

Hanna Reitsch (1912 - 1979)



While the "Right Stuff" men were still sitting behind conventional engines and looking through the arcs of their propellers, a pilot in Germany was routinely setting records in exotic jet- and rocket-powered aircraft and helping draft the first blueprints for a trip to Mars.

While the Allied air forces were pounding Germany's industrial infrastructure to dust during World War II, Germany turned in desperation to its best test pilot--arguably the most professional and courageous who ever lived--to push aviation technology far beyond anything the Allies ever dreamed of in a last-ditch effort to defeat them.

When a powerful Russian army was only scant yards from Hitler's bunker, a pilot in Germany landed a bullet-riddled plane (with a freshly wounded comrade writhing in the cockpit) on a shell-cratered Berlin street in a futile effort to rescue Hitler from the deadly trap. Shortly after, the pilot successfully took off from the same street through a hailstorm of Russian gunfire, again swerving around the shell craters.

Long after the war, when most would be in retirement, this pilot took off from a field near State College, Pa., to try out a glider that belonged to a friend. When the glider landed--after flying almost 600 miles without power--yet another stunning record had been added to aviation history. These are but a few of the incredible exploits of Hanna Reitsch.

The ascent of Reitsch's career and WWII German aviation, both began, remarkably enough, with the restrictions imposed against the German air force by the Treaty of Versailles. Few powered planes were permitted in Germany after World War I.

A loophole in the restrictions allowed Germany to form dozens of glider clubs that attracted thousands of fresh-faced, eager young pilots.

The clever German militarists were developing a large cadre of skilled pilots who would one day trade their harmless little gliders for much more formidable craft marked with the distinct "Balkenkreuzen" of the Luftwaffe.

In 1932, 20-year-old medical student Hanna Reitsch joined a glider club. Soon, she set the first of at least 40 aviation records credited to her and was one of the first glider pilots to cross the Alps.

Like many of her fellow glider pilots, Reitsch graduated to powered aircraft when an emboldened Germany began rebuilding its air force in earnest.

Reitsch's talents were soon harnessed to help hone the edge of the Luftwaffe, and she took on unimaginably dangerous jobs. One type of plane she tested was a heavy bomber that had steel blades installed on the leading edges of the wings to cut the heavy steel cables used to tether barrage balloons. During one demonstration for Luftwaffe brass of this hair-brained scheme, Reitsch made a graceful landing and exited the cockpit smiling and waving after deliberately flying into the cables. Only she knew that the wing had almost been ripped from the plane when she hit a cable and she had to fight for her life--second by unnerving second--to get the crippled plane on the runway.

On another hair-raising flight in a stricken plane, instead of bailing out, Reitsch calmly recorded flight data with paper and pencil because she did not think she would live long enough to make the report in person. Many of the designs that Reitsch tested were novel and innovative, and some were just simply ill-conceived deathtraps. Reitsch was the only civilian and only woman to receive the Knight's Cross with Diamonds. Had Reitsch never lived, a hypothetical screenplay of her adventures would probably be dismissed as being "too far-fetched to be believable." The first operational jet fighter, the twin-engine Me-262 "Swallow" was one of Reitsch's more routine rides.

She also tested a cockpit-equipped V-1 rocket and the insanely dangerous rocket-powered Me-163 Komet. The Komet was powered by a binary fuel that--when mixed together-- exploded to provide thrust. Sometimes the plane exploded, too, and, if that were not bad enough, the fuel provided only five minutes of flight time, and the pilot had to glide home to a landing. A second landing attempt was not an option.

One of the fuel components dissolves flesh, and sometimes there was nothing to bury following a Komet fuel leak. The payoff was an aircraft that could scream through an Allied bomber formation decimating it with the impunity of a shark attacking a school of baby squid. The Komet is the direct ancestor of many of today's most advanced delta-wing warplanes.

