

# The combat stories of **TATJANA ZHABKO**



**Branch of Service:** Russian Army

**Unit:** 10<sup>th</sup> Corps, 28<sup>th</sup> Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Company

Tatjana Zhabko was a female soldier in the Russian Army. As a member of an anti-aircraft artillery battalion, she was in charge of searching for German planes at night, as well as, repairing phone lines under enemy fire.



These stories were compiled by an interviewer, who prefers to remain anonymous, and goes by the nickname 'Kilroy Was Here.' These stories are posted through a partnership between 'Kilroy Was Here' and the Witness to War Foundation. Permission to use any of these materials must be granted by 'Kilroy Was Here,' which can be obtained through the Witness to War Foundation.



I was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1922 and my mother died when I was just 5 and my sister Sonya was only 3. It was also during this time that my father Fedir, joined what was called a collective farm in 1923 and all of our belongings, land, and cattle were taken. I started school in 1929 and was doing well in all my studies until 1933, at which time there was a big famine. For the following 2 years, I was unable to attend school due to the famine killing a large number of people, with my father being one.

After my father's death, my cousin Anastasiya took me to live with her. As the famine came to an end, all children who had lived without parents, were collected and placed in a state children home. My cousin decided to place me in one of these homes and it was there my sister Sonya and I were reunited again. When I arrived, the children's home had 14 other kids who had been placed there. Here I was able to pick up where I had left off in my studies and was able to graduate from school in 1941. I was studying well all the time and that's why I had the right to enter the university without exams. I took my documents and went to enter a teaching university in Lebedin.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 1941 our school was having a graduation party, full with dancing and singing and at 4 A.M., during our celebration, there was an announcement telling us the war had started. The following day, the Germans crossed the border on the



22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1941 and news came about the cities next to the border being bombed. We returned to our homes with hopes that our army would stop the Germans there. I remember thinking that Stalin and Hitler signed an agreement, and all of the men were called to join the army.

In August, Germans occupied the Grun region, which was where my grandmother lived, and we learned of how they were taking everything the people had. The adults couldn't be out in the streets, because Germans were killing them, so instead they were sending their children out to look for food. A number of people had escaped to the forest and become partisans, and people lived under this occupation until 1943. Germans were asking and looking for these partisans but we really never saw them, and the Germans often went out searching through the forest trying to find them but were unable to.

There were no laws in the USSR against taking girls into the army and that's why I was asked to write an application to enter. There was another girl with me at the time by the name of Alexandra Zhakka. After being accepted, we went to Kharkiv, where we joined up with a spare regiment. We trained and studied for one month on how to operate the anti-aircraft searchlights. At the end of the month, our team was taken to the 10<sup>th</sup> corps of the 28<sup>th</sup> anti-aircraft searchlight battalion, where I was placed in the first company.



We were stationed in Shepetovka and then in Rivne, Ukraine. There we lived in dugouts for the first week before being sent to the frontlines where the searchlights were set up. The commander of the company, Komlev, left me at the command station with a connection and telephone operator with connections between the command station and the searchlights. Our duty was spotting the German planes as they flew over, of which we spotted 5 to 16 a night. These planes also reported to their base about where we were, so each day we had to move our lights so as not to be in the same place each night. Sometimes our connections were broken and Alexandra Stetsenko and I were sent out to find the break in the lines. When we did this, we were handed a submachine gun, phone and grenade. If captured by the Germans, we were to use the grenade to kill ourselves, along with as many Germans as we could who might be standing around us. At the time, if the Germans captured you, you were viewed as a traitor and treated as one. A lot of the times while we were out repairing the phone lines, we were under fire from the Germans and had bullets passing over our heads, but luckily I was never wounded. Alexandra and I were never afraid and were always able to repair the lines.

As time went on, we moved to the area called Breslau. Fortunately, we moved just before our base was bombed, and it was while we were in Breslau that the war ended, and in August of 1945 I returned home.