



NIGHT WITCHES
НОЧНЫЕ ВЕДЬМЫ

A GAME BY
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It is a well-known fact that the Soviet Union has achieved exceptional successes in drawing women into the active construction of the state. This accepted truth is not disputed even by our enemies.

ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI

ORIENTATION

WHERE TO BEGIN

IF YOU'VE PLAYED BEFORE AND ARE READY TO GO

...jump straight to “The Setup” on page 69 and get ready to fly!

IF YOU ARE NEW TO ROLEPLAYING GAMES

...please read on. If it seems complicated at first, know that the core of roleplaying is playing—and if you are having fun with your friends it's hard to go wrong. These rules will support you!

IF YOU ARE A SEASONED TABLETOP GAMER

...pay close attention to the structure of play, which differs in subtle ways from both “traditional” and typical “indie” procedures. There's a very satisfying interplay between what you have your character do and how the game's systems feed back into the fiction. These rules will support you!

IF YOU ARE A VETERAN OF “POWERED BY THE APOCALYPSE” GAMES

...you'll find much of this to be comfortably familiar. There are a few fiddly differences, so pay attention to Regard, Marks, Mission Pool, and the ways in which Moves and advancement differ.

WHAT YOU NEED

To play *Night Witches* you need a few friends—you plus two, three, or four. Four total participants is probably the sweet spot. Three or five will work just fine. Six or more at once is probably too many for everyone to have a good time, although the game handles absent players and drop-ins seamlessly.

One of you will start the game as the Game Master (GM), the person responsible for the Regiment and its enemies. Since you are reading these rules, you will probably start as the GM, but others can take on the role over the course of the game (See page 72). Everyone will have a character.

The game accommodates varying lengths of play time well. The episodic nature of *Night Witches* means you can have a satisfying session in two hours, or play for four if you have that luxury. You can follow the Regiment across the entire Second World War, a literal campaign that will take many hours of play over weeks or months, or you can choose a single Duty Station and use it to frame a compelling one-shot. (For more on one-shots, see page 73.)

You'll need some supplies, as well: dice (six-sided, two per person), pencils, playbooks, and handouts, as well as a few tokens for the Mission Pool—coins work just fine. You can find the handouts at <http://www.bullypulpitgames.com/games/night-witches>.

ADULT CONTENT

As you assemble your group of friends, keep in mind that this game is for adults. It deals with mature themes, including sex and death at their most poignant, stupid, and horrible. It is written using coarse language that befits the subject matter and time and protagonists. It is about real people, some of whom are still alive.

HISTORICAL CONTENT

This game is thoroughly rooted in real history, but don't worry about "getting it right." While you're given enough information to anchor the game in gritty reality, the game takes vast liberties with the facts anyway. The following summary should give you enough context to get started with *Night Witches*.

The Soviet Union was aviation crazy between the World Wars. Aviators—including all-female aircrews—were celebrities and Socialist folk heroes. Countless young women eagerly learned to fly.

In the thirties, the USSR was wracked by a paranoid madness known as the Great Purge. No one was safe from accusation, incrimination, and execution. Hundreds of thousands died and the purges touched everyone. The military officer's corps was especially hard-hit.

One echo of the Great Purge was the political officer—the Politruk—that was a part of every Regiment. Answering to the dreaded NKVD secret police, the Politruk was always alert for spies and wreckers, even finding them where none existed. In many ways, their own totalitarian state was as big a threat to the women of the 588th as the Germans were.

When Hitler invaded in 1941, the Red Army was gutted and demoralized. But early disasters bought time for the Soviets to retreat and reorganize, digging in for a hard fight. The Germans, too confident, had overplayed their hand. A long, brutal war was the result.

At first, women were excluded from the Red Army Air Force. Soon casualties mounted, and Stalin himself ordered the use of female volunteers. Three Regiments were formed. The last of these, the 588th, was almost an afterthought. The 588th got the worst equipment and, as the only Regiment containing no men at all, bore the brunt of Red Army sexism. Many wanted it to fail as an object lesson to ambitious women everywhere.

