



FEMALE WAR BADGE RECIPIENT

by Marc Garlasco

There were many photos taken of German women wearing uniforms and badges during the Second World War. Most often these photos are of wives and girlfriends donning the clothes and decorations of their husbands or boyfriends. But it might be shocking for some to know there was only one German combat badge that a woman could rightfully earn during the war – the Flak Badge.

On January 6, 1945 the *Luftwaffe* authorized women to receive the *Flak-kampfabzeichen*, or Anti-Aircraft Artillery War Badge. The *Luftwaffe* Flak Badge was the only German war badge of the Second World War authorized for females. Until now there has been no evidence of a woman ever earning such a decoration, although

women were bestowed the Iron Cross during the war for acts of heroism, as well as lesser awards for merit. But a war badge recognized direct participation in hostilities, and the mere fact women were authorized to earn such a decoration recognized their place on-par with their male counterparts and acknowledged a fact of the war: women were fighting and dying as they defended Germany against Allied air attacks.

The photo below is from a small grouping of a *Horcher*, or sound locator unit, operating in Germany. In the spring of 1944 the *Flakhelferinnen*, or female flak helpers, were created. Far from helpers, these women were involved in direct combat operations against Allied forces. The addition of

women to the Flak allowed the *Wehrmacht* to move men from defensive Flak positions throughout Germany to frontline service. Women operated early-warning devices such as the *Horcher*, range finders, searchlight batteries, and even the flak guns themselves. Women's service was only limited by geography; they could only serve within the borders of Germany. But this did little to protect them. They faced 24-hour air assaults as the Americans bombed Germany by day and the British bombed by night, often targeting anti-aircraft defenses. When others sought shelter, the women of the *Flakhelferinnen* stood out in the open and fought back, taking the same risks as the men. By 1945 all of the searchlight batteries





in Germany were crewed by females and 50 flak batteries were 100% female.

While the photo on previous page is not definitive proof of a woman being officially awarded the Flak Badge it does provide strong circumstantial evidence that this was the case. The photo was clearly posed for, and she is the central figure, wearing the badge quite prominently. Although women were known to don the uniforms of friends and family for fun photo sessions, this is not likely the case here. First, it would be highly unusual for Germans to be so openly playing with something as serious as a war badge in front of members of their unit. Second, none of the *Luftwaffe* men in the group had Flak Badges or award loops on their uniforms in any of the other photos in the grouping, making it unlikely that one of the women took a man's badge for fun.

One oddity of the photo is the that badge in question is clearly broken. The eagle should be easily visible in the photograph, but it is not. This certainly raises some questions as to the origin of the badge, though it does not rule out the possibility that the wearer was awarded it. Perhaps the only badge available at the location was a broken one, or perhaps she had been awarded the badge at some time in the past and, as it is clear she wore it on work overalls, perhaps the eagle had broken off. Add to this the likelihood that it was a late war zinc badge which was more brittle than the early *Neusilber* or *Tombak* versions and breakage is even likelier.

Regardless of the answer to our many questions posed by this photo, one fact is clear; with the thousands of women fighting as *Flakhelferinnen* there must have been at least several hundred that met the criteria to receive the badges. By 1945 the regulations had been relaxed, requiring only the participation in five air defense actions, regardless of wheth-



er any kills were scored to earn the badge. The incredibly late date of authorization would have been further affected by the need to notify units of the change in regulations. With only

four months left in the war we must consider that this was not the highest priority to those in the field. We will always wonder whether a woman was truly awarded a war badge until an authentic award document is produced. But consider the following: Two women received the Iron Class First Class and 32 received the Iron Cross Second Class during the war. Countless others received lesser awards such as the War Merit Cross and War Merit Medal. For a woman to have received a combat badge would be a monumental discovery. We can speculate all we want, but the fact remains that we now have a photo of a woman wearing a Flak War Badge in a combat environment.

Marc Garlasco is the author of the internationally acclaimed book *The Flak Badges* and co-author of an upcoming book about the German Parachutist's Badge

