

This document was sent to Reina Pennington by Inna Vladimirovna Paspornnikova on 9 September 1992 via email. Paspornnikova said she wrote this for those who are interested in Lilia Litviak.

My Commander

A Memoir of Lilia Litviak, by I. V. Paspornnikova

It was the terrible summer of 1941. The whole country rose to the defense of our Motherland. We, the students of the aviation institute, immediately appealed to the Voenkomat, and to the regional committee of the Komsomol with a request that they send us to the front; we received the invariable refusal: "No military specialty." Like many other institutes and factories in Moscow, our institute was preparing to evacuate.

Life in Moscow was tense. On everyone lay the stamp of war. Ever more frequently the voice of Levitan announced on the radio, "Citizens: air raid!"

In Moscow there was an obligatory curfew. At night, in every courtyard, on every roof, brigades were on duty to extinguish "cigarette lighters", which were being thrown from fascist aircraft in order to increase the bomb damage.

On one of the most alarming October nights the Central Committee of the Komsomol reported to us that because of the numerous requests of girl pilots, a women's aviation unit was being formed. And so all of us who were dying to get to the front lines went to the Central Committee of the Komsomol. To our joy, we were all accepted in the 122nd Aviation Group, the commander of which was designated to be Hero of the Soviet Union Marina Mikhailovna Raskova.

To our great distress instead of the front they sent us to the east, to the Engels Flying School. It was essential for us to master and to learn how to operate the technical equipment (aircraft), in which we would have to fight.

Intensive days of study began. Classes were held 12-14 hours a day. Reveille was at 6 in the morning and retreat at 11 at night. At night there were practice alerts, and the path to the dining hall and to the airfield was used for drill training.

When the cold season arrived, they issued winter uniforms. At the morning formation, a command from Raskova rang out: "Litviak, step forward!" Lilia took a step forward and the whole formation burst out laughing. Instead of instead of a brown fur uniform collar, she was showing off a white, fluffy one with ringlets.

"Litviak, what do you have on your shoulders?" asked Raskova.

"A goatskin collar," Litvak replied. "Why, doesn't it suit me?" The goatskin looked suspiciously like the stuff used to line our new winter boots.

"It suits you," said Raskova. "When did you do this?"

"Last night," Litviak answered.

Of course, we all began to laugh, but Raskova said sternly: "You'll have to spend one more night without sleeping, Litviak, and sew back on the collar that is supposed to be on that uniform."

I looked at her then: small, delicate, and beautiful; still completely a little girl. How could she be a strong, courageous, tough-willed fighter pilot? Here she was making herself collars from fur boot linings. And what was she going to wear on her feet inside her boots? Blood was flowing and people were dying, and she was thinking about what suited her and didn't suit her? What sort of frivolity! I never imagined then that I would become the aircraft mechanic in the crew of Lidia Vladimirovna Litviak, or that she would become the only woman in the world to have 14 enemy aircraft to her credit — killed by her in difficult air battles. *[note: official documents indicate 12 personal and 3 shared kills]*

Finally our studies ended. The practice alerts changed into real ones: night flights by fascist aircraft began at Saratov. From the three women's regiments that were formed out of the 122nd Aviation Group, our 586th Fighter Regiment received its combat mission to defend the industrial centers of city and an important strategic target: the bridge across the Volga. The regiment received the Yak-1 aircraft. Day and night our girls fought bravely in the Saratov sky, but in spite of all the importance and responsibility of the mission we had been assigned, we believed that our place was at the front, in the very thick of things.

The chief designer of Soviet fighters, A. S. Yakovlev, writes in his memoirs *Goal of a Lifetime*: "maybe it's because I am a designer of fighters, but it seems to me that of all the flying professions, the brightest and most heroic is that of fighter-pilot..." "a fighter-pilot characteristically has not only personal daring and courage, but also lightning-fast speed in getting his bearings and uncommon resourcefulness. He must possess iron endurance; in no other type of aircraft does he have to test such physical stress, such g-forces, as in the fighter." Our girl-pilots possessed all of these qualities, which is evidently why, on the 10th of September 1942 our squadron at last received the order to fly out to one of the hottest and most crucial parts of the front, near Stalingrad.