In the very last days of The Third Reich, she landed an aircraft on a shell-pocked street in Berlin when most of the city had already been occupied by the Russians. She spent two days in the "Führerbunker" before returning to her aircraft and taking off under a hail of heavy gunfire.

Although her politics were not popular in post war Europe, to say the least, she did not hesitate to break the "glass ceiling" of women's aviation. In fact, she smashed through it in the fastest and most advanced aircraft of her day.

Allied airmen were lucky that she was too valuable as a test pilot to be risked on but a few combat missions.



A German WWII test pilot who has been called "The Century's Greatest Pilot" Hanna Reitsch came to flying by an indirect route. Born in Hirschberg, Germany in 1912, she originally pursued a career in medicine, and dreamed of becoming a flying missionary doctor in Africa. Her father was an ophthalmologist and wanted her to be a doctor. Her mother taught her a simple faith in God. From early on, Hanna Reitsch was an intense, determined and intelligent individual. She became fascinated with flying at a young age, reportedly attempting to jump off the balcony of her home at age 4 in her eagerness to experience flight. Looking back on her childhood, she wrote in her 1955 autobiography *The Sky My Kingdom*:

The longing grew in me, grew with every bird I saw go flying across the azure summer sky, with every cloud that sailed past me on the wind, till it turned to a deep, insistent homesickness, a yearning that went with me everywhere and could never be stilled.

Hanna started with gliders, Her passion for the air soon overtook her interest in medicine, and she left medical school to become a full-time glider pilot,. (Germany had been forbidden to build "war planes" after WWI, which meant that most of the planes constructed in Germany were built without engines.)

She went on to become an instructor in gliding at the Horngerb in Swabia and also worked as a stunt pilot in films, but she really distinguished herself in competition.

Not yet strictly speaking a test pilot, Hanna joined a group led by Heini Dittmar investigating upper air meteorology . This involved her in long distance and high altitude flights, during the course of which she established a long-distance gliding world record for women at over 100 miles.

The most important outcome of that record was undoubtedly her immediate posting to a "civil" airways training school at Stettin, one of a number of thinly disguised military training establishments. At Stettin Hanna trained on the Focke-Wulf Fw 44 Stieglitz. Once again Hanna was the only female at the school; the pupils, incidentally, wore a uniform which bore an uncanny similarity to that of the shortly to be revealed Luftwaffe.

She became the twenty-fifth pilot and first woman to earn the Silver Soaring Medal (for a cross-country flight of fifty kilometers), setting the women's world record for non-stop gliding in 1931, (a record she more than doubled in 1933), the women's world record for point-to-point gliding in 1939, the women's record for non-stop distance flight in 1936, and the women's altitude record in 1934, and was invited by professor Walter Georgi to give up medical studies and become a test pilot at the Darmstadt Gliding Institute. The Deutsche Forschungsanstalt für Segelflug (DFS) was considered the top research establishment for motorless flight not just in Germany but throughout the world. In 1935 she carried out tests on Kranich and See Adler gliders designed by Hans Jacobs. It was at this time that Germany began to produce 200 aircraft per month notably the Messerschmitt fighters, Junkers, Dornier and Heinkel bombers. The infamous Stuka dive-bombers were being rapidly developed. In 1936 she was doing dive-brake tests in gliders and took part in the famous Berlin Olympics. 1937 saw her seconded to Rechlin where she tested dive brakes on Stukas..

1937 seems to have been a very crowded year -- she test flew the Junkers Ju-87 and Dornier Do-17, both on dive brake trials. That same year she visited the Focke-Wulf facility at Bremonto to see the Focke-Achgelis Fa-61, arguably the world's first practical helicopter, the brainchild of Professor Focke, it behaved as a helicopter should. Karl Franke flew the Fa-61 first and then Hanna was invited to fly it. Franke had some trouble in keeping the helicopter steady, but Hanna got the hang of the rotorcraft almost at once and was soon flying quite steadily.

