in the mechanical-mathematics department at MGU. She gave a lecture on Hegel's dialectic. I spoke on Feuerbach's idealism. This was interesting because it was not the usual thing.

There was very little spare time, because we worked at night. Even so we published a literary magazine. We published it ourselves, writing and drawing everything by hand in a single copy.

Among the flying personnel I was the most active in flying. Everyone treated me very well.

*RJP: In your opinion, why were there so many Heroes of the Soviet Union in the 46th and so few in the other women's regiments?*

PVG: This was the only regiment among the three formed from the 122nd Aviation Group that was completely women, from the start to the finish. In the others, men also served. This regiment went to the front almost a year earlier than the others.

One of the fundamental criteria for the award was the quality and quantity of successful combat flights. It was precisely our regiment that firmly held first place among all in the Air Forces for the number of flights.

The regiment was all-volunteer. Everyone was a patriot. Often they hadn't even completed a landing before they were already spoiling to carry out the next flight. The men even attempted to stop us, they said, "The less you fly, the longer you'll live."

The women, in contrast to the men, were very scrupulous about the fulfillment of each mission.

*RJP: You were awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union. For what, exactly? Was it unusual for a navigator to receive the HSU?*

PVG: For 860 combat flights. Altogether 80 women were awarded the Hero medal during the war." [Note: the count as of 2020 is TK]

[Note from my friend: "By the way, Mrs. Gel'man's husband mentioned when we talked that she is the ONLY ONE Jewish woman in this country (and this means in the whole world) who has the decoration).]

Of the 23 women who received the Hero in our regiment, five were navigators and the rest were pilots. It was only at the front that they awarded the medal not for the office one held, but for what one actually achieved. In peacetime it is often the other way around.

## 11 August 1992

In August 1992, I sent Gelman some follow-up questions via my friend in Moscow. She replied by telephone on 11 August 1992; her answers were transcribed and sent electronically to Pennington.

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*1) You said that the 46th Guards was among the leading regiments according to effectiveness and other indices. Can you explain what those indices were, and how they were measured?*

PVG: The effectiveness was determined by the accuracy of the hits from bombing and shooting. After completing a mission everyone had to report their results and the results of others, as you saw them, what and where it happened. Crews from other regiments reported on our results, as did ground reconnaissance — in fact, we worked for them. It was easy to verify everything, everything was recorded: the number of combat flights, of bombs dropped, of rounds fired. When different units were working [it was easy to see who worked in what way.] In the 4th Air Army our regiment was always first or among the first.

*2) You said that the 46th was in first place in the VVS for the number of flights. Does that mean first among all types of regiments, or among other night-bomber regiments? Do you mean the 46th was one of the top regiments, or was it THE top regiment? Was it first during the war, at the end of war, or throughout the entire period? Isn't this a truly remarkable achievement?*

PVG: It was first among all regiments. The very first or not — it's impossible to look upon it that way — everyone was fighting, but when they totaled things up, they always held us up as an example, our superiors had nothing to be embarrassed about. We were first for the entire time that the regiment was in combat, from 27 May 1942 until 5 May 1945. Our regiment was valued very highly, they gave it the name of Guards, Taman. The regiment was awarded combat orders, they are on the regimental banner. When in 1943 the global offensive began on all fronts, the command headquarters issued orders in which was noted the special achievements of subunits. Our regiment was noted by the Supreme Command nine times.

*3) I'm intrigued by another thing you said: "The women, in contrast to the men, were very scrupulous about the fulfillment of each mission." Would you please elaborate a*

*little more? In what ways were the women more scrupulous -- in planning, in the actual flying, or in all ways? Can you tell me a story that illustrates this?*

PVG: Women in general by their nature more organized. Even in the most difficult times, women in the army weren't conscripted, only volunteers went into service. We were always trying to prove that we were no worse. This of course was one of the incentives.

*4) You stress several times the fact that the 46th was all-female. Do you think this was the reason why it was so successful? Do you think women worked better in an all-female regiment, as opposed to the regiments that had both men and women?*

PVG: Our regiment was very harmonious and close-knit. We were like sisters. So we have passed through our entire lives. Right to the present we rely on one another as if we were family. Our commander, LtCol Evdokiia Davydovna Bershanskaia, played a tremendous role in this. I'm very old, I served a long time in the army, and worked in many places. I had many commanders. But I never met such a wonderful person as our commander.

*5) You mention that you flew with Raisa Aronova, who wrote the book "Nochnye vedmy." I have a copy of this excellent book. Is Aronova still alive? Can you tell me about one of your flights together? I'd also like to hear more about Dusia Nosal. She was such a beautiful woman, and had such a sad life. Was she different from the other women, since she had already been married and had a child? She was the first woman pilot to become a Hero of the Soviet Union; was she also the first woman to receive the award? What was her nationality?*

PVG: Aronova is dead. I saw a copy of "Night Witches" in English. It is not that book. It is a falsification. Everything that is written in it is a forgery. Different names, different events. Aronova was a journalist and interpreter, and very talented. About our flights, you should look in those books that I named. Everything is written there.