The mission of the 588th was night harassment, close to the front lines. They flew Po-2 biplanes, aircraft almost twenty years out of

date. Each night they would bomb well-defended German positions, often flying five or more missions before dawn. It was some of the most dangerous flying of the war and casualties were appalling.

For more detail on the history of the Soviet Union before and during the Great Patriotic War, see the historical overview beginning on page 123.

GENDER CONTENT

Night Witches is, at its core, about women and their experiences during a cataclysmic war. How you parse this is up to you, but it is, very specifically, not a game about people in wartime—but women.

The dominant military narrative has always been reductively masculine, and it's easy to view war through this lens. When sex and gender enter the story—if they enter the story—it is rarely important and never central. This game is different. By playing women, you'll get a chance to think about that traditional narrative critically, as you explore characters who fall on its uncomfortable margin.

The soldiers and airwomen of the 588th found a middle way between competing gender narratives, and a big part of this game is striking that balance yourself. The rules will intentionally pull you in both directions, as will the GM's Principles, Moves, and especially Threats.

If you find the sexist and discriminatory treatment of women in the setting distressing, it won't hurt the game if you simply remove the cultural and legal baggage, and treat men and women—and everything in between—with complete equality and equanimity.

For more information on the role of women in the Soviet Union before and during the Great Patriotic War, see the historical overview that begins on page 123.

QUEER CONTENT

There will be some queerness in your *Night Witches* game. It is a thing that will happen, so embrace and explore it in a sensitive and meaningful way.

If you find the oppressive and brutal treatment of homosexuals in the setting distressing, it won't hurt the game if you simply remove the state's interest entirely and treat the emerging relationships as normal and routine.

For more information on homosexuality before and during the Great Patriotic War, see "Queers in the Soviet Union" on page 126.



I was glad to be in a female regiment. It was easier for me because, well, men are men and women are women; I was more comfortable.”

Mariya Akilina





The antiaircraft guns stopped, and a German fighter plane came and shot down four of our aircraft as each one came over the target. Our planes were burning like candles.

SERAFIMA AMOSOVA-TARANENKO

THE SETUP

GETTING STARTED

Gather your friends in a comfortable space.

You'll also need some supplies—dice (six-sided, two per person), pencils, playbooks, and handouts, as well as a few tokens for the Mission Pool; coins work just fine. You can find the handouts at <http://www.bulypulpitgames.com/games/night-witches>.

THE PITCH

Before you play, read the historical context and review it at the table. You can skip this if everyone is familiar with it, but if not, it is useful to share a high level summary, like so:

“We’re playing Soviet women in an all-female Night Bomber Regiment during World War Two. We’ll be pilots and navigators. We’ll be airwomen.

Our mission is to harass the German army, which has invaded our country. The war is brutal and horrific. We fly obsolete biplanes and drop bombs or, when we don’t have bombs, railroad ties, on the Germans. Things are desperate. It is incredibly dangerous. We fly in darkness, sometimes a dozen missions each night.

The Soviet army wishes we didn’t exist and nobody expects us to succeed. We are going to succeed anyway.”

If anybody has questions you can refer to the history section (see page 123), but it is probably better to just get started and answer questions as they arise.



STARTING PLAY

LIFE AND DEATH WITH THE 588TH

A session of *Night Witches* always starts at dawn, and life for the Regiment follows a day-and-night pattern. By day, plans are made, aircraft are readied, and the ceaseless grind of keeping the entire Regiment running is attended to.

By night, air wings are dispatched to targets across the front line, often only minutes away. The planes return, are rearmed, and sent out again. And again. And again. For game purposes, these endless sorties are combined into one overarching mission each night.

Your airplane holds two people. Barring special circumstances, it has no machine gun. You fly too low for parachutes to be anything but extra weight. You have neither radios nor radar.

Officers are issued Tokarev pistols. If you crash behind enemy lines, save the last bullet for yourself.