Impressed by her ability, she was encouraged to make several more flights and soon established initial records for helicopters including altitude, speed, endurance and range. Hitler was keen to show off the proficiency of German technology and plans for something special were made for the 1938 Berlin Motor Show. This was held in the vast Berlin Deutschlandhalle and would most certainly attract the world's press. So it was decided to fly the Fa-61 inside the auditorium.

Hanna Reitsch flew the helicopter nightly for three weeks inside the hall during February 1938 in a variety of maneuvers, from normal take-off and hover to sideways flying and then ascending to the ceiling and slowly descending.

At the end of this she would hold the helicopter in the hover and slowly turn through 360 degree ending the performance with the Nazi salute from the cockpit. Certainly, it was an impressive, but foolhardy, circus stunt. The slightest miscalculation or malfunction would result in a crash and in a crowded hall would have claimed several lives, but it gave the Nazis considerable publicity. Once she demonstrated this revolutionary aircraft for Charles Lindbergh.

The Luftwaffe gave her the Military Flying Medal for this and accomplishments with other aircraft. She was the first woman to receive it.

She was the first person to cross the Alps in a glider in 1937. In 1938, she won the German long-distance gliding championships. and set the Women's World Record for distance and the Women's World Altitude record for gliders. She flew in South America, Finland, Portugal, and in the U.S. at the National Air races at Cleveland, Ohio in 1938. By this time she had moved to powered flight.

In 1939 Reitsch suffered through a three-month bout with scarlet fever, followed by muscular rheumatism. On recovering, she went right back to work, becoming involved in the development of large cargo-, troop- and fuel-carrying gliders. The work was largely abandoned after the 180-foot wingspan Messerschmitt Me-321 Gigant (giant) crashed and killed the pilots of its three Me-110 tow planes, the Gigant's six-man crew and 110 troops in the glider.



Flugkapitän Hanna Reitsch

In Germany Hanna Reitsch was a role-model, her earlier fame had by then spread beyond national boundaries, and in 1937, General Ernst Udet appointed her as a civilian flight captain and test pilot at the Luftwaffe the Luftwaffe test center at Rechlin. This was not an officially published appointment, but a private gesture from Udet.

She was thrilled; to her, the Luftwaffe were "guardians of the portals of peace." Her skill and dedication made her a powerful symbol for the Reich. The Luftwaffe made full use of her talents.

She was the first woman pilot to be so honoured, and it was a distinction of which she was immensely proud. She insisted on its use for the remainder of her life.

Somehow Hanna Reitsch's special physical ability was discovered by the Germans in World War II.

The official reports say Hanna Reitsch had the special physical ability to withstand tremendous pressures and was well suited to solve a special problem with the V-1 rocket. Seems like the wings kept falling off.

So a special seat was installed in the nose of test V-1 rockets for Hanna Reitsch so she could visually spot the problem and report (hopefully alive) why the wings kept falling off. She spotted the trouble and the V-1 we went into production and the "buzz bomb" became the weapon of choice against England.

In 1943, after the Allies began to step-up their devastating around-the-clock bombing campaign over Germany's cities, the Nazi aviatrix Flugkapitän Hanna Reitsch proposed to Hitler and Göring to create an all-female fighter defense squadron. Many qualified female pilots were already ferrying fighters, later including the new Me-262 jet fighter, but in true history, the war ended before Reitsch's proposal could become a reality.

But in an altered World War II, the first all-female fighter unit, the JG500, became operational in 1945. Her other idea, one for suicide units, had to wait.....

Hearing rumors that the Nazis were exterminating Jews, she confronted Heinrich Himmler with that. He was as outraged as she was that the Allies would spread such propaganda.

Seriously and officially Germany was only accused, during the war, of having murdered ten thousand Polish officers in Katyn; a charge that was only withdrawn in the light of Gorbachev's "Glasnost".