Dusia Nosal's baby was killed at the very beginning of the war during the bombing. As a pilot she was one of the best, very purposeful. In technique she was one of the best. She did not receive her award, because it was given posthumously. She was Ukrainian. She loved Ukrainian songs very much. In non-flying weather, when we sat and waited for a break in the weather, she usually struck up a Ukrainian song.

6) *I notice that you did not recommend the book "V nebe frontovom." What is your opinion of that collection of stories? Did you ever read the book by Bruce Myles? What is your opinion of his work?*

PVG: I have not read and don't know about the Bruce Myles book. "V nebe frontovom" is simply a collection of articles. Before each article is an introduction. In it is contained, in my opinion, very important factual material.

7) *You've said in previous interviews that you were told several times that you couldn't learn to fly because you were too short. Yet here you are, a Hero of the Soviet Union. Do you think that physical characteristics, such as height, size, strength, etc., are important in flying? What sort of mental and emotional characteristics do you think are most important?*

PVG: They were afraid that in difficult situations, for example in a spin, my feet wouldn't be able to reach the pedals, or something like that. But I was a navigator, and there was always a pilot in the cockpit also. In the airclub where they once said this to me (on account of my short height), a flagstone now carries the names of Heroes who were once members of the club. Among those names, and the only woman's name, is mine. I believe that the most important qualities, for all people, are these: honesty, devotion to one's duty, and love for one's work. And also, of course, one must be kind.

8) *Some Western writers claim that the Soviets used women in combat purely for propaganda reasons. What is your reaction to that? Did it seem to you that there was a lot of publicity about your regiment during the war? Did any famous journalists, such as Simonov or Ehrenburg, write about your unit? Did any foreign journalists write about you?*

PVG: They didn't recruit us. We besieged them with requests, demanded. It was only because of the greatest pressure from us that we were taken. We always were growing up in a situation of full equal rights for the sexes. Together with the boys we flew in airclubs. It didn't seem that they devoted too much attention. After the war at a closing meeting, which was in Germany, the commander of our air army came to us. He said that everyone saw the missions had been very dangerous. But we made them. After all, girls were killed; how could this have been propaganda?

Ehrenburg was never with us. Simonov, it seems, wrote something. It seems in some sort of introduction to an article, no more than a single page. But I can't say



exactly, now. The Poles wrote about us, and the French from the "Normandie-Nieman" squadron. I don't remember the name of the French count (there were two counts, who became Heroes of the Soviet Union), but he wrote that the Germans called us "night witches," and we admired these wonderful sorceresses.

9) *If you had a granddaughter who wanted to become a pilot, what would you tell her? What if she wanted to fly in wartime? And what would you say to your Huckleberry Finn grandson, if he wanted to fly?*

PVG: I would say that anyone should be what they want to be. My mama, when I announced to her that I had become a pilot, wrote to me that it was better to die standing on your feet than to live on your knees. I would say the same thing to my granddaughter.

10) *Are there any important questions that I've forgotten to ask? Is there anything you'd especially like to say to Americans about your experiences during the war?*

PVG: This is too broad a question. I wish peace and good will to all Americans.  
Polina Gelman

### **3 March 1993 Reina Pennington to Polina Gel'man**

*I wrote to Gel'man, resending an earlier letter that went astray. I told her about the forthcoming article in Air & Space Smithsonian and let her know that I would be traveling to Moscow in April in order to attend the May reunion of the women's regiments, and hoped to set up an in-person interview with her then. I also responded to a few things from her previous letter:*

When I said I had Aronova's book, I meant that I have it in Russian. I also have the Myles book in English. He used the same title, but since almost no one in the west has ever seen Aronova's book, I don't believe he was trying to make people think it was the same book. Unfortunately, his book is the only thing most people here have read about your regiment — if they've even read that.

I have copies of many books by women in your regiment and in the others — Aronova, Chechneva, Kravtsova, Markova, Timofeeva-Egorova, Dospanova, Seid-Mamedova, Kazarinova, and of course, Raskova. It has taken me several years to find these books, and often I had to make expensive photocopies of them because they exist in only one or two libraries in this country.

The reason I've asked you to repeat what's already in the books is simply to verify their accuracy. Many people in America do not trust what was published in Soviet books. Also, both my magazine editor and my dissertation director demand that I get first-hand answers from you and the other women veterans. That's why I've had to ask you to tell me things I've already read! It's also why I asked your opinion about some of these books.

And it's also why I had to ask you the questions about propaganda. I've read enough to be quite certain that the 46th and the other regiments were, in general, just like any regiment. But many Westerners still find this hard to believe. That's why I needed a statement directly from you — not to convince me, but to tell others. One whole chapter of my dissertation will attempt to prove that propaganda was NOT an important factor in your regiment.

### **2 May 1993**

I first met Polina Gelman in person on 2 May 1993 at the reunion in front of the Bolshoi Theater. My brief note about her then:

"Incredibly short; white hair. Told me how much she liked my article, how "truthful" it was. Said she had read many articles written about the women; sometimes there were parts that were good — usually the parts she wrote herself! But there were many lies. But my article was very well done."

### **3 May 1993**

Interview: Reina Pennington and Polina Gel'man (Gelman)

Moscow, Gelman's home

(see full transcript)