24 HOURS WITH THE 588TH

Days are for rest and preparation. During the day, airwomen will:

1. EAT TWO GOOD MEALS.

WHAT'S COOKING?

Meals, hot when possible, are served just after the Debrief and just before the Briefing in a communal canteen tent. The morning meal is “supper.”

Meals are a good time for Sections to revisit the previous night’s mission and settle any unofficial business between them.

Many aircrews also tuck away morsels of food to eat during the night as lunch. Some make a bad habit of devouring the milk candy in their survival kits.

2. DO CHORES.

HOW DOES ONE GET SQUARED AWAY LIKE A NATURAL-BORN SOVIET AIRWOMAN?

Personal needs—laundry, a cold shower, sewing to repair uniforms—usually occur after Debriefing and the morning meal.

Communal needs like cleaning the barracks and maintaining the airfield and facilities occur at this time, as well.

Mechanically minded airwomen squeeze chores and grooming in after coordinating airplane refit and repair for the day shift. This is why mechanically minded airwomen are often dirty and exhausted.

3. HIT THE HAY.

WHAT ARE THE SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS?

Sleep occurs at mid-day, behind covered windows. Every woman has her own cot. A footlocker contains everything she owns.

Extra-curricular interests (like stealing parts from another Regiment, pitching in to repair work, conducting a clandestine affair, or assembling a dossier on some Capitalist wrecker) typically cut into sleep time.

4. RELAX.

SO THERE'S TIME FOR A LITTLE FUN FOR THE AIRCREWS? LIKE WHAT?

Late afternoons are usually reserved for recreation—writing letters home, exercising, embroidering or sketching, attending lectures to raise moral and political consciousness, singing, or dancing. Sometimes there is optional or mandatory training.

For mechanically minded airwomen, this time is spent checking the work of the day shift crews. This is why mechanically minded airwomen are always grumpy.

For Section Leaders, Squadron Commanders, and Command Staff, this time is devoted to paperwork.

Squadrons assemble as dusk approaches, and the whole cycle begins again.

A mission highlights the most hair-raising moments across half a dozen or more sorties in a night. On a mission, each Section must:

5. CHOOSE A TARGET.

WHO CHOOSES THE NIGHT'S TARGET?

The player of the Squadron Commander or highest-ranking airwoman. It's their job to communicate the mission as ordered by the Regimental Chief of Staff and brief the Squadron's four Sections [Briefing]. The chosen target is marked off the Duty Station list.

For each mission, a navigator must be assigned to Wayfind and a pilot must be assigned to lead the Attack Run. All other player characters must be assigned other planes to serve as Vedomayas.

When all six targets have been marked off, it's time to change Duty Stations (see the "Operational Planning" special Move on page 48 for details).

6. DEPART AT DUSK BY THREE-PLANE SECTION. LOCATE THE TARGET [WAYFIND].

WHO CAN MAKE A WAYFIND MOVE?

Anyone in the rear seat of an airplane—that is, anyone assigned as a navigator. Multiple navigators can Wayfind individually if they like. You don't earn promotions by refusing to use your skills.

HOW CAN I IMPROVE OUR ODDS?

- Ask your Vedomaya for help.
- Use Mission Pool, before or after you roll.

WHAT IF THE SECTION HAS NO PC IN THE NAVIGATOR SEAT?

- The GM will decide what happens, probably with a hard Move.

WHAT IF WAYFIND FAILS?

- Another PC in a rear seat in the Section can try to find the target.
- If everyone fails to Wayfind, the Section can't find the target.
- The Section will likely need to return to the airbase, mission scrubbed. This looks like incompetence, because it is.

7. STRIKE THE TARGET [ATTACK RUN].

WHO CAN MAKE AN ATTACK RUN MOVE?

Anyone in the front seat of an airplane—that is, anyone assigned as a pilot. Multiple pilots can make Attack Runs individually if they like. You don't earn medals by being timid.

HOW CAN I IMPROVE OUR ODDS?

- Ask your Vedomaya for help.
- Use Mission Pool, before or after you roll.

WHAT IF WE FAIL ANYWAY?

