



Anne Noggle, Raissa Surnachevskaya, from *A Dance with Death*

THE Adventurer

Editor's Note: What follows is the product of K. Johnson Bowles' interviews with Anne Noggle. A Dance with Death: Personal Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen in World War II, Noggle's latest book, published by Texas A & M Press in fall 1994. The exhibit "Out of the Sky: Portraits of Russian and American Pilots of WWII" is planned for November 7-December 10 at Firehouse Gallery, sponsored by the Houston Women's Caucus for Art.

K. Johnson Bowles

"I think I've always had a sense of adventure. It doesn't happen to everyone."—Anne Noggle

Joseph Campbell, explorer of societal and personal myth and "self-construction," has examined the individual's need and/or desire to seek self-actualization as opposed to conforming to options thrust upon one from chance or inaction. He describes this process as "following your bliss." According to Campbell, the path to fulfillment is blocked by many obstacles, some internal and some external, and great personal effort—and risk—is required. The person who successfully follows his/her bliss recognizes the risks and accepts them as part of life's experiences. As one progresses, fear dissipates and life's "shoulds" and "should nots" are forgotten. Such strong people become the heroes of society, those that break, or set, the archetypes to which the rest of us compare our life experiences.

Anne Noggle is one of Campbell's strong people. She has always followed her dreams and desires and lived a life filled with the exceptional—exceptional to everyone but her. First she found her spirit and breath in flying, both physically and metaphorically, as a pilot and as a photographer. She has challenged conventional views of women in her life and in print, thriving on the energy and fulfillment her experiences

have produced. In 1939, at the age of 17, she gained her pilot's license. From 1943-44 she was a Woman Air Force Service Pilot; from 1945-53 a flight instructor, air show stunt pilot, and crop duster pilot; and then a captain in the United States Air Force from 1954-59.

In 1959 she retired from the Air Force due to disability and decided to return to college. About this time in her life Noggle recalls "I was excited about the possibility of going back to school. At first, I decided to be an art historian. I attended the University of New Mexico when I was 37. In my last semester Van Deren Coke came to the university as chairman of the art

department and started the photography program. So I took a class in photography." In Noggle's first photography book, *Silver Lining*, Noggle explains the power photography had over her: "It was the first time since I'd been grounded that I felt completely happy. I knew what I was going to do for the rest of my life."

Noggle finds being a pilot and being a photographer fulfilling in much the same way. "The similarities between photography and flying are that you are totally independent. Once you're off the ground flying you are completely on your own. I've always wanted to be completely independent and photography is a very independent thing.

You either rise or fall because of that. There is no question in your mind about who is responsible."

Being a pilot also affected her way of looking at the world when she began to photograph. "Initially, I used a wide-angle lens to take in all I wanted around me which probably stems from my years as a pilot—scanning the horizon. Those were in my early photographs. It felt good to photograph that way. It took me a while to get closer to people, to really look at them as portraits."

Her influences are as wide-ranging as Arbus, Sander, Avedon and the like. Noggle contends, "The only one who influenced

Anne Noggle, 125th Regiment, Pe-2 Aircraft, from *A Dance with Death*



me was August Sander. I liked the very straight-forwardness of what he was doing even though he was categorizing the people. My greatest influence was having lived and done all the things that I had before I approached photography. Some of my friends had died flying. I had lived in Europe. I had seen an awful lot right down to the raw bone. I believe that it was my experience of life more than it was outside influences that caused me to photograph the way I do."

Noggle's insistence on doing things independently and on her own terms is deceptive. She is a humanist nourished by her relationships and life experiences. Her photographs are not those of an outsider looking in or of cold scientific categorization by an anthropologist. "My approach is very personal. It is the way I feel, it is the rapport between myself and the person being photographed. What I wrote some time ago I still find to be true. To look straight into a face and find a pulse of what

but strength, and beauty and humor and the aging of real human beings whose lives are so visible. Now I am one of the elderly and I use my self-images in a humorous way, being perhaps naughty, reminding us of the sensuality and playfulness that remains with us even as ancient citizens. And I offer it to the viewer in hopes that while they are enjoying the images they will also see us as viable human beings. Attitudes are changing and the elderly are speaking up nowadays.

"The second book, *For God, Country and the Thrill of It*, 1990, explored the uniqueness of Women Air Force Service Pilots. It was the first work I had ever done that was formal. I photographed a good number of people in a short period of time at a reunion of Women Air Force Service Pilots. I felt it was time to photograph us. I knew we were special in relation to what we had done. In the late '30s, it was uncommon for women to fly airplanes. I wanted to see if there was something visual

I re-photographed their snapshots from World War II. The book is called *A Dance with Death: Personal Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. The text is so powerful I decided to make the images secondary; it is not a coffee table book.

"They [the Russians] were the first women ever to be in combat. I think it was the only freedom they ever knew. Most of them were born about the time of the Communist Revolution and spent their whole lives under that dictatorship. To get to fly an airplane was a real release. They were such daredevils in the air! Once they were off the ground, as long as they fulfilled the mission, they got away with naughty things like slow rolling the field; things they would have never done, never allowed to do during peacetime. The interesting thing is that they are

a lot like us at least in looks.

There is a powerful thing in them that gives them a sense of self. They have certainly proven themselves!"

Noggle and the Russian women developed a decisively caring friendship going beyond the distance implied in the artist/model relationship. "When I arrived in Russia, the women came to my hotel where I interviewed and photographed. The very first ones that came gave me bear hugs and a kiss on either cheek. Even though I couldn't understand the language there was understanding in a number of ways. We were the same age. We had been in the same war helping each other. We were all pilots or crew. There is something in those things that makes you alive. We formed a friendship in spite of the lack of language through our translator. I never felt the distance that might have been between us."