It must be remembered that the gassing accusation was never raised officially or seriously during the war by the Allies. The gassing charges were only accepted unanimously after the war.

During the war, they only appeared sporadically in small newspapers and obscure brochures.

The following extract is from *The Sky, My Kingdom*, by Hanna Reitsch:

In October 1944, my old flying comrade Peter Riedel, who was now attached to the German Embassy in Sweden, called on me at the "Haus der Flieger" in Berlin. In a state of considerable agitation, he threw a booklet down on the table.

“Do you know what is happening in Germany? Look at this! This is what we find on our desks at the Embassy!”

I glanced through the booklet, which concerned the gas chambers. Now, I was beside myself:

“And you believe this?” I asked, furiously. “In the First World War enemy propaganda smeared the German soldier with every imaginable barbarity — now it has come to gas chambers.”

My emotional outburst strongly impressed my friend.

“I’ll believe that from you,” he said, but he asked me to inform Himmler about it immediately.

I telephoned Himmler, obtaining permission to visit him at his headquarters in the field. I took the booklet with me and placed it before him.

“What do you say to this, Reichsführer?”

He picked it up and flicked over the pages. Then, without a change of expression, he looked up, eyeing me quietly.

“And you believe this, Frau Hanna?”

“No, of course not. But you must do something to counter it. You can't let them shoulder this onto Germany.”

Himmler laid the booklet on the table, then looked at me once more.

“You are right,” he said, “That is the rope by which they will hang us in case of defeat.”

As a consequence Himmler refuted the accusation, posting inserts in various large newspapers in neutral countries.

Wolfgang Späte was a respected and decorated fighter pilot, commander of V/JG54, pulled out of the front line fighting on the Russian front in 1941, and selected by no lesser person than Adolf Galland as the first commander of Operational Test Unit 16, and tasked with transforming the Me-163 from little more than a prototype concept aircraft that few believed in, into the world's first rocket propelled fighter.

This highly dangerous machine that was a cross between a sheer rocket powered adrenaline rush, and a glider. The prime requisite established very early on in the test programme was that the test pilots all had to have glider experience.

This small cadre featured several well known glider champions from the immediate pre-war period. Späte and his little band of pioneers, worked closely with other names such as Walter Horten and Alexander Lippisch - the 163s designer - from delivery problems with the Walter rocket engines to interference from higher authorities, keen to kill the project and use the resources on better things like 'ordinary' fighter production.

The Messerschmitt Me 262 was a German single-seat interceptor fighter of the Second World War, and was the first jet fighter aircraft to enter combat. The Messerschmitt Me 262A-1a was powered by two 900 kg thrust Jumo 004B turbojet engines providing a maximum speed of 870 kmh and a range on internal fuel of 1050 km. The Messerschmitt Me 262A-1a was armed with four 30 mm MK 108 cannons in the nose. While faster than the Allied aircraft of the time, the Messerschmitt Me 262 suffered from not being as manoeuvrable.

When Späte watched the landing of the US Space Shuttle, a glider of tailless configuration, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfilment that all the hard work and effort he and his team put into the 163 had finally made a lasting contribution to aviation.

Here was a combat veteran with some 72 confirmed and as many as another 20 unconfirmed aerial kills to his credit, who did his duty as an officer and a gentleman for his country in war, yet the developments they pioneered have had a lasting effect even now sixty years later in peace.

The fastest and most dangerous plane, she tested was the top secret German rocket plane, after three male pilots had died in their attempts. First she flew the prototype without the motor, the Me 163A. Then she flew the militarized version, the Me 163B, Komet. [This experimental interceptor, in a minute and a half after takeoff climbed at a 65-degree angle to 30,000 feet. It traveled 500 mph -- the fastest any human had ever gone] Reitsch launched behind a tow plane at Regensburg, and the takeoff gear failed to drop away from her aircraft. The little fighter was supposed to land on a tough skid in its belly, but now the heavy axle with outsized wheels hung canted to one side beneath the fuselage. The plane vibrated alarmingly and was very heavy on the controls. Flares from the airfield alerted Reitsch that she indeed had an emergency. Radios of the time were heavy, unreliable devices, and Reitsch couldn't get hers to work. She had no way of contacting either the ground or the towplane. With no communications, the despairing tow plane pilot grimly pulled her up to 3,000 meters altitude, and Reitsch cut loose.

