



# Sabretache

THE OFFICIAL  
JOURNAL OF  
THE CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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December 2017

The Soviet Polikarpov Po-2 biplane bombers would idle their engines as they approached the target, then glide the rest of the way—leaving only the “whoosh” of their aircrafts in the wind to give them away. Then they would drop their bombs.

**The Night Witches had arrived.** The pilots and navigators were women of the 588th Night Bomber Regiment . The squadron was the brainchild of **Marina Raskova**, -famous not only as the first female navigator in the Soviet Air Force but also for her many long-distance flight records. She had been receiving letters from women all across the Soviet Union wanting to join the World War II war effort. While they had been allowed to participate in support roles, there were many who wanted to be gunners and pilots, flying on their own. Many had family or had seen their homes and villages ravaged. Seeing an opportunity, Raskova petitioned **Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin** to let her form an all-female fighting squadron. The Germans were pressing on Moscow, Leningrad was under siege and the Red Army was struggling. The Soviets were desperate.

On October 8, 1941, Stalin gave orders to deploy three all-female air force units. The women would not only fly missions and drop bombs, they would return fire—making the Soviet Union the first nation to officially allow women to engage in combat. Previously, women could help transfer planes and ammunition, after which the men took over.

Raskova quickly started to fill out her teams. From more than 2,000 applications, she selected around 400 women for each of the three units. Most were students, ranging in age from 17 to 26. Those selected moved to Engels, a small town north of Stalin-grad, to begin training. They underwent a highly compressed education—expected to learn in a few months what it took most soldiers several years to grasp. Each recruit had to train and perform as pilots, navigators, maintenance and ground crew.

The military, unprepared for women pilots, offered them meager resources. Flyers received hand-me-down uniforms (from male soldiers), including oversized boots that required stuffing with bedding to make them fit. Their equipment wasn’t much better. The military provided them with outdated Polikarpov Po-2 biplanes, 1920s crop-dusters that had been used as training vehicles. These light two-seater, open-cockpit planes were never meant for combat. They were described as a “coffin with wings”. The canvas and wooden aircraft offered virtually no protection from the elements. Flying at night, pilots endured freezing temperatures, wind and frostbite. Due to both the planes’ limited weight capacity and the military’s limited funds, the pilots also lacked other “luxury” items their male counterparts enjoyed. Instead of parachutes (which were too heavy to carry), radar, guns and radios, they were forced to use more rudimentary tools such as rulers, stopwatches, and compasses. Another downside was if they happened to be hit by tracer bullets, which carry a pyrotechnic charge, the wooden planes would burst into flames.

There was some upside to the older aircraft. Their maximum speed was slower than the stall speed of the Nazi planes, which meant these wooden planes, ironically, could maneuver faster than the enemy, making them hard to target. The German fighter pilot would be trying to find a lone, tiny biplane flying at tree top height in the pitch-black skies.



## CMHS Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on

**Tuesday,  
December  
19th  
2017  
7:00 pm**

At the  
Petty Officers’  
Mess  
HCMS Tecumseh

Continued Page 2

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CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The  
CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

is a non-profit registered society  
which fosters the study of the  
military and the police, and the heritage of  
Canada, the British Empire, and the world  
as well as the preservation of military  
artifacts and records.

The CMHS meets once every calendar month  
at: Petty Officers' Mess  
HMCS Tecumseh  
1820 - 24th Street SW  
Calgary AB T2T 0G6

## Notice of Next Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on  
**Tuesday, December 19th, 2017**  
**19:00 (7:00 pm)**

At the Petty Officers' Mess, HMCS Tecumseh.

Members are reminded that an offering of foodstuffs for the Legion Food Bank is considered your unofficial entrance fee to our regular scheduled meetings.

The unofficial agenda of this meeting will be:

Introduction of guests, Minutes of last meeting Correspondence, Membership report Treasurer's report, Old business / New business Break, Show & Tell  
The President, **Allan Ross** would like to invite everyone to remain after the meeting for an informal time of fellowship.