- If you fail, the target isn't hit.
- Another PC in a front seat in the section can try to attack the target.
- The Section can return to the airbase, mission aborted. This stinks of cowardice, because it is.

8. GET HOME.

WHAT'S INVOLVED IN GETTING HOME?

The outcomes of Wayfind and Attack Runs and the choices you make. Normally it is trouble-free, but Moves tend to snowball. Your crew may be injured or your aircraft may be damaged. You may be forced down behind enemy lines.

HOW DO I IMPROVE THE ODDS?

- Pray that your Vedomaya still has your back.
- Don't screw up the Attack Run and Wayfind Moves.
- Use Mission Pool, before or after you roll.

9. ASSEMBLE AT DAWN [DEBRIEF].

WHO CONDUCTS THE DEBRIEF AFTER A MISSION?

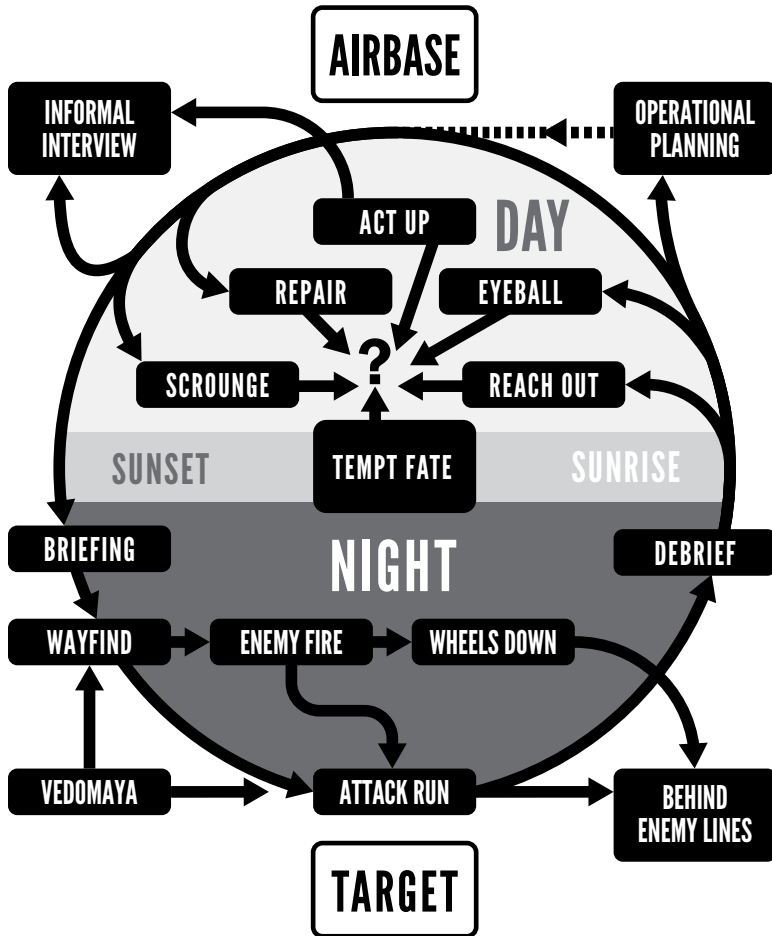
The GM, as an NPC who outranks all the PCs. Perhaps the Squadron Commander, Regimental Chief of Staff, or Politruk. For very important missions, it might be the Commander herself, or a high-ranking officer in the Fourth Air Army. The Debrief is an informal opportunity for airwomen to acknowledge one another, for good or ill.

Once the Debrief is over, the day begins—time for rest and prepare again.

THE MISSION

The mission of the 588th is one of constant and unrelenting harassment. You lack the resources and firepower to do serious damage to the German war machine, but you make up for it in persistence and the imposition of maddening uncertainty. You keep them up listening for your little motors, you keep them wondering. Every once in a while you kill a few Germans, and they know who is responsible every time—women in biplanes. For a society even more obsessed with gender roles than the Russians, it is humiliating and maddening.

