



Southwest Soaring

Quarterly Newsletter of the U.S. Southwest Soaring Museum

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An affiliate of the Soaring Society of America, Inc.

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The 1930 Franklin PS-2 on loan from the National Soaring Museum

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Cover: Wolf Hirth and Hawley Bowlus used this Franklin PS-2 in 1930 to instruct students at their North Beach Glider School, NY (now LaGuardia Airport).

Museum Musings By George Applebay

Please enjoy Bob Alkov's outstanding issue of his summer edition of the museum newsletter with its' brilliant contributors. See page 6 for the rest of the musings.

Editorial

By

Bob Alkov



Patrick Dolce with his Science Fair Project

Patrick Dolce, 11, a student in Mr. Brazil's 6th grade class at Moriarty Elementary School donated his science fair project to the museum. He says he picked the aerodynamics project to find out which of three sizes of wings, small, medium and large would provide the most lift. He designed a wind tunnel to test the wing shapes.

We were saddened to learn of the death of Al Santilli on June 23rd. Al was 93 years old. He served in the US Army in the South Pacific during WWII and retired as a Lt. Col in 1965. Al was widely known and respected in the soaring community. A member of the SSA Hall of Fame and a LT. Col in the CAP, Al will be remembered as a perpetual instructor. He first started flying in 1930 and accumulated over 6000 hours flight time. His original pilot's license was signed by Orville Wright. On July 2nd a memorial service was held in Als' honor. The many testimonials from friends and fellow pilots attested to the love and respect he commanded. Al was a life member and staunch supporter of the museum. He will be sorely missed.

Also we will miss Bob Knight and Bill Barber as well as Vice President Steve Hill who have resigned from the Board of Directors. Bob, Bill and Steve have been invaluable assets to the museum. We appreciate all they have done for us over the years. Thanks fellas!

We commemorated the first anniversary of the opening of the Museum with a Gala, Dinner and Dance at the Museum's No. 3 Building on June 9th. We had a crowd of more than 60 people who bought tickets to celebrate with us. Following the New Mexican Buffet Dinner we were entertained by the Dukes of Albuquerque Swing Band playing dance favorites from the 40s and 50s. Sounding very professional, Rick Kohler, proprietor of Sundance Aviation, sung old favorite tunes, surprising and pleasing the crowd.

Following the departure of the band, Dennis Piskiewicz gave a talk based on his book "From Nazi Test Pilot to Hitler's Bunker – The Fantastic Flights of Hanna Reitsch". Hanna Reitsch was the controversial German female test pilot who was the consummate "Pilot's Pilot", admired by male and female aviators alike on both sides of the conflict.

After Dennis's lecture a round table discussion was held. The discussants included Craig Angus, Dieter Bibbig and Bertha Ryan in addition to Dennis. The resultant dialogue proved to be very interesting.

Although Karl Striedieck was unable to attend, he sent an article relating his experiences with Hanna, which appears on page 5.



Gala Night June 9th discussion group about Hanna Reitsch. From left to right: Craig Angus, Dieter Bibbig, Bertha Ryan and Dennis Piskiewicz

Craig Angus who hails from Aspen, Colorado has a PhD in Clinical Psychology. Craig has an extensive collection of Hanna Reitsch memorabilia including magazine articles and books written by her and by others about her.

Dieter Bibbig learned to fly in Doernberg, Germany in 1964. He moved to Aspen in 1966 and started the Gliding School where he serves as an instructor. He has accumulated over 10,000 flight hours. Dieter, who was only 13 at the time World War II ended, was able to give us the perspective of a German living under Hitler.

Bertha Ryan met Hanna in 1961 in Lancaster, California where she had come to attempt to fly the wave. Unfortunately, the wave never developed. Bertha, an aerospace engineer, worked for NASA at the time and had Hanna as a houseguest for a week.

Hanna Reitsch

By Bertha Ryan

(Reprinted from WOMAN PILOT, Jan/Feb 1996)

We had just left my home in Lancaster, California on our way to dinner with some of the soaring pilots in the local area. She told me, "Some people thought I was Hitler's girl friend." She wasn't of course, but this comment started one of the most intriguing conversations I have ever had.

Who was this woman who kept me spellbound for the next few minutes as we stood in the door of my home? She was Hanna Reitsch, arguably one of the most talented pilots of this century. She had come to the United States from her home in Germany to participate in a meeting of helicopter pilots (Whirly Girls) and to explore the Sierra Wave.

She was spending a few days in my home while she enjoyed the excitement of flying the Wave. This wave occurs on the lee side of mountains when the upper wind blows across them in an approximately perpendicular direction. It provides strong rising air currents enabling glider pilots to reach altitudes up to 50,000 feet. The conditions on the lee side of the Sierra Nevada are especially strong and known worldwide. My home was near these mountains.

Hanna Reitsch was primarily a glider pilot but was known for much more than soaring. She was the first person to fly a helicopter indoors - she demonstrated the Focke-Achgelis FA-61 at the Duetschlandhalle stadium in Berlin in 1937. She was the first woman to receive the title of Flugkapitan and the only woman to be awarded the Iron Cross during the regime of the "Third Reich"

in Germany (only the second since 1813). She flew a piloted version of the V-1 rocket bomb that terrorized London near the end of World War II.



Hanna Reitsch

Hanna started flying gliders in 1930 while Germans were prohibited from flying powered aircraft in the period after World War I. She became an instructor in 1933 and in 1934 participated in a study of meteorological and thermal conditions in South America and another similar study in North Africa. She learned powered aircraft flight as soon as it was allowed for German citizens. In 1937 she was one of five German pilots who made the first crossing of the Alps in sailplanes. In 1938 she performed an aerobatic demonstration at the Cleveland Air Races in the United States.

In 1937 Hanna was assigned to flight-testing with the Luftwaffe as a civilian and had the opportunity to fly every type of aircraft available from fast fighters to heavy bombers. She became the first person to fly the Focke-Achgelis FA-61 twin rotored helicopter in untethered flight. This was one of the world's first practical helicopters.

In 1938 she flew the Messerschmitt Me 163b interceptor rocket plane which was capable of reaching 500 mph and 30,000 feet in seconds. On her fifth flight, the takeoff dolly would not release. The aircraft became difficult to

control, and she attempted all sorts of maneuvers trying to get rid of the dolly. Rather than bail out, she elected to continue taking data and tried to save the aircraft. Just prior to landing, the aircraft became completely uncontrollable, resulting in a crash and several months of painful convalescence.

She traveled all over the world demonstrating aircraft and performing aerobatic shows. When World War II began, she continued her flight test efforts, although she never held military rank. As the war was drawing to a close, the Germans conducted a last ditch effort to develop the V-1 buzz bomb. Some early versions were fitted with cockpits for testing and