

NIGHT WITCHES AIRFIELD ON THE BORDERLANDS

A STRUCTURED INTRODUCTION

This document consists of a series of scenes that walk a group through the first *Night Witches* duty station—Engels Airdrome. Starting as raw recruits, the characters will gradually form up into a competent combat section ready to be shipped off to war. Along the way, the group will learn about these women and the dangerous world they live in.

To use this you'll need a copy of *Night Witches*, nature playbooks, a move sheet, and the first duty station handout.

Let each player control a discrete part, rotating this responsibility as you proceed. Everyone should follow the prompts when it comes time to build a character. The final two parts—six and seven—include complete missions and full integration with the rules, so if one player has read the book it might be best to defer facilitation to them toward the end.

Each part consists of a series of prompts with one of three symbols:



This symbol represents actual instruction. Each is a point of entry into either building a character or engaging with the rules of the game.



Read these sections out loud. Feel free to paraphrase! These paragraphs are colorful transitions and scene-painting. If they evolve into scenes that's fine, particularly if those scenes allow the players to engage with moves and learn about the world.



Dialogs between non-player characters and the player's new recruits are important. They allow you to share background information and build up personalities within the regiment that you can return to. Each includes a list with check-boxes for your reference. Try to hit all the relevant points but don't feel constrained.

The document is formatted with a wide margin so you can take notes and write down names, facts and observations. Hopefully you'll build up interesting relationships and situations to explore further as you undertake this exercise.

PART ONE: SARATOV, RUSSIA



Explain that you'll be gradually building both characters and situation as your young women transition from fresh recruits to seasoned pilots and navigators ready for combat.



We've arrived at Saratov, a city at war. The darkened streets are filled with soldiers but we are still civilians, in our best clothes. Patriotic marches in celebration of the 24th anniversary of the founding of the Red Army and impassioned speeches by Comrade Stalin and Marshal Zhukov fill the air. "The day is not far distant when the Red Army will thrust back the brutal enemy and the red banners will fly again victoriously over the entire Soviet land."

With a Red Army Air Force transit voucher in hand, we board a ferry across the Volga with a hundred other hopeful, enthusiastic, and confused young men and women. One woman stands out in the crowd—dressed in a splendid uniform with sky blue shoulder boards with a medal pinned to her chest. We haven't yet learned to know either her rank or what the medal signifies, but we know we want to be just like her.



Explain natures and hand out the playbooks. Have each player choose a nature and then choose a name, look and background. Ask each what the other recruits see when they look at her. She's not in uniform - what sort of clothes does she wear? Has she brought any luggage? What sort of shoes does she have on? What can we tell about her from her demeanor?



Choose a player for the officer to strike up a conversation with. Roleplay a short dialog. Make sure you deliver the following information, but keep it short.

- I'm Captain Evgeniya Lobodeva of the 588th Night Bomber Regiment.
 - The 588th is one of three regiments being formed by Major Marina Raskova, the famous air hero. We focus on night harassment and will do the most difficult, dangerous work.
 - We're glad to have competent new recruits. We'll be flying outmoded biplanes under cover of darkness in all weather conditions.
 - The war situation is bad—even Comrade Stalin says as much. Our winter stopped the Fascists fifty miles from Moscow, but the spring muds have blunted our counter-offensive. Now things are very uncertain. Personally I aim to change that.
 - Step lively, obey your section leader and squadron commander, and you'll get your chance to kick the Hitlerite bandits right in the balls.
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The ferry bumps up against the dock in Engels and suddenly everyone is all business—shouting, pushing, rolling trucks and equipment off. Time to get moving!

PART TWO: LOGISTICS AREA SIX



Across the Volga, Engels Airdrome is still 4 kilometers away. While a truck is waiting for Captain Lobodeva and the other soldiers in uniform, we are told to walk. Hopefully we wore sensible shoes.

The skies overhead are filled with airplanes—sleek new Pe-2 bombers shining in the sunlight, stubby, aggressive-looking Yak-1 fighter planes, and plodding old Po-2 biplanes. These look ridiculously out of date, and their tiny engines sound for all the world like sewing machines. As we near the Airdrome, footsore and hungry, we see for the first time how massive and busy it really is. There are hundreds of planes here, and hordes of Soviet aviators—many of them women.



Orient the players to the day side of Duty Station 1. Collectively answer the questions and draw the Engels Airdrome.