THE DAY & NIGHT CYCLE DIAGRAM



HISTORY & CONTEXT

This section is filled with colorful background information about the Soviet Union before and during the Great Patriotic War. It isn't comprehensive and it isn't even necessary to enjoy the game.

WOMEN IN THE SOVIET UNION

While the Soviet constitution granted women “equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life,” reality was far different. Sexism was deeply ingrained and ubiquitous. The women’s Regiments only formed after horrendous losses made a lack of aircrews a strategic emergency, and even then it took unprecedented pressure by famous female aviators to elevate them from reserves to front-line combat formations. The Red Army Air Force didn’t want them and existing air Regiments wanted them to fail. The only people who genuinely loved the 588th—eventually—were the infantry whose lives they occasionally saved, who saw the work they did up close, where it mattered.

The Soviet Union enforced a rigid gender binary, both socially and legally. After 1934 deviation was literally illegal.

1941

OCTOBER-DECEMBER

The call goes out for female aviators to form three new Regiments. Two will be well-funded and equipped with the latest Soviet aircraft. The third will be the 588th.

1942

JANUARY

Volunteers begin to arrive in Saratov, to be greeted by Marina Roskova.

FEBRUARY-APRIL

The 588th forms up on February 5 and training begins at Engels Aerodrome. Three years of training are compressed into four months of 13-hour days. On April first, the Regiment suffers its first losses—an aircrew becomes disoriented in bad weather and crashes. [DUTY STATION 1]

REPLAY

LOUIS, ANNA, JACK, and **GRACE** sit down to continue their *Night Witches* campaign. It's the fourth session and the Regiment has been through a lot. The death of Jack's first character was the apex of the previous session and he's returning with a replacement fresh from training.

LOUIS: So what are you thinking, Jack?

JACK: Can you guys recap your characters? It's been a while. I feel like my old character fit in really well, and I want to play somebody quite different, but I also want her to mesh with the existing characters.

ANNA: Poor Raisa, we'll miss her! Sure, I'm Lt. Zoya Kovalyova, grease monkey and mad lover!

GRACE: Zoya's deeply in love with my navigator—and her boss — Captain Tamara Malkova. She's commander of 3 Squadron now and really regrets having a love affair with Zoya.

ANNA: C'mon, it's true love! Zoya got punished for being a lesbian and spent some time away from the front after Pashkovskaya, if you recall. She's back and even more obsessed.

LOUIS: And I'm Lieutenant Marina Lusitsiva, Section Leader of the unfortunately-named C-section, 3 Squadron. She's an NKVD snitch, remember? And a great pilot. And Tamara is boss of all of us.

GRACE: You're damned right she is.

JACK: Thanks, that's helpful. OK, is it all right if I play another pilot? Will that be stepping on your toes, Louis?

LOUIS: Not at all. It'll probably be helpful on missions, actually.

TONIGHT WE FLY

There was a **night bomber regiment** in World War Two composed entirely of women. **Natural-born Soviet airwomen.**

These 200 women and girls, flying **outdated biplanes** from open fields near the front lines, attacked the invading German forces every night for **1,100 consecutive nights**. When they ran out of bombs they dropped railroad ties.

To each other they were sisters, with bonds forged in blood and terror. To the Red Army Air Force they were an infuriating feminist sideshow. To the Germans they were simply **Nachthexen—Night Witches.**

Night Witches is a **tabletop role-playing game** about women at war. As a member of the **588th Night Bomber Regiment**, you'll answer the call of your Motherland in her darkest hour. Can you do your duty and strike blow after blow against the Fascists? Can you overcome discrimination and outright sabotage and rise above your sexist comrades? Are there limits to patriotism—or endurance? Play Night Witches and find out!

Night Witches requires **3-5 players**, who will take turns in the role of **game master** during the game. It can be played for a **single two-hour session** or expanded into a **literal campaign** following the Regiment across the entire Second World War. Either way, you'll tell an epic tale of **heroism and sacrifice** that honors the women who did it for real.

Powered by the Apocalypse.

