80 YEARS SINCE FEMALE CREW HONORED FOR RECORD NONSTOP CROSS-COUNTRY MISSION

News / Airlines, Personalities

Eighty years ago, on November 2, 1938 the Soviet Union's Central Executive Committee (abbreviated as TsIK in Russian - the country's supreme legislative and governing body at that time) for the first time awarded the title of the Hero of the Soviet Union to three women nominees. The country's highest decoration went to air pilots Valentina Grizodubova, 27, the commander of the Antonov ANT-37 twin-engine plane Rodina (Russian for Motherland), Polina Osipenko, 30, the co-pilot and Marina Raskova, 27, the navigator for setting an international women's record for a straight-line non-stop distance flight.

On September 24, 1938, a plane called The Rodina with its female crew of three took off from an airfield in Shchyolkovo, in the suburbs of Moscow, to set off towards the Far East.

As Valentina Grizodubova would recall later, 50 kilometers away from Moscow, The Rodina entered thick clouds and the crew had no chance to see the Earth's surface until the moment of landing thousands of kilometers away. At a certain point, the plane started to accumulate ice. When navigator Raskova tried to clear the cockpit's windshield of

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hoarfrost, the flight maps flew away with a gust of wind. To get out of the clouds the crew had to climb to an altitude of 7,450 meters and put on the oxygen masks. Later on, the radio equipment went dead and all contact with the ground stations was lost. On September 25, after flying over Lake Baikal, Raskova managed to approximately determine the plane's location using the stars and map out the direction towards Nikolayevsk-on-Amur. At dawn, the clouds dispersed, opening up a view of the Tugur Bay of the Sea of Okhotsk, and eventually the flight's destination was reached.

By that time, the plane had already used up the 5.5 tonnes of fuel taken on board in Moscow. Grizodubova made the tough decision to make an emergency gear-up landing. Before doing that, though, she ordered Raskova to jump out of the plane with a parachute, because the chances the navigator, seated in the front cabin, would survive a crash landing looked slim. The Rodina, with both of its engines dead, landed in a swamp in the upper reaches of the Amgun River. All three crewmembers remained unhurt. Raskova landed far away from The Rodina and spent several days wandering around the marshland trying to find her way.

The moment that radio contact was lost, a massive search operation was launched over a vast swath of territory from Lake Baikal to the Sea of Okhotsk. Nine days later, on October 3, 1938, the women pilots were spotted from the air.

On October 4, two planes were dispatched to the site of The Rodina's emergency landing - a TB-3RN and a Douglas DC-3 - but they collided in midair, with the women pilots on the ground helplessly watching the tragedy, which resulted in 15 deaths. Marina Raskova reached The Rodina later on the same day. On October 12, the female aircrew was taken to the city of Komsomolsk by motorboats, where they boarded a train back to Moscow. An enthusiastic red-carpet reception at a railway station in the center of Moscow followed.

During the 26 hours and 29 minutes that the aircraft was airborne, the Antonov ANT-37 covered 6,450 kilometers (5,908 kilometers straight from point A to point B). The international aviation federation (Federation Aeronautique Internationale - FAI) officially certified the accomplishment as an international record for a straight-line distance flight.

Photo: Polina Osipenko, Valentina Grizodubova and Marina Raskova | © Alexey Mezhuev / TASS archive

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