When we reach the main gate of Engels Airdrome, a Fourth Air Army military policeman reviews our papers and tells us all to report to Sergeant Kataeva in Logistics Area Six and request the following items:

Service uniforms, flight boots, one week's rations and directions to the 588th's trainee barracks

We're told to repeat this list. Go ahead and do that right now, let's hear it.

After some fumbling around and vague directions from harried, impatient mechanics, we find Sergeant Kataeva.



Choose a player for her to have a conversation with, once she is done screaming at a hapless private. Roleplay a short dialog. Make sure you deliver the following information, but keep it short.

- I'm Masha Kataeva. Who the fuck are you? Scratch that—I've seen your type come and go. You'll be down in fucking flames in a fortnight and I am not going to get to know you.
- What do you want? Let me make one thing perfectly clear to you skinny bitches—I am not your mother and I don't have any boots or fucking field rations, so go choke yourselves.
- Let me tell you what we've got and you can fucking pick from that, all right? We've got some nice used men's uniforms that won't fit. We have a God-damned airplane in a packing crate and no time to assemble it. We've got endless fucking shovels for some reason. Ask me for anything else and I will shit on your mother.
- Before I find you suka's some nice lady boots, I think I'll focus on acquiring a couple of Shvetsov M-11 engines and all the shit that breaks on those fuckers—cylinders, heads, gaskets, pumps - Jesus and his whoremonger apostles—gages, canvas and canvas dope, control wire and surfaces, wheels and struts, bomb release mechanisms, I could go fucking on, sister. I don't have shit.
- You better go see Senior Lieutenant Petrova. Ask for her in the 588th's barracks—just keep walking that way until you see the shitty place no decent woman in her right mind would call home.

PART THREE: 588TH TRAINEE BARRACKS



We take our new uniforms and head for the barracks, enduring some cat-calls from leather-jacket-clad male pilots on the way. When we arrive, a woman no older than any of us is waiting to greet us. She shows each of us to a cot and tells us to put on our new uniforms.



Explain Roles and have every player choose one. Ask them to choose a starting rank and then assign stats. Ask each of the recruits how their Role and stats are obvious to the casual observer.



Choose a player for Petrova to have a conversation with. The training begins before we've even got our trousers on! Roleplay a short dialog. Make sure you deliver the following information, but keep it short.

- I'm Senior Lieutenant Petrova. What's your name? Where are you from?
 - We'll be dividing you out into pilots and navigators based on aptitude, but you will both be qualified for either seat. Pilots in front, navigators in back.
 - These airplanes are simple. Fuel and oil are gravity fed, so don't fly upside-down. An air cooled engine. No oil filter, just a mesh screen. Open cockpits.
 - Many things can go wrong. Flying at night is strange and challenging.
 - Memorize your cockpit layout. Down and to your left: Throttle, fuel mix lever, fuel cutoff switch, carburetor heat and elevator trim. Left dash switch bank: Pitot heat, master battery, panel lights, two magneto switches. Gages—Fuel, altitude, airspeed, heading, attitude. Climb rate and engine RPM. Oil pressure and temperature. Fuel pressure gage. Cylinder temperature.
 - I've reviewed your files and you are quite a mixed bag, aren't you?
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As Senior Lieutenant Petrova, ask each player one question, for example:

- What did you do when your first flight instructor failed you because you were a woman?
 - What did you lie about on your regimental intake form?
 - Why did you want to join the 586th Fighter Regiment so badly?
 - Who do you routinely see from your brother unit, the well equipped, all-male 218th night bomber regiment, and where, and why?
 - Who do you know in your sister unit, the photogenic media darlings of the mostly-female 586th fighter regiment, and how do you feel about her?
 - Who do you know in the 4th Air Army Logistics and Supply Commissariat, and what favor do you owe them?
 - Who do you know occupied territory, silent since June of '41?
 - Whose funeral did you miss by volunteering for flight training?
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Senior Lieutenant Petrova, satisfied with our answers, tells us that the Major is waiting on the flight line, and we file out to meet her.

PART FOUR: FLIGHT LINE, ENGELS AIRDROME



The regiment's Po-2's are in formation on the flight line, each fragile craft lovingly tended by a pair of mechanic-armorerers. Senior Lieutenant Petrova forms us into rough order and salutes a stern older woman with gold shoulder boards—the Major. Next to her is Captain Lobodeva, who we met on the ferry—her Chief of Staff - along with several other officers. The Major looks us over.