Then, even if it is located, this biplane's top speed is similar to the stalling speed of an attacking fighter, making it highly dangerous to attempt anything more than a single firing run. Add to this the fact that the Po-2 is considerably more maneuverable than any Bf109 of FW190 at low speeds and this agile, near impossible to detect low flying raider is all of a sudden a real problem, especially when trying to make a low speed firing run at low level in the dark, near stalling point, with a target equipped with a sting in the rear cockpit...

The Polikarpovs could only carry two bombs at a time, one under each wing. In order to make meaningful dents in the German front lines, the regiment sent out up to 40 two-person crews a night. The weight of the bombs forced them to fly at lower altitudes, making them a much easier target—hence their night-only missions.

The crews of the 588th would carry out a succession of short ranged bombing attacks against German forces over the course of an entire night. The effect was not in mass destruction of assets or a huge casualty toll, but came twofold: the psychological effect and sleep deprivation. Hour after hour, night after night, with some accounts describing crews flying up to 18 raids in a single night, the 588th and other units would harass and attack German forces.

Crews would switch their engines to idle and glide down through the night, the only warning of their impending attack being the eerie howl of wind through the biplane's struts and bracing wires only seconds before bombs were dropped. Terrified by the threat of the bombs, not permitted to sleep due to the frequency of attacks, German soldiers referred to the women of the 588th as the 'nachthexen' or 'night witches'.



A downed Po-2 being inspected by German troops.



**Disbanded and Overlooked** Their last flight took place on May 4, 1945—when the Night Witches flew within 60 kilometers (approx. 37 miles) of Berlin. Three days later, Germany officially surrendered.

Altogether these daredevil heroines flew more than 30,000 missions in total, or about 800 per pilot and navigator. 24 of the flyers were awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union. **Marina Raskova**, the mother of the movement, died on January 4, 1943, when she was finally sent to the front line—her plane never made it. She was given the very first state funeral of World War II and her ashes were buried in the Kremlin.

Despite being the most highly decorated unit in the Soviet Air Force during the war, the Night Witches regiment was disbanded six months after the end of World War II. And when it came to the big victory-day parade in Moscow, they weren't included—because, it was decided, their planes were too slow.

## Minutes of last meeting / Calgary Military Historical Society

Meeting held on November 21, 2017 at the Petty Officer's Mess, HMCS Tecumseh

**1. Meeting called to order**—By President Allan R. at 7:05 PM. 19 members in attendance.

**2. Minutes of Previous Meeting.**—Discussed no correction. Member Bob M. moves that the Previous Meeting Minutes be accepted. Seconded by David G. Approved.

**3. Newsletter.** - Add Kathy C. to email distribution list.

**4. Treasures Report.**

Report by Floyd S. Lists of monies collected from book auctions, donations etc. Listing of expenditures. Floyd reports, with last month expenses, a slight increase. Member Kathy R. moves that the Treasures report be accepted as reported. Seconded by Barry E. Approved.

**5. Membership Report**

Report by Floyd S. Total 40 members (2 Life, 2 Hon, 36 Regular). Six members shy of last year.

Member Dave S. moves that the Membership report be accepted as reported. Seconded by Member Susan E. Approved.

**6. Correspondence:**

- Annual Return receipt received for 2017.
- Request by the Military Museums for the CMHS to assist with their Military Road Show, dates to be confirmed. Discussion followed with vote to support with show of hands. CMHS participation in future Military Museums Road Shows approved.

**7. Announcements:**

- Friday 24<sup>th</sup> - "Enigma" Lecture at the Military Museums.
- Coldstream guards training RCN members for assignment as the Royal Ceremonial Guard. First time assignment for the RCN
- Added Kevin Roberts website "The Canadian Soldier" to CMHS website.

**8. Old Business.** None

**9. New Business:**

- Discussion by Bob M. - Reparations in Post WWI Europe, war effort resulted in shortage of coinage result, the printing of "Notgeld" ("emergency money") with examples displayed.
- Indra R. submitted display to the Military Museums - International Service in WWI. Go check it out.
- Dave S. - Comment/Question - DND's Maple Leaf Publication. Still operating? Appears not.
- Christmas Dinner discussed. Horton Legion? Glenmore Inn? Alan R. to make enquiries. Date To be determined, potentially Jan. 19th or 26th.