We were very proud that this confidence was placed in us and before departure at a triumphant meeting we gave a vow to our combat friends: to fulfill their orders and to justify their confidence.

The situation both on the ground and in the air in the region of Stalingrad was extremely intense. Endless columns of enemy aircraft bombed the city and the Volga river crossing. The city was burning, boats and oil burned on the Volga. It seemed that the river was on fire. For many kilometers thick smoke overshadowed the sun. Severely damaged, worn out, the hero-city bled profusely, but did not surrender.

The male personnel at the regiment regarded our arrival at the regiment with skepticism. Several of them did not want to fly in the same group as the girls on combat missions. It was even more difficult for us, the mechanics: they could not accept us at all. Fortunately this didn't continue for long, but in order for them to believe in us and trust us, it was necessary to be equal to them in everything or even to surpass the men. We strove diligently; after all, the Motherland had entrusted us with an awesome weapon - the aircraft. We had to fulfill our duty.

From the first days the girls tore into combat. On the 13th of September 1942, Litviak, with a group of fighters, flew on patrol over Stalingrad. Lilia was wingman to the regimental commander.

The enemy aircraft were coming in echelons, attacking our formations. Our leader spotted three Junkers-88's to the side of the group of bombers. He decided to attack

them and directed his aircraft toward them. Lilia followed his lead. She attacked so energetically that the bombers scattered and had to drop their bombs. Taking advantage of this, the leader shot down one Ju-88. With accurate shooting, Lilia killed a second. But the battle wasn't over. Others were still fighting, and Lilia swooped down to their aid. She spotted Raia Beliaeva, who was pursuing a Messerschmitt. Lilia covered her from behind. Raia opened fire on the German. But the cannons and machine gun didn't fire. Lilia took her friend's place. She caught up with the escaping Me-109, engaged him in battle, and conducted it so skillfully that the enemy aircraft caught fire. The pilot had to jump by parachute. He landed on our territory and was captured. He turned out to be a famous fascist ace, and considered himself unbeatable. Under interrogation he asked to be permitted to meet with the pilot who had managed to set his aircraft on fire. How astonished he was when he learned that the ace-pilot turned out to be a young twenty-year old girl.

And so, her scorecard was opened! Two victories in a single battle. All of us were sincerely happy for such a brilliant success by our friend, and I was certainly happier than anybody. But it was necessary to get our aircraft ready right away for the next flight; a male pilot from our squadron was already waiting for it. (The aircraft in which the girls arrived at the regiment were fresh from the factory, and therefore carried the greatest load, because all the others had long ago worked past their overhaul time and needed replacing.)

The numerical superiority of enemy aircraft in the skies of Stalingrad was indisputable. The air battles went on for hours above the city. One flight followed another with brief intervals for a quick inspection and to refuel and rearm the aircraft.

From us, the mechanics and armorers, was demanded exceptional efficiency in our work. We worked harmoniously, as friends, helping one another. We didn't stop working even when the airfield was being bombed. We "got used" to the fact that a pair of Me-109's was constantly "on duty" above our airfield. We continued to work even at night, when the airfield grew quiet for a few hours, if emergency repairs were required. We slept 2-3 hours right by the aircraft (behind a gunner, in a trench which had been dug to provide cover from shrapnel during bombing attacks).

When the frosts set in, we began taking cover under the aircraft covers, which during the night became covered with hoarfrost.

The winter of 1942-43 turned out to be exceptionally severe. All of our hands were calloused, swollen, with bloody scratches, our faces were chapped and frostbitten. We had an even harder time of it when the aircraft required serious repairs.

The difficult situation at the front made us tough. All of us became experienced specialists. And in any event the most difficult thing for us was waiting for the return of our aircraft from a combat mission. We always wished we could change places with the pilot. There was worry and depression in our hearts, but there was such joy when at last the aircraft taxied into its parking place.