Noggle's concern for their well-being turned to action. "Since they have to spend all their money on food they have nothing left over. They can no longer afford medications from the West. I carried over a lot of medicine. What I took over there did not solve the problem, but every little bit counts. I realized that in order to raise the money for the medicine I would have to do something. I made a whole bunch of prints of myself as a pilot and offered them to anyone who could give at least \$50. I raised \$8,000. That's a lot of prints."

The content of Noggle's photographs express the strengths of women. "Women have many modes of expression and each adds to our knowledge of them; style of hair, makeup, clothing, almost everything about her is chosen to effect her self-image. The body, the stance, pose and then the face, the face—we learn to read a face even before we learn to speak. The subtleties of facial expression and the openness of women to using them are legion. Girls are free to emote, to express their feelings at the same time as boys are taught to be stoic

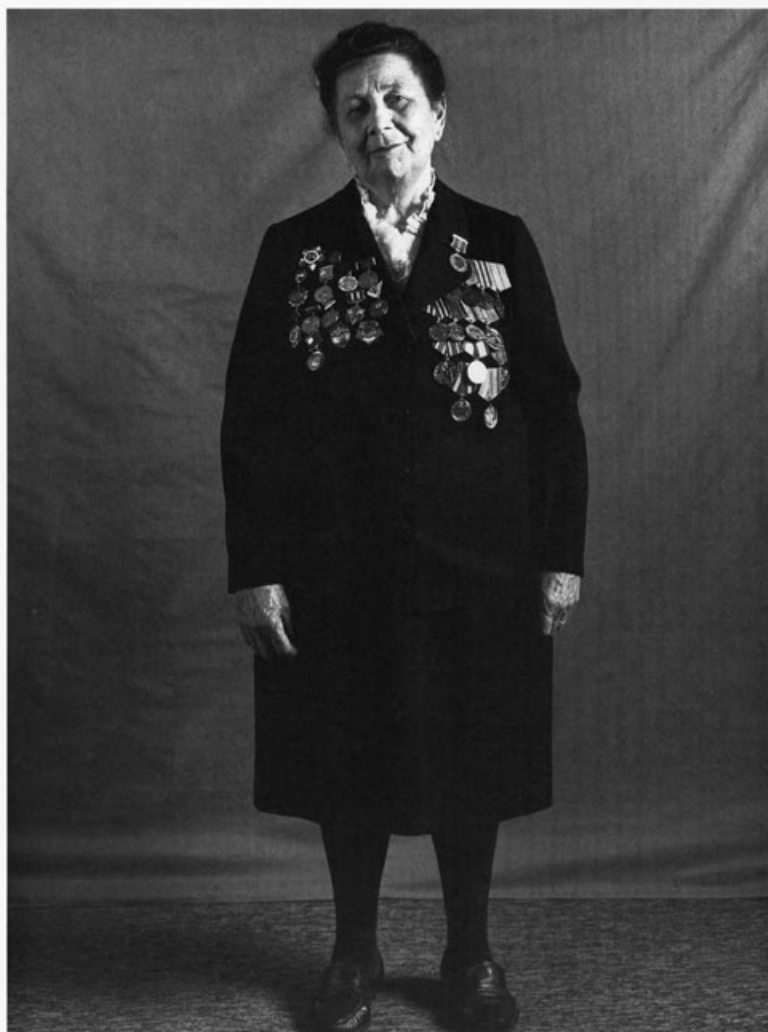


Anne Noggle, Valentina Volkova-Tikonova, from *A Dance with Death*

and impassive. And on the face of an older woman you can often trace a life, not just a mood. I believe when women are old they grow stronger. Not physically of course but inner strength. I find them to be beautiful. I do and don't call myself a feminist. I think the ideas of the basics of feminism I certainly agree with. I don't call myself that for one thing; I don't call myself much of anything. I'm not a joiner, but I do believe in the rights of women."

Noggle, in her life's process (or progress) did not purposefully reject the typical for the atypical, for her bliss was not in being a rebel but to be completely herself, an individual in search of her soul's desire and her heart's excitement. Just as with her subjects, on her surface, from looking at her or talking to her in everyday conversation, she could be anyone/everywoman. Just as with her subjects, it's only through her photographs and writings that those who are not intimates of hers can experience her uniqueness. Through her documentation of her own and other women's lives, she has significantly contributed to an expansion of expectations of what is possible/typical for anyone/any woman. But Anne was just being herself.

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Anne Noggle, Mariya Akillina, pilot, 1991

it is to be human, that is what fuels me, that is the sum of my mind and longing."

Her images express a collaboration with the people she has photographed. The images are non-threatening yet raw. There is an obvious trust. Each of Noggle's photographic projects is tackled with sensitivity, personal involvement and a certain level of intimacy. This can be found in her first book *Silver Lining*, 1983. "Since I began photographing my mother and her generation when I was still relatively young, I was both surprised and then shocked by the degree of discrimination directed against the elderly, and its de facto acceptance by the society at large. It became a cause for me and a dominant direction in my work—not pathos, certainly not wrinkles,

that would distinguish us as women pilots. In looking at our photographs I realized there was not. Indeed, we were a cross section of American women of our age. I think I had expected otherwise but upon reflection, it reinforced my belief that women can do whatever they are bold enough to do."

Noggle's latest project continues her focus on women and freedom. "I had a call from the organization of Women Air Force Service Pilots saying 'Guess what? The Russians have women pilots who flew combat in World War II.' I sat there at my desk and thought 'Oh, Lord. Now I'm going to have to go to Russia and photograph.' I traveled to Russia four times and interviewed and photographed seventy women.



Anne Noggle, Mariya Dolina, from *A Dance with Death*