**BREAK**

**10. Ticket book auction:** - - Conducted by David G.

**11. Show and Tell:**

Gary M. - Discusses his fathers naval service, RCNR - HMCS Nonsuch Edmonton, with photo of father's 1943 Electrical Engineers course graduation class.

Brian H. - Four 1937 Kings crown bakelite buttons. What are they?

Bob M. - Selection of medals. Bulgaria 1878 "Order of St. Alexander"; Belgium "Order of the Crown"; "Order of Leopold" and "Centenary of National Independence commemorative Medal 1830-1930" for 100 anniversary of Belgian independence.

Dave G. - UN "Blue" helmet, unmarked; 1950 "Fingerprint and Identification Magazine" issue; Discusses current CMHS Newsletter article about Reg Nutter. This was Dave's high school shop teacher.

Kathy C. - Two photos - Parade review at Camp Hughes Jan 30, 1916 and Prince Albert Sask Regt.

Floyd S. - German Post War, WWII veterans' awards, 1957 Steinhauer & Lueck contacted to produced de-nazified decorations & medals. Displayed a group with Iron Cross 2<sup>nd</sup> Class, War Merit Cross and an Eastern Front Medal.

Martin U. - Attended Veterans Day events Kauai, Hawaii. Discusses honouring veterans in the US, the Kauai event and the Grand Hyatt's Vietnam War 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Dinner.

**12. Adjournment:**

President Allan R. calls for motion to adjourn. Member Kevin R. moves to adjourn. Seconded by Bob M. Approved. **Meeting Adjourned**

### Hero of the Societ Union



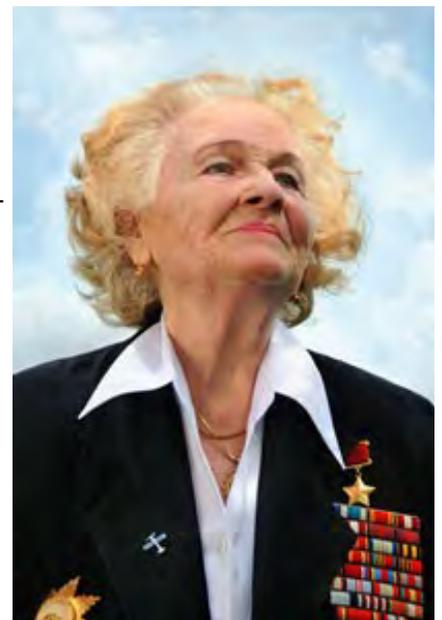
“Almost every time we had to sail through a wall of enemy fire,” **Nadezhda Popova**, one of the first Volunteers—who herself flew 652 missions - said in an interview. Ms. Popova, who died at 91 years old in 2013 in Moscow, was inspired both by patriotism and a desire for revenge. Her brother was killed shortly after the Germans swept into the Soviet Union in June 1941, and the Nazis had commandeered their home to use as a Gestapo police station.



Ms. Popova, who rose to become deputy commander of what was formally known as the 588th Night Bomber Regiment, said she was mostly just doing a job that needed doing. “We bombed, we killed; it was all a part of war,” she said in a 2010 interview with the Russian news service. “We had an enemy in front of us, and we had to prove that we were stronger and more prepared.”

Ms. Popova was named Hero of the Soviet Union, the nation’s highest honor. She was also awarded the Gold Star, the Order of Lenin and the Order of the Red Star.

“I sometimes stare into the blackness and close my eyes,” Ms. Popova said in 2010. “I can still imagine myself as a young girl, up there in my little bomber. And I ask myself, ‘Nadia, how did you do it?’ ”



## A recent auction item

### US 7th Cavalry Mule Hoof and Iron Shoe

Sold for \$ 3200 US



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

**US 7th Cavalry Mule Hoof and Iron Shoe with Old Bannerman's Tag.** With great visual appeal. Probably came from Benteen's contingent, which included the pack train. It has outstanding provenance: once part of the legendary Bannerman Collection, it was subsequently part of the Alex Acevedo Collection auctioned by Butterfield and Butterfield in April 1995. Accompanied by their notarized certificate of authenticity. *Property from the Estate of Kenneth S. "Bud" Adams,*