All of us were absolutely to some degree calloused, but in the rare, brief hours and minutes of quiet and respite we invariably began to have intimate women's conversations. There were no secrets among us. We lived with one feeling, one thought, one wish. We remembered our relatives, our homes, our loved ones, our friends. We dreamed about how good and peaceful life would be when the cursed war was over. We made plans for the future, and nobody talked about death, which was lying in wait

for us at every step. Everyone wanted to live until the bright day of Victory, although in our hearts, of course, we understood that in war, anything could happen. It was a great pleasure for us when there were letters from parents, relatives, and loved ones. We read them aloud and were happy for those who had received them, but at times a letter brought grief: the war carried grief to every corner of our vast country. We loved to read poems, to sing songs, both happy and sad, from the time of the Civil War, and also prewar and songs of the Great Patriotic War. One of the latter, "Oh, Dnepr" was the favorite song of "Batya"—regimental commander Nikolai Ivanovich Baranov. And "Dark Night" and of course "In the Dugout," which we always sang with tears.

Lilia was very musical. She loved operetta, and she often sang favorite arias, sitting in the cockpit of the aircraft while waiting for the rocket signal to take off.

Lilia's closest girlfriend, the pilot Katia Budanova, was the chief lead singer in our regiment. She had a beautiful, strong voice. And no one could dance so beautifully, merrily and ardently as Katia, especially the "Little Gypsy," smacking a golden forelock of hair and spinning wildly. Katia and Lilia were the soul of the collective.

In Katia's character, courage and inexhaustible energy were wonderfully matched with sensitivity and sympathy. It was not by chance that she became a Party member.

On the 8th of January 1943, two crews (Litviak and Budanova) from the 926th were transferred to the 296th. *[note: they transferred from the 9th Guards]* They were no longer novices, but joined the new regiment as seasoned, experienced pilots.

Both of them "for outstanding combat work, for demonstrating heroism and courage" were assigned to the group of "free hunters." The spare words of the order reveal the great and full heroism of the life of these Soviet patriots.

In the new regiment Katia became the wingman to "Batya", the regimental commander, LtCol Nikolai Ivanovich Baranov; and Lilia, to squadron commander SrLt Aleksei Frolovich Solomatin.

On 11 February, as part of a famous foursome under the command of Baranov, Lilia took part in an unparalleled battle of four against 29 fascist aircraft. In this battle, three Ju-87's were destroyed; one of the them was shot down personally by the respected woman pilot, who also shot down a Focke-Wulf jointly with the commander.

In a short period of combat work in the new regiment Lilia proved herself to be an excellent air fighter and keen commander. "Outstanding fighter pilot — masterful knowledge of the techniques and tactics of air combat, not knowing fear in battle with the enemy, Lidia Litviak unceasingly took part in air battles with the superior forces of the enemy" — so it is written in her "combat characteristics" record.

On 19 February 1943, Litviak was named a flight commander, and on 23 February 1943 she was promoted to junior lieutenant.

On 22 March a group of Yaks attacked twelve Junkers. Shooting down one Ju-88, Lilia suddenly felt a sharp pain in her leg. Glancing around she saw that two Messerschmitts were sitting on her tail. Gritting her teeth, she threw her aircraft into a turn. In the turn she saw that another four Messers were joining the attack. Without thinking, the brave pilot rushed into a deadly battle with the fascist gang. Six Messers were racing toward her at tremendous speed. The one in the middle opened fire. The tracers flashed by the pilot's head. But Lilia stubbornly rushed toward the Fritzes. The formation wavered,

and the gaunt fuselages with crosses on them dispersed like a fan in [all] directions. One fascist jerked his aircraft into the vertical, exposing a white belly to the woman pilot's sights. In the same instant, she fired. Lilia brought her bullet-riddled aircraft back to her own airfield. Smoothly and unusually quietly she completed a circuit and landed carefully. The aircraft stopped at the end of the airstrip. She wasn't able to taxi to the parking stand. The wounded girl had fought six Messers for a full 15 minutes.

Lilia was sent for treatment to a hospital in Moscow. The command group detailed Katia Budanova to accompany her to the hospital. In the hospital, immediately after the operation Lilia asked to be sent home under a pass. She should have continued treatment at home with the observance of a strict regime and rest. But Lilia left for the regiment with her wound still unhealed. And, despite being forbidden by the doctor, she got permission to fly.

