

POLBIN

An Account of The Final Flight of a Group of Petlyakov Pe-2 Dive Bombers

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Lt. Michail Batovsky's Pe-2R crew. On 9 October 1942, during a mission in Jarcev / Smolensk area, their plane was seriously damaged, being hit in the prop blade by a direct flak. The broked off prop blade damaged the propeller reducer. Although this accident occurred some 100 kilometers away from their own base, Lt. Batovsky managed to limp the plane home.

Based on writings of February 11, 1945 as the Second World War was nearing its inevitable end.

Forty-year-old Guards General-Major Ivan Polbin, CO of the 6th gv.bak of the 2nd Air Army, 1st Ukranian Front, prepared for his 158th combat sortie on the Petlyakov Pe-2 dive bomber nicknamed the 'Peshka'. He had already by 1942 been awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union award in recognition of 107 combat flights.

General Polbin was not only a good pilot, but also a quality commander and aerial tactician. He had worked out, and put into practice, tactics for groups of dive bombers, the role for which the Pe-2 was designed. This was what elevated the dive bomber into an effective weapon. The tactic involved the practice of forming a so-called 'secured ring' on reaching the target area and one after another, at a spread of 500 to 600m and a dive angle of 60 to 70 degrees, attacking the target using not only bombs, but on-board weapons as well. If numbers allowed, larger formations would consist of 27 aircraft in three groups of nine.

On that date of February 11, 1945, General Polbin, as he had done many times before, led a group of nine Pe-2s. Their task was to bomb stubbornly defended German positions at Breslau (today's Wroclaw, Poland). The three member crew of the Pe-2, besides the General, consisted of Gurads Lt.Col. Michail Zarukin and radio operator/gunner Sgt. Major Vladimir Orlov. At this point, it would have been difficult to imagine that this would be their final flight.



Pe-2 unit leader gv.Gen-Mjr Polbin after landing at a field base. Likely timeframe is September, 1944.



Guards General-Major of Aviation Ivan Polbin with his staff cabinet in January, 1945.



Gurads pilot B. Gvozdkov (centre) with his radio operator/gunner. 160th gv.bap, March, 1945.



Three member Pe-2 crew from the 12th gv.bap, BMF (Baltic Fleet). A Guards badge appears below the cockpit and a large red-outlined white inscription in Cyrillic on the fuselage. End of October, 1944.



The rather vicious lion artwork was a favorite among the pilots of these aircraft.

Back at the airfield, there was an increasingly impatient anticipation of the return of the bombers. The expect flighttime of the nine crews was quickly coming to an end. Finally, the first of the Pe-2s began to appear on the horizon as they laid in their final approach course. However, the General's aircraft, clearly marked with a white lightning bolt down the length of the fuselage and a rendering of a lion on the sides of the fuselage below the cockpit was not among them. In the final hectic battles of the war there was little time to ponder such details



The crews of one of the Pe-2 groups photographed with the 96th gv.bap combat pennant. The 96th was equipped with the Pe-2 from June 17, 1943 til the end of the war.

as the likely events that brought down Polbin's Pe-2 with a precisely placed large calibre anti-aircraft shell.

Formally, the case was closed with the verdict handed down along with the listing of General Major Polbin as MIA and the following:

'On February 11th, 1945, Gen. Polbin led a group of Pe-2 aircraft tasked with the bombing of a concentration of enemy positions in the area of Breslau. The area was heavily defended by the enemy with anti-aircraft positions. Furthermore, Polbin positioned his aircraft on the target as to be able to execute the most effective attack possible. This was his 158th combat sortie. The German anti-aircraft defences concentrated all their fire on the lead aircraft. As the result of a direct hit, the aircraft exploded and crashed.'

The report emphasized that the aircraft did not return from the mission. The same report was attributed to Zaruikin and Orlov. Before the end of the war, on April 6, 1945, General Major Polbin was posthumously awarded a second Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union and it could be constituted that this closed the book on the loss of a high ranking CO of the VVS RKKA.

In 1963, there appeared a publication from Kazakhstan publisher Zhasuzhy with the title 'In Deep Spirals' who's author was a two time recipient of the

Hero of the Soviet Union and fighter ace General Major Sergey Luganskiy. By the end of his career he had undertaken 390 combat sorties over the course of which he had shot down 37 enemy aircraft on his own with another five shared.

In the book, besides his own personal memoirs, Luganskiy also touched on the subject of the shooting down of Polbin's Peshka: 'Pilot Ivan Polbin became a German POW after being pulled unconscious from the wreck of his aircraft and was taken to a military hospital. This was in part thanks to the fact that he wore the same winter flight suit without any indication of rank as any pilot would.' There, he reportedly came in contact with another Soviet pilot who in all likelihood gave away who it was the Germans actually had in their possession. According to sources, it was Polbin's radio operator/gunner Orlov. The latter had saved himself from the wreck of the Pe-2 having endured serious abdominal injuries from the initial explosion that also threw him clear of the aircraft, and he managed to open his parachute. Luganskiy also goes on to say that the General was executed and his head was delivered to Hitler as a present for what turned out to be his last birthday. This bit of information evoked much research among historians. The final conclusion on the likely chain of events stated that the group of Pe-2s reached Breslau, where the CO gave the command to form the ring formation and one Peshka after another dove on their targets, releasing their bombs on such things as tanks and transport vehicles. One of the participating pilots revealed that the first aircraft, that of the General, was hit by anti-aircraft fire and became engulfed in flames. It turned to the east towards the Oder River in an effort to return to its own field, but was hit a second time, began to steeply dive and impacted into house ruins, and exploded.

The centre for archives of the Soviet Ministry of Defence joined the discussion. They published the official account from the Army's Summary of Events from February 11, 1945, in which there was detailed information on



Pe-2 crew from the 34th gv.bap TAF (Pacific Fleet), August, 1945.



The Order of Suvorov, 2nd Class, an award held by General Polbin.



The Order of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, 1st Class, also held by the General.



Guards emblem in a Second World War incarnation.

Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union.

all losses from that date and stated: 'During the course of the repeated attack by the group of bombers over the target, a medium calibre anti-aircraft shell struck a direct hit on the aircraft piloted by gv. gen. m-r aviaciyi I.S. Polbin. Among his crew were also M.K. Zarukin and radio operator/gunner V.A. Orlov. In an effort to douse the flames by entering into a dive, the aircraft tail section severed. The aircraft crashed on the eastern outskirts of Breslau and exploded. At the time of the shoot down, only one crew member was able



to egress the aircraft and take to his parachute.'

And with that, the case was closed. The remains of the crew were never recovered and they have no known graves.

General Major Ivan Polbin for his military service was decorated twice Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union, twice the Order of Lenin, twice the Order of the Red Flag, the Order of Suvorov 2nd Class, the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi First Class, the Order of the Great Patriotic War First Class, the Order of the Red Star and the Defense of Moscow and Defence of Stalingrad medals.



The crew of this Pe-2R (359th Series) from the 99th Long Range Reconnaissance Regiment was commanded by pilot Baranov. Eastern Prussia, October, 1944.

Sources:

- 1) *Dvaždy Geroji Sovětskogo Sojuza*, Various authors, Vojenizdat, Moscow, 1973.
- 2) *Nebe východní fronty*, Jiří F. Šiška, Votobia, Olomouc, Czech Republic, 2001.
- 3) *Osprey Combat Aircraft - 96, Pe-2*, D. Khazanov, A. Medved, Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2013.

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