

## She killed 309 people – and watched most of them die...

Written by Andy Owen



Lyudmila Mikhailovna Pavlichenko was known as 'Lady Death'.

And with some justification. She was certainly not a lady to tamper with.

A Lieutenant in the Red Army, she was one of the greatest snipers in human history, credited with an astonishing total of 309 confirmed kills during the Second World War.

And, just to underline her 'special' talent, thirty-six of them were enemy snipers plus, every one of them had been hand-picked to kill her.

She was given the title of "Lady Death" by the Russian propaganda machine.

The Germans called her "The Russian Bitch from Hell" and, for obvious reasons, they did all they could to eliminate her. But they couldn't...

Without doubt, Lyudmila was a very talented lady.



She was born Lyudmila Belova in 1916 during the horrors of the Great War, in Bila Tservka, a central Ukrainian city. The Russian Revolution and Civil War played a key part of her formative years, shaping a woman destined for a remarkable path.

When she was fourteen, her family relocated to Kiev and she was soon working as a grinder in a munitions factory.

This young lady was a toughie from an early age...

A few years later, in 1932, she married Alexei Pavlichenko, a doctor.

A son, Rostislav, arrived the same year. However, the marriage was soon dissolved, and Lyudmila went back to live with her parents.

Even at such a young age, she was spirited and outspoken and clearly a real handful. She was competitive in everything she did – and was fearlessly independent.

She wanted to be a teacher and enrolled at Kiev University in 1937, where she studied history. There, she competed on the university's track team as a sprinter and pole-vaulter.

She left the University with a Master's Degree.

She joined the Soviet paramilitary sports organisation, OSOAVIAKHIM, where in a very short time, her prowess in the shooting club stood unmatched.

*"I set out to show a girl could do as well. So, I practiced a lot."*

On 22nd June 1941, Lyudmila's life was about to be changed forever.

It was the day that the largest invasion in history started - Operation Barbarossa - Nazi Germany's invasion of The Soviet Union.

A call to arms immediately echoed across the vast expanse of the Soviet empire and Pavlichenko answered it without hesitation.

But it nearly didn't happen for her.

Incredibly, she met resistance at the Odessa recruiting office.

Despite her formidable record as a sharpshooter in the rifle club, the military authorities initially gave her a role as a nurse.

She simply wouldn't have it...

She noisily and consistently continued to complain and finally got her wish, when she was sent to the front line with a rifle in her hand.

She was immediately given the job of eliminating two Romanian soldiers, clearly as a kind of test.

After killing them with an almost casual ease, she earned her place in a rifle division, standing amongst the 2,000 female snipers who would serve the Red Army during the war.

She selected an 1891 bolt-action Mosin-Nagant rifle, equipped with telescopic sights as her chosen tool of death – and this partnership soon made their mark on the Western Ukrainian front.



Her reputation grew very fast.

She wasn't good - she was the best - an unrivalled killing machine, lethal and brutal in her delivery of death.



Astonishingly, during the Siege of Odessa, she claimed the lives of 187 Axis soldiers within her first 75 days of combat.

This instantly made her a legend in her ranks.

The Wehrmacht wanted her dead. And quickly. So much so, they put a bounty on her head.

As her unit relocated to the Crimea for the prolonged Siege of Sevastopol, a number of top German snipers were selected to silence the lethal Lady Death, once and for all.

But they weren't good enough – and they paid a heavy price.

She dispatched all thirty-six with the finesse that marked her fearless character. Her success earned her a promotion to the rank of Lieutenant.

The Wehrmacht sought revenge.

Pavlichenko became a prime target for artillery bombardments and aerial bombings. But, as most people had, throughout her life so far, the Germans underestimated her strength – and she weathered these assaults, demonstrating an indomitable spirit.

The Germans then attempted to entice her to defect through broadcasts across enemy lines, dangling promises of comfort and glory.

Unsurprisingly, she just laughed at these overtures. She was steadfast in her allegiance to the Soviet cause.

In 1941 she married Alexei Kitsenko, a fellow sniper.



He was killed in action in 1942.

By this time, the Germans wanted her so badly they became obsessed with her and increased their attempts even more. She sailed close to the wind on numerous occasions. There were a few close calls.

But, in June 1942 in Sevastopol, a mortar shell wounded her. She was hit in the face with shrapnel.

As soon as this happened, the Soviet High Command ordered her to be evacuated from Sevastopol via submarine.

She spent around a month in hospital.

She was lucky. The injury was not significant and she recovered quickly.

But the Soviets knew she had become a prime target and her luck wouldn't last much longer. They couldn't afford to lose their iconic sharpshooter to the whims of fate.

They withdrew her from combat. She wasn't too happy about it, either, but she followed orders.

The High Command knew that her fame and high status meant she had become a propaganda celebrity - and she was soon sent overseas on a publicity tour to Canada and North America.

This formed part of the Soviet Union's attempts to convince the other Allies of World War II to open a second front against Nazi Germany.

She became the first Soviet citizen to be received by a U.S President when Franklin D. Roosevelt invited her to the White House.