Built with swept wings for a rocket-blast climb to altitude and a near-sonic glide attack on Allied bomber formations, the Komet was fast. With its heavy landing gear still attached, it was even faster. It dropped like an anvil with wings. "Bale out?" Unthinkable.

The Me-163 was too new, too advanced for such a waste.

So at great risk and without the foggiest guess about how the landing gear had configured itself in the airstream, Reitsch attempted a landing. Hanna managed to land it in a plowed field, but the plane flipped.

In the sliding, smashing, grinding mass of twisting, tearing metal and breaking glass, Reitsch's face catapulted into the instrument panel. Finally, everything stopped. There was no fuel aboard, or the little Komet surely would have burned and exploded. Astounded to be alive and upright in the wreckage, Reitsch tried to get out. The canopy was jammed, so all she could do now would be wait for the rescue crew to arrive. She killed time until the ambulance and fire truck could get to her by sketching and labeling the details of her accident. Shifting the clipboard to avoid more blood splashes from her face, she noticed a rubbery object in her lap and picked it up. It was her nose. At the hospital, doctors discovered that Reitsch had fractured her skull in six places. She'd smashed the bones of her detached nose irretrievably and displaced her upper jawbone. She'd broken several vertebrae and bruised her brain severely. She nearly died. It took Regensburg Surgeon Doctor Bodewig five months of plastic surgery and neurosurgery to repair the Führer's most valuable aviator. It took Reitsch's own iron will five more months to rip her free of physical weakness and mental despair. As he awarded Reitsch the Iron Cross of the Knight's Cross, First Class, the only woman to receive this medal, Adolf Hitler himself forbade her ever again to attempt such a foolhardy feat.



Reitsch had been dreaming of a suicide force attack on the Allied invasion fleet, "piloted by healthy young men who believe that through their deaths, thousands of soldiers and civilians can be saved." She was thinking in terms of one thousand volunteers. Hanna Reitsch was able to fulfill this dream (at least in part) due to the ranking status of her lover, General von Greim, commander of Luftflotte 6.

Von Greim was the first man to ever take the Führer up in a plane, and the oldest living fighter pilot. The Führer secretly wanted to make von Greim head of the Reich's air force. This would have replaced Göring (air force) and quite possible saved Germany from defeat.

The Führer, fatefully, felt too close to Göring from the early years of the struggle, so von Greim was promoted to "Deputy Commander in Chief" on September 21, 1944 and warned by the Führer of Göring's manifold "sins."

On February 28, 1944, Reitsch took the project to Herr Hitler at the Berghof. Hitler was skeptical of the idea, believing that such a squadron would not be an effective use of Germany's limited resources. "It is not in keeping with German character," he told her, but the delicate blonde's enthusiasm finally won him over; he agreed to investigate the possibility.

Reitsch promptly formed a Suicide Group, and was herself the first person to take the pledge:

I hereby...voluntarily apply to be enrolled in the suicide group as a pilot of a human glider-bomb. I fully understand that employment in this capacity will entail my own death.

By late 1944 a spirit of self-sacrifice was being imbued in the German pilots. On November 8 Colonel Galland was heard issuing order 2159 to his squadron commanders, creating an elite shock of troops within the fighter force:

The Reichsmarschall has ordered the setting up for a Sturm Staffel (Storm Unit). It is to scatter the enemy bombers using heavily armored fighters in level, close formation attack, pressed home to point blank range.

