

## **My Grandfather Saw Harriman**

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William Averell Harriman, a prominent statesman and the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union (1943-1946), remains not only one of the most influential but also one of the most controversial figures in the history of Soviet-American diplomatic relations. The term of his authority began during crucial periods of World War II. The family memories that I want to share have been preserved as an oral testimony of a participant in that war and those memories send us to the Vnukovo military base near Moscow, the place where my grandfather served. I did not happen know him while he was alive, but the eldest of his two sons, my father, telling his own father's biography from the front, mentioned a memorable episode - a brief meeting between a Russian soldier and an American ambassador.

It was 1944. The Soviet government and the allies had finally reached a long-awaited agreement about the opening of a second front. My grandfather was appointed to the 1st Air Squadron of the 28th Fighter Air Regiment in March of 1944. A freshman at the Riazan Agricultural College when he was drafted into the Red Army and trained in artillery, Andrei Grigor'evich Semin<sup>1</sup> (1906-1973) was assigned to aviation. He was not a novice in military action. While serving his term of compulsory military service, and as the representative from his military unit, which was stationed in Kubinka, in April of 1930 he was present at the massive funeral in Moscow of the futurist poet Vladimir Maiakovskii. Years later, as part of the 402nd howitzer artillery regiment he took part in the Soviet-Finnish war (1939-1940), and in August 1941 was sent to the 329th anti-aircraft artillery regiment, with which he fought for the defense of Moscow in the Naro-Fominskii operation in December of that same year.

Later he was transferred to the Leningrad province where he participated in liberating the city of Tikhvin.

In the summer of 1943, Andrei Semin participated in a fierce battle of the Kursk Bulge,<sup>2</sup> where he suffered shrapnel wounds and a severe concussion and as a result later ended up in Vnukovo. After the tank attack and high-explosive shells dropped by German bombers, according to ordinance reports from the 14th Battery of the 5th Division of the 1867th mortar-anti-aircraft artillery regiment, there were only two survivors: ammunition loader Kamalian and gun commander Semin. The latter's fate, it seems, would have been sealed, had it not been for the resourcefulness of the wounded Kamalian, who, before the arrival of the paramedics, succeeded in digging out with his sapper spade<sup>3</sup> the dying commander, buried up to his charred combat boots that were sticking out of the ground.

The concussion resulted in the complete loss of speech and partial hearing loss. For seven months my grandfather remained in recovery in Sverdlovsk, where one of the military hospitals was situated deep in the rearward. Doctors extracted numerous fragments from his riddled back, traces of which would make their presence felt even in peacetime (from his wounds the skin on his back became hypersensitive to water, such that any procedures using water turned into a hardship for him). Medical personnel would make bleak prognoses because they did not believe that Red Army soldier Semin would recover. His speech and hearing unexpectedly returned, when one of the patients in the smoking room threw out a hasty remark, pointing to Andrei, who was sitting nearby: "And he's a mute!" That first phrase heard by my grandfather after the concussion echoed in his chest like a wave of indignation, and after many months without uttering even a single word, he told off the brusque offender: "What do you mean ... mute?" Everyone was taken aback, and someone ran to get the doctor, talking about the miracle that had just taken place.

After ordering one-hundred grams of medicinal alcohol<sup>4</sup> for Semin, the army doctor sent him to sleep it off. Before long, the artillery soldier was on the mend.

My grandfather served in Vnukovo until the end of the war and saw many military commanders from the top military brass, but he especially remembered meetings with marshal Semyon Tymoshenko (for whose family he would repeatedly deliver food rations) and military pilot Vasilii Stalin. As an aviation mechanic Andrei Semin serviced military aircraft based in Vnukovo: British fighters *Supermarine Spitfire*,<sup>5</sup> American *Bell P-39 Airacobra*,<sup>6</sup> and *Bell P-63 Kingcobra*,<sup>7</sup> delivered to the USSR via the Lend-Lease program.

On one occasion, the American ambassador's plane was expected to arrive at the airfield (likely a *Douglas C-54 Skymaster*<sup>8</sup>). Descending the folding stairs, Harriman headed toward the awaiting car, greeting the technicians with a barely noticeable nod of the head. Toward evening, having completed work on inspection and refueling of the aircraft together with the Americans, both teams decided to strengthen their inter-Atlantic friendship. The Russians culled the whiskey offered by the Americans, while the Americans liked the vodka. "Moscow" vodka was a big hit that resounded with familiar phrases: "All right, very well." Toasts were raised for the opening of the second front. [My grandfather's] memory preserved the surname of the aviation mechanic of the American plane - McCain.

In 1945 Andrei Semin was discharged as a junior sergeant; he was awarded medals "For the Defense of Moscow" and "For victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945." The plane delivering the Act of unconditional surrender by fascist Germany was greeted in Vnukovo with jubilation.



**Image 1.** Andrei Semin with the medal “For the Defense of Moscow,” December 22, 1944. *From the author's family archive.*



Image 2. Andrei Semin's Red Army book with a record of service in the 28th Fighter Air Regiment, Vnukovo. From the author's family archive.



Image 3. Andrei Semin's Red Army book with a record of service in the 28th Fighter Air Regiment, Vnukovo. From the author's family archive.



Image 4. Andrei Semin was awarded an honorary certificate for his participation in the battles with the White-Finns. *From the author's family archive.*



**Image 5.** (From left to right) Soviet People's Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Viacheslav Molotov; Chairman of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Eric Johnston; Supreme Commander, Joseph Stalin; and U.S. Ambassador to the USSR, Averell Harriman at an official reception in the Kremlin, *Pravda*, June 28, 1944.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Russian, Андрей Григорьевич Сёмин (pronounced Andrey Grigoryevich Syomin).

<sup>2</sup> Also called the Kursk Salient, this formation along the Eastern Front was the objective of the Nazi Offensive, Operation Citadel which initiated the battle of Kursk, the largest tank battle in history. For a video documentary with English subtitles, see, "The Great Patriotic War. The Kursk Bulge. Episode 9. StarMedia. Docudrama. English Subtitles," <https://youtu.be/7L8FhmCmpU8>.

<sup>3</sup> Soviet small infantry spade (*malaia pekhotnaia lopata-50*), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MPL-50>.

<sup>4</sup> One hundred grams of medicinal alcohol, diluted with water, is more or less the equivalent of two hundred grams of vodka. Vodka was part of a Soviet soldier's ration during the war. "When the war against Hitler began, every Russian soldier at the front was given a daily "commissar's ration" of a hundred grams of vodka, as stipulated by the Ministry of Defense." Victor Erofeev, "The Russian God," *The New Yorker* 78, no. 39 (December 16, 2002): 56-63. See also, Alice Madden, "Vodka: "The Bitter Stuff" (December 15, 2009), <https://www.macalester.edu/russian/about/resources/miscellany/vodka/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Supermarine Spitfire HF. Mk. VIIc," Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, [https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/supermarine-spitfire-hf-mk-viic/nasm\\_A19600331000](https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/supermarine-spitfire-hf-mk-viic/nasm_A19600331000).

<sup>6</sup> "Bell P-39 Airacobra," The Aviation History Online Museum, <http://www.aviation-history.com/bell/p39.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Bell P-63 Kingcobra," The Aviation History Online Museum, <http://www.aviation-history.com/bell/p63.html>; see also P-63 Kingcobra, <http://p63kingcobra.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Douglas C-54 Skymaster," Military Wiki, [https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Douglas\\_C-54\\_Skymaster](https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Douglas_C-54_Skymaster).