23 April 1943 the regiment was awarded the title (name) of Guards (the 73rd).

The regiment suffered heavy losses.

On 6 May LtCol Baranov, the regimental commander, fell to his death in a brave and unequal battle.

The regiment bore the loss of "Father" with difficulty. And on 21 May before the eyes of his comrades in arms, commander Aleksei Frolovich Solomatina crashed on the airfield and was killed. On 3 May he had been named a Hero of the Soviet Union. At the grave of her beloved, Lilia vowed, "Revenge, revenge, revenge," and now irrepressibly rushed into battle. She kept her word.

15-20 kilometers from the front, the fascists had raised an artillery-observation balloon. With a good view of the area, it directed the fire against targets among our ground forces, inflicting heavy casualties on them. Our pilots had made several attempts to destroy it, but a solid wall of artillery fire prevented them from breaking through to the balloon. And it was on this mission that Lilia embarked. She flew deep into our territory, then crossed the front line where they did not expect it and approached the balloon from the direction of the enemy, remaining unnoticed. The balloon was shot up at point-blank range on the first attempt. First this victory, Litviak received the Order of the Red Banner.

The name Litviak became famous on the entire front.

On 16 July 1943 she fought with a six-ship of Yaks against 36 enemy aircraft in the region of Kuibyshev. She personally shot down one Ju-88, and one Me-109 jointly. But Litviak's aircraft was hit. She was wounded in the shoulder and in the leg. *[note: official documents indicate this occurred on 16 June]*

Lilia managed to make a belly-landing. The regimental doctor insisted on hospitalization and on freeing Litviak from flying duty. But Lilia said that there was no time for rest, and the wounds were not dangerous. And she flew her Yak again and again on combat missions.

On the morning of 19 July 1943 the pilots were riding a bus to the airfield. Katia Budanova, who was buoyant, always merry and never lost her presence of mind, was more serious than usual: the regiment was suffering heavy losses in difficult, brutal battles in the Donbas. Everyone in the regiment bore the loss of comrades with difficulty. Jokes and laughter grew silent. Katia sat at a window thinking. Someone

asked her to sing something, and she sang the sad, favorite song of "Batya": "Oh, Dnepr." But then and there, as if suddenly remembering something, she cut off the song in mid-word. Katia did not know that morning that she was leaving on her last flight.

The day became sultry and hot, and the battles were even hotter. Katia flew out together with other fighters to escort dive bombers. The operation that lay ahead was difficult. After successfully completing the mission, the aircraft were returning to their airfield in columns. Katia brought up the rear. She spotted three Messerschmitts going on the attack against a group of bombers. Katia undertook an unequal battle and was able to divert the enemy from our aircraft. A desperate fight developed in the air. The aircraft tried to get on each other's tails, firing uninterruptedly. Katia managed to pick up an enemy aircraft in her sights and riddle him with bullets. This was the fifth aircraft she killed personally. Katia's fighter rapidly soared upward and swooped down on a second enemy aircraft. She "stitched" it with bullets, and the second Messer, streaming black smoke behind it, escaped toward the west. But Katia's red-starred fighter began a barely-controlled descent. Tongues of flame were already licking at the wings. Katia managed to put out the fire and landed her aircraft in no-man's land. With difficulty, the local kolkhozniki pulled out the fatally wounded pilot. They buried her on the outskirts of the village of Novokrasnovka. Lilia was stunned by Katia's death.

The next day she engaged in an unequal battle against ten Messerschmitts while flying in a pair with the regimental commander, LtCol Ivan Vasil'evich Golyshev.

Three enemy aircraft attacked Lilia's aircraft. The commander fought the rest. Finally Lilia managed to get free of the three enemies. At once she hurried to the aid of the commander. She killed an Me-109 and her aircraft caught fire. With great difficulty she managed to jump out of the burning machine.