Galland continued, quoting Göring's order:

Once initiated, the attack by storm units will be carried right to the heart of the enemy without regard to losses.

Galland asked for volunteers:

Pilots who are absolutely determined to take their opponent down with them rather than land without a victory.

By April 1945, the Luftwaffe was under pressure from every side. Göring then made the decision to authorize suicide missions.

The Luftwaffe formed an 'Elbe Special Commando' air unit, Volunteer pilots would ram the remaining ME 109's into Allied bombers. Göring's orders read out secretly to all pilots who had completed fighter training:

The fateful struggle for the Reich, our people, and our native soil is at its climax. Virtually the whole world is fighting against us and is resolving to destroy us and, in blind hatred, to exterminate us. With our last and utmost strength we are standing up to this menacing onslaught. Now as ever before as in the history of the German fatherland we are threatened with final annihilation from which there can be no revival. The danger can be arrested only by the utmost preparedness of the Supreme German warrior spirit. Therefore I turn to you at this decisive moment. By consciously staking your own lives, save the nation from extinction! I summon you for an operation from which you will have only the slenderest chance of returning. Those of

you who respond will be sent back at once for pilot training. Comrades, you will take the place of honor beside your most glorious Luftwaffe warriors. In the hour of supreme danger, you will give the whole German people hope of victory, and set an example for all time.

Three days later, "Werewolf" was executed. 183 fighters, the bulk of them Me Bf 109G, challenged some 1,300 American bombers, accompanied by about 850 fighters. They were headed for Desau along the Elbe River. The German suicide unit engaged the Allied formations at 11.45 a.m. over Steinhude, near Hannover and the aerial duel lasted 45 minutes. Astonished Allied radio monitors heard patriotic marches flooding the fighter-control wavelengths and a female choir singing the German national anthem, while anonymous voices exhorted these 180 pilots to die now for the Führer and for Germany. Seventy of them did. Only 15 'Elbe Special Commando' planes survived. Only a few smashed into the enemy bombers but most were shot down, the heavy counter-fire was so devastating to the German attackers that only in a few cases were they able to ram the US bombers.

At 5:00 A.M. April 16, 1945, the final Soviet push across the Oder began. Sixty more suicide pilots crash-bombed their planes into the Oder bridges in a desperate attempt to save Berlin. There is no way of telling if Colonel Heigl's "total operation" would have stopped the Allied invasion, had it not been shelved, Germany may have had the time to have completed their "jet" and "laser" projects. Projects that, if completed, would have won the war for Germany.

Hanna ended up undertaking a dangerous flight to Hitler's Bunker in Berlin. Since November 1943, Reitsch had been stationed along the Eastern front in Russia, with General Robert Ritter von Greim. On April 26, 1945 they flew to Berlin, where Greim was supposed to take command of the Luftwaffe. Their plane was hit by Soviet anti-aircraft fire. Greim was badly wounded and Hanna landed the plane. They stayed in Berlin for 3 days, as Hitler's guests.

"They were all very moved to see me come in," said Reitsch. "all were calm and ready to die. History books say Hitler was mad and incoherent, that many in the bunker were drunk and having sex parties.

"It is not true. I was there. We were seeing the end of a great man and his cause. There was nothing in the bunker but dignity. Hitler greeted us quietly and without emotion."

Hitler refused Hanna's pleas to fly him out. And Eva Braun said, *"I do not wish to live in a Germany without an Adolf Hitler. It would not be fit to live in for a true German."*

According to her testimony Hitler said at the time:

Now nothing remains. Nothing is spared to me. No allegiances are kept, no honour lived up to, no disappointments that I have not had, no betrayals that I have not experienced – and now this above all else. Nothing remains. Every wrong has already been done me.