“Comrades, welcome to the regiment,” she says, “I am Major Yevdokiya Bershanskaya, your commander. I will expect you to comport yourselves at all times as natural-born Soviet airwomen. We will fly these”—and she points to the biplanes behind her. “The Polikarpov Po-2 LNB. A simple two-seat canvas-and-wood biplane has been determined to be ideal for our mission by the great operational minds of the Fourth Army Air Force, and we are certainly not going to doubt their wisdom in this matter. Let’s talk about that mission, shall we?”



Choose a player for Major Bershanskaya to speak to. Roleplay a short dialog. Make sure you deliver the following information, but keep it short.

- What’s your name? Did you train with a Comsomol flying club or a glider school or as part of an agricultural technical academy?
- There are three places you can put a bullet that will break the Po-2: The small fuel tank, the compact engine, or the pilot. Anything else just passes through and you keep flying. And, honestly, the pilot doesn’t count because you have a spare.
- There is no radio in a Po-2. Individual aircrews communicate with hand signals or by using a speaking tube, and communication between planes in the same section is by flashlight, flare or hand signal. We will work together so closely, night after night, that you will be able to read another plane’s intention by instinct.
- The Po-2 is not a fighter but a bomber. Each wing has six attachment points for FAB-50 fragmentation bombs. The release mechanism for these bombs is unreliable. In the event of a hanging bomb, you navigators need to climb out on the wing and release it manually. When FAB-50s aren’t available, we will drop sawed-off railroad ties.
- Since our mission profiles rarely have us flying above 1200 meters and weight is at a premium, parachutes are not standard equipment.
- Formation drill at 1700; I expect you to be crisp. It is now my pleasure to administer the oath of a Soviet soldier and induct you into the Red Army Air Force Fourth Air Army.



Have all the players stand, and stand yourself. Administer the following oath:



I, [NAME], promise to rise to the defense of my Motherland, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as a fighting man [sic] of the Worker’s and Peasant’s Red Army, I promise to defend it bravely, skillfully, with dignity and honor, sparing neither my blood nor my life itself for the achievement of total victory over our enemies.



Major Bershanskaya dismisses us and Captain Lobodeva congratulates us, pointing the way to the mess tent so we can finally get some chow after a busy morning. She tells us that classroom instruction begins tomorrow at dusk, in Classroom F.

PART FIVE: CLASSROOM F



The following morning we find ourselves in a crowded tent configured as a classroom. The pungent smell of aviation gasoline permeates everything, and the roaring of aircraft occasionally interrupts a lesson. Our first class is on political consciousness for aviation troops, and is conducted by two women in the grey tunics of NKVD officers. The NKVD is the Soviet secret police, and her officers are not to be trifled with. Two are attached to every regiment.

“Good morning Trainees, “ says the ranking officer, “I am Captain Olga I. Barsukova and this is my Deputy, Lieutenant Svetlana Sheremeteva. Our job is to encourage your continued development as politically conscious and socially engaged Communists. But we must never forget that we are also military officers with security responsibilities within the regiment. ”



Choose a player for Captain Barsukova to single out, after consulting her notes. Roleplay a short dialog. Make sure you deliver the following information, but keep it short (albeit long-winded!). Barsukova can drone on a little.

- What's your name, Comrade? Where are you from? Would you say that enemies of the people - the bourgeoisie of course, but also aristocrats, religious figures, social parasites, eggheads, nationalists - are these dangerous elements any less a threat than the Fascists?
- We're all here to protect the regiment, But think carefully about "helping your friends", comrades. Military personnel who fail to report treason are themselves subject to ten years imprisonment.
- When I find a counter-revolutionary I will arrest her. If I find someone undermining or weakening the external security of the USSR by means of slacking or wrecking, or parasitism or aiding the enemy, well that is treason, my friend. Section 58-1B clearly states that treason by military personnel incurs an immediate death sentence. Should the offender run away, the same statute allows for the imprisonment of her relatives for five to ten years.
- Listen, I want you to have success here so I will warn you about section 58-14, which deals with counter-revolutionary sabotage. Conscious non-execution or deliberately careless execution of defined duties, aimed at the weakening of the power of the government and of the functioning of the state apparatus, is subject to at least one year of imprisonment, and under especially aggravating circumstances, up to the highest measure of social protection: execution, with confiscation of property. I burn for the opportunity to hang a saboteur. I hope we understand each other.