Golyshev did not return from that mission. During those tense days, sitting on alert in the cockpit of the aircraft, Lilia dictated a letter to her mother, Anna Vasil'evna:

Hello, dear Mamochka! A warm greeting comes to you and very best wishes. Everything here is meadows, and now and then can be found woods that remind me now of our native areas around Moscow, where I grew up, where I passed quite a few happy days. For a long time I've become unaccustomed to the noise of the streets of Moscow, to the rumble of the trams, to the cars driving everywhere. It is difficult for me to snatch even a minute to write you a letter and to report about myself, that I am alive and well, that I love above everything my Motherland and you, my dear.

I'm burning with the desire to chase the Germans from our land as fast as possible so that we can live a happy normal life together again, so that I can return to you and then tell you both everything that I have lived through, that I have felt across the days when I was not together with you. Well, for now, goodbye. Your Lilia.

Mamochka, the adjutant wrote this while I was on alert. So long, I kiss you affectionately.

28 July 1943

On the first of August, 1943, Lt Litviak did not return from a combat mission. In her last air engagement there were 49 aircraft in the sky (40 enemy and 9 of ours). In the unequal fight, the brave Moscow komsomolka died heroically.

A front-line newsheet wrote about her:

Comrade!

Wherever you are fighting, remember the shining example of the pilot Lilia Litviak, as a symbol of eternal undying youth, as a symbol of battle and of victory.

Let the example of the hero-girl inspire you to new victories in the battles with the hated fascists!

Twice-Hero of the Soviet Union shturmovik pilot Leonid Ignat'evich Beda wrote to me about Lilia:

I fought near Stalingrad together with Lilia Litviak. I knew her. We often met on the airfield, in the dining hall, and in rest areas. We had occasion to fly together. I remember her as happy and vivacious on the ground and fearless in the air ..."

Lilia was our common pride. She was small, graceful, beautiful. Lilia herself selected the stern and completely unfeminine profession of fighter pilot. Being strong-willed, bold, courageous, and fearless in war and faithful in everything both in the air and on the ground, Lilia had a kind, sensitive and tender heart.

She ardently loved her people and her Motherland. For her, [the cursing and ransacking?], fierce hatred toward the enemy filled her heart. To the last drop of blood, to the last breath, Lilia vowed revenge on the enemy for all their crimes against our land. In Lilia's small but strong hands was a fearsome weapon, which she knew how to use to perfection.

Hero of the Soviet Union Col Ivan Ivanovich Borisenko writes:

We were flying a group of eight Yak-1's on a mission to provide cover to our forces. Lilia was in a strike group of six Yak-1's. I was in the pair covering the group. Over enemy territory at 15-20 km behind the front line we spotted a group of enemy bombers which was moving towards the line of the front. We decided to attack them immediately.

During the attack, Lilia did not notice a group of Messerschmitts, which was covering the bombers. A pair of Me-109's attacked her. Her wingman rushed to intercept them but did not succeed. Lilia Litviak's aircraft was hit. The battle was behind the clouds. I saw how one Yak-1, sharply descending with smoke, entered the clouds. I followed after it, but, coming out of the cloud layer, could not spot it any longer. Whose aircraft it was, I didn't know. After the end of the engagement, arriving back at the airfield, we learned that Lilia had not returned from the mission. It is difficult to imagine our grief. Everyone without exception loved her. As a person and as a pilot she was wonderful.

In 1966 at the place where her aircraft fell school children discovered the remains of a woman pilot. She had been buried in a trench under the wing of the aircraft. No documents had been found on her. It was only in 1980 that we managed to discover her name. In a public garden in front of middle school No. 1 in the city of Krasnyi Luch in the Voroshilovgrad oblast, a monument was erected to the renowned woman pilot, and the former Proletarsky street was renamed Litviak. On 1 September 1988, a memorial plaque was unveiled on the school, which has been named for L. Litviak. In 1988 on the Kozhevnia farm (where the aircraft and remains of L. Litviak were found), and in the

village of Dmitrovka in the Shakhtersky region, where in common grave number 19 the remains of Litviak were reburied, and on the gravestone, her name is written and streets are named for Lilia Litviak. In the Stalingrad guards unit she is eternally entered in the list of heroes.

Lilia Litviak — the pride of all our girls and of all our people.

I. Pasportnikova

1989