That same night Hitler summoned Hanna Reitsch and handed her a vial of poison. According to her interrogation, Hitler said: *'Hanna, you belong to those who will die with me. Each of us has a vial of poison such as this. I do not wish that one of us falls into the hands of the Russians alive, nor do I wish our bodies to be found by them.'*

At another Hitler–Reitsch encounter, Hitler said reassuringly, if her report is to be believed: *'But, my Hanna, I still have hope.'* Hitler's hope rested with the future success of his forces to the south and east of Berlin. Reitsch describes Hitler waving a road map that was fast coming to pieces from the sweat of his hands.

Meanwhile, on the field of battle Hitler's forces were denied any success by swiftly advancing Allied armies. On April 29th later Hitler ordered Reitsch to fly out of Berlin immediately with Greim and arrest Heinrich Himmler whom he accused of treachery. In addition, Reitsch was to carry Hitler's orders to organize new bombing raids against the Allies. Reitsch protested, at first. She wanted to be allowed to die with her Führer. In the end, though, she and Greim did as they were told, escaping Berlin just as the Russian noose tightened around it. They made it to Admiral Karl Dönitz's headquarters, but both of them were eventually captured by the Allied forces.

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Hanna survived the war, but she found herself somewhat alone. Greim had committed suicide, the first to swallow poison, on May 25, 1945 within the high command, obviously preferring an early death, rather than submit to the victors torture tactics for information, and possible death at their hands.

Her father had killed her mother, her sister, and her sister's children. then he turned the rifle on himself. She happened to meet the famous film maker, Leni Riefenstahl, in a cemetery soon after the war, but the two never met again.

Hanna was doggedly unrepentant.

She wore her Iron Crosses proudly and wrote her memoirs, *Fliegen, mein Leben* (1951), which were translated in 1954 as *Flying is My Life*. In this book she presents herself as a patriot, and makes no moral judgments about Hitler and Nazi Germany. Some call it "an exercise in selective memory, rationalization, and denial."

Was she a Nazi to the end, or just a proud woman? We don't know.

In later writings Reitsch sought to explain her activities as a loyal member of the Nazi regime. She has described in a memoir what she calls 'my offence': I was a German, well known as an aviator and as one who cherished an ardent love of her country and had done her duty to the last. Legends formed about my last flight into Berlin. Might I not perhaps have hidden Hitler away somewhere?

She continued to fly and was generous in helping other women pilots from other countries. She set dozens of world records, and participated in a number of competitions. She was often the only woman competing.



Hanna Reitsch in `MÜ 13 E` D-5201
Eisenhardt Airport, October 1952

In 1953 Hanna won the bronze medal in the International Gliding Championships in Madrid, Spain. In 1957 she set two women's altitude records for gliders. She also continued to work as a research pilot. In 1959, she traveled to India, where she became friends with Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister Nehru, whom she took on a glider flight over New Delhi. .

In 1962, she founded the National School of Gliding in Ghana, where she stayed until 1966. Always drawn to people in power, she was friends with Ghana's president, Kwame Nkrumah and flew for him until he was deposed in 1966. She reported these experiences in a 1968 book, *Ich Flog für Kwame Nkrumah*.

Reitsch set dozens of world records in aviation. Yet at home, she was never able to shake the stigma of having been a Nazi. Her unconditional loyalty to Hitler's regime remains as undeniable as her brilliance in aviation.

Her exaggerated concept of honor and loyalty to her country never allowed her to question the Nazis' reign. Nevertheless, many of her contemporaries deny that she ever actually was a National Socialist .



She was accepted as a member of the American Test Pilots' Association and was received by President John Kennedy in the White House in 1961. A photo shows her standing near Kennedy, not wearing her self-designed uniform but a dress and carrying a woman's handbag. At the age of 65, the year before she died, she set a new women's distance record in a glider. Hanna died of a massive heart attack in 1979 at age 67. As she wished, she was buried near her family in Salzburg, Austria. So ends the sad story of a heroine of the Third Reich



Hanna Reitsch died quietly in bed in Frankfurt, Germany one year after setting a new women's distance record in a glider. Her 67-year-old body bore faded scars of long-ago plane crashes. Her mind held memories of Adolf Hitler and her heart still carried Nazi pride which kept her out of history. She began by wanting to be a flying missionary but laws kept her from flying airplanes and she began in gliders, winning dozens of competitions and attracting the attention of Hitler.

She soon became Nazi Germany's ideal woman, young and vivacious, daring and highly publicized by the Nazi propaganda machine.

If she hadn't been on the losing side and if she had been later willing to admit the horrors of the Nazi regime, Hanna Reitsch would be honored in history books as the greatest woman pilot.

She was probably the mother of Women's Liberation, having bested men in every flying competition. She was photographed rarely after the war and she is mentioned more than 60,000 times on the Internet.

At a time when women were expected to stay in the kitchen, she was one of the world's top glider pilots. She held 40 world aviation records; was the first to cross the Alps in a glider, first to fly a helicopter and first to fly a jet plane. She was the first woman awarded the Iron Cross and was the world's first woman test pilot.

Her eye-witness account of the last days of Hitler are an important part of history and her flights in the V1 rocket are a first chapter in space travel. She spent her last years quietly. The darling of Nazi Germany was a post-war outcast. Germans who adored her later shunned her. She never married, saying her man died in the war.

But there are millions in Germany who love me. It is only the German press which has been told to hate me. It is propaganda helped by the government. Germans have not been allowed to write about me since 1945. They are afraid I might say something good about Adolf Hitler. But why not? Because of Hitler we Germans were the pioneers of space travel, ahead of our time, ahead of the world. The first space rockets were copies of our V2 bombs which climbed 50 miles up. After the war my dear friend Wernher von Braun helped the Americans. He was brilliant with the V2 rocket and the father of all space travel and satellites.

I am surprised I am still alive. So many of my friends were killed. Ten of us test flew the V1 rocket. Five were killed and three severely injured. The V1 was built to fly as a robot controlled by an early auto-pilot – something else we designed. It was almost impossible to fly with fins or wings just three feet long. But I flew it ten times.

Catapulted from a sled, it produced more than 24 G's acceleration force, enough to burst body organs as we learned from experiments and dead pilots.



In 1965 they made a movie in England called “Operation Crossbow”, with Sophia Loren playing me. They pictured me flying off a catapult in the film. It was all technically wrong and made without my permission. Because Hitler’s body was never seen by the allies it was widely believed for years that Hanna Reitsch flew out of Berlin with Hitler or his secretary



When in State College, Pa., Reitsch proudly showed the owner of the glider she flew a cyanide suicide capsule that was handed to her by Hitler shortly before he killed himself in his dank bunker. Some historians, blinded by her accomplishments, have tried to depict her as a naïve, apolitical technician, but the fact that her parents committed suicide rather than face life in a defeated Germany did not seem to faze her.

Reitsch was a microcosm of a wartime Germany that was blessed with great scientists and engineers like her colleague, rocket scientist Wernher von Braun .

Hanna Reitsch was interviewed and photographed several times in the early 1970's in Germany by US investigative photo journalist Ron Laytner. At the end of her last interview she told Laytner:

"When I was released by the Americans I read historian Trevor Roper's book, 'The Last Days of Hitler'. Throughout the book like a red line, runs an eyewitness report by Hanna Reitsch about the final days in the bunker. I never said it. I never wrote it. I never signed it. It was something they invented. Hitler died with total dignity.

"And what have we now in Germany? A land of bankers and car-makers. Even our great army has gone soft. Soldiers wear beards and question orders. I am not ashamed to say I believed in National Socialism. I still wear the Iron Cross with diamonds Hitler gave me. But today in all Germany you can't find a single person who voted Adolf Hitler into power."

Then she uttered the words that for so long kept her out of the history books:

**"Many Germans feel guilty about the war.
But they don't explain the real guilt we share – that we lost."**