From Washington D.C she toured the United States alongside the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Everywhere she went she was met with large crowds that had assembled to greet her.



Pavlichenko, far left, with Eleanor Roosevelt, second from right, and fellow Soviet sniper Vladimir Pchelintsev, far right

In her speeches she would taunt and chide the men of America, telling them *"Gentlemen, I am 25 years old and I have killed 309 Fascist invaders now.*

*Don't you think, gentlemen, that you have been hiding behind my back for far too long?"*

It seems the media then, were about the same as some of the brainless berks around today.

She was not taken seriously by most of the press and was referred to as the 'Girl Sniper'. She appeared before the International Student Assembly being held in Washington DC, attended the meetings of The Congress of Industrial Organisations, and made appearances and speeches in both New York City and Chicago.

In New York City, she was given a raccoon fur coat by Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia.

She said later in life, that she was staggered by the kind of dumb questions put to her. *"One reporter even criticised the length of the skirt of my uniform, saying that in America women wear shorter skirts and besides, my uniform made me look fat."*

One reporter asked if she used makeup on the front line - and there were other banal questions about her choice of underwear.

On one occasion she became so exasperated, she challenged an especially sexist reporter to a fist fight. She responded to one question about her underwear, by saying:

*"I am proud to wear the uniform of the legendary Red Army. It has been sanctified by the blood of my comrades who've fallen in combat with the fascists."*

Whilst on tour in the US and Canada, she was presented with new weapons, including a Winchester rifle and a Colt semi-automatic pistol.

When she visited Toronto along with fellow sniper Vladimir Pchelintsev, she was greeted by thousands of people at The Union Station.

In November 1942 she sailed back and visited England, turning up in Birmingham and Coventry - and she created quite a stir.

She first visited a factory in Birmingham, then travelled to Coventry to the Alfred Herbert works and Standard Motor Factory and visited the ruins of Coventry cathedral, devastated by the shocking bombing raid on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1940.



It was the single most concentrated attack on a British city in the Second World War.

Following the raid, Nazi propagandists coined a new word in German – 'coentriieren' - to raze a city to the ground.

She accepted donations totalling £4,500 from the workers of Coventry to pay for new Red Army x-ray machines.

When she got back to the USSR, because of the bounty that was still on her head, she was not allowed to return to the battlefield.

Again, she was most unhappy about it.

The Soviet High Command gave her the role of instructor for future snipers, herself being one of only 500 female snipers that had survived the fighting.



In 1943 she was awarded the Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union, as well as the Order of Lenin, twice.

After the war, she returned to her studies at the history department in Kiev University and promoted to Major.

She served as a research assistant at Soviet Navy headquarters until 1953, when she finally left the service.

She became a key figure in the Soviet Committee of the Veterans of War – and, in 1957, Eleanor Roosevelt visited her in Moscow during a visit to the Soviet Union.

They had become life-long friends.



She lived out the rest of her days quietly researching history and acting as an advocate for veterans of the Great Patriotic War.



A second Soviet commemorative stamp featuring her portrait was issued in 1976.

After she left the service, she struggled constantly with depression mainly revolving around the earlier loss of her husband in the war.

She also developed post-traumatic stress disorder and started drinking heavily. Her health deteriorated.

PTSD and excess alcohol were almost certainly a big contributing factor to her early death from a stroke on 10th October 1974.

She was only 58.

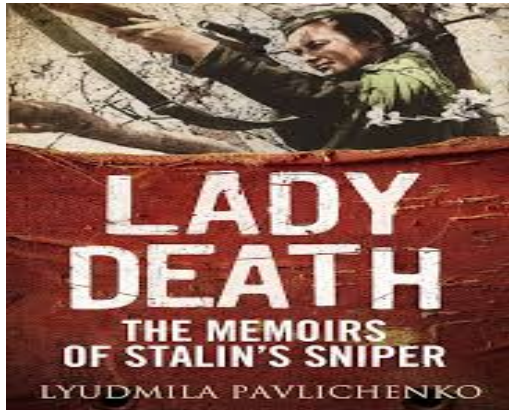
She is buried in the columbarium in Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow and her son Rostislav, who died in 2007, aged 75, is buried next to her.



A few years after her death, Woody Guthrie composed a song "*Miss Pavlichenko*" as a tribute to her incredible war record and her visit to the United States and Canada in 1942.

*'Miss Pavlichenko's well known to fame,  
Russia's your country, fighting is your game.  
The whole world will always love you for all time to come,  
Three hundred Nazis fell by your gun.'*

A film was released in 2015 called 'Battle for Sevastopol' which had its premiere in The Beijing International Film Festival in 2015. It is a heavily romanticised version of her life, with several fictitious characters and numerous departures from the events related in her memoirs.



The first English language edition of her memoirs - Lady Death - was published by Greenhill Books in February 2018.

It has a foreword by Martin Pegler and is part of the Lionel Leventhal's Greenhill Sniper Library series.

Lyudmila was indeed '*Stalin's Lady of Death*'.

A lady of enormous skill, bravery, dedication and ferocious commitment.

She was the most successful female sniper in history.

Simply, one of a kind.