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PART FIVE: CLASSROOM F (CONTINUED)



As Captain Barsukova, ask each player one question, for example:

- What did the Germans take from you?
 - Were your parents actually guilty?
 - Why does the NKVD already have a file on you, and how did you get around that black mark to join the regiment?
 - What does the Marxist-Leninist struggle against the forces of reaction mean to you personally?
 - When you were last disciplined, by whom, and what was the reason?
 - When did you get a favor because of your gender, and how did you pay it back?
 - What would you be doing if they didn't let you fly?
 - What happened the last time a crowd of brother airmen wolf-whistled at you?
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After handing out some inspirational literature, Captain Barsukova dismisses us. We have thirty minutes to wolf down some kasha before classroom instruction in land navigation with Senior Lieutenant Petrova begins.

PART SIX: FLIGHT TRAINING

After a week of monotonous classroom instruction under the tutelage of Captain Barsukova and Senior Lieutenant Petrova, we are formed into a three-aircraft section as part of the training squadron. Each section has three pilots and three navigators. Which of us volunteered earliest?

! Decide who it is. If somebody chose the Role of Zealot, it's a good bet they volunteered as soon as they possibly could after the war started.

Congratulations, you are the provisional section leader and responsible for the deportment and proficiency of the five women under your command. Give everyone a post—pilot or navigator—and assign them to individual planes. The reserve plane is a beat-up reserve of dubious airworthiness.

! Ask them to assign tail numbers to their four airplanes. Any number between 001 and 200 is fine. Make sure everyone notes the composition of the training section on the back of their nature playbook.

Finally we are ready for our first training flight. We've all flown before in civilian life, but now we will be expected to fly as a team, under difficult and possibly deadly circumstances, with precision and courage.

! Orient the players to the night side of Duty Station 1. Check off the first mission and run the night flying exercise - ask the section leader to brief the airwomen, run the mission, then debrief. Since there is no initial mission pool, it is likely to go poorly. Senior Lieutenant Petrova will not be pleased if so. Regardless, explain how mission pool works and why it is valuable.

A month has passed—it is now March 1942. We've been flying relentlessly, every night, for thirty straight days. We are exhausted but the pace only quickens. The Red Army Air Force has been decimated and is slowly rebuilding. The time has come to begin tactical training and skill building to bring the regiment up to 4th Air Army standards.

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PART SIX: FLIGHT TRAINING (CONTINUED)



Ask each player an introspective, personal question, for example:

- When has your sexuality gotten you in trouble?
- When has your sexuality gotten you out of trouble?
- In what ways do you dress or look like a woman?
- In what ways do you dress or look like a man?
- Whose picture will you tape to your plane's dash?
- Who in the regiment evokes the strongest feelings from you, and why?
- When we search your footlocker, what surprising thing do we find?
- What did the Soviet state take from you?



Present some vignettes of daytime life around Engels Airdrome. There can be direct challenges from men from the 217th or 218th, news reporters from Pravda, mechanical problems, whatever seems interesting based on what has already been established. Make sure there are opportunities to build mission pool based on the character's interests and personalities.

When night falls, check off the second mission and run the mock bombing run—ask the section leader to brief the airwomen, run the mission, then debrief. anyone participating in this mission deepens ties and earns an advance—mark it off and fill in a Regard slot. Explain why Regard is valuable.

PART SEVEN: COMBAT READY



April, 1942. After another month of grueling training, the pace has become frantic. Supplies are becoming rarer as the combat situation becomes more and more uncertain. The regiment's airplanes are suffering, and pressure from our staff officers continues to mount. Not only are we expected to become excellent pilots and navigators, we are also expected to be model Soviet airwomen, perfect in every way. Something has got to give.



Present more daytime vignettes, seasoned with desperation and failure. They may need to scrounge or repair. Captain Barsukova will be looking for shirkers, wreckers and saboteurs. Word might go out that anyone performing poorly will be cut from the regiment. As before, make sure there are opportunities to build mission pool based on the character's interests and personalities.

When night falls, check off the final mission and run the live bombing run with "aggressive" opposing forces from the all-male 217th Fighter Division under D.P. Galunov. After the debrief, anyone participating in this mission learns a harsh lesson and earns an advance - mark it off and choose a move.



That's it—play time is over. Senior Lieutenant Petrova informs us that word has come down from the Major that tomorrow we will be shipping out for the Caucuses. Sergeant Kataeva has travel vouchers for the ferry and a train from Saratov departs tonight. We've been assigned to 2-Squadron where we will comprise A-Section. Good luck, and we'll all meet again in Trud Gornyaka.



Change to Duty Station 2, choose an initial GM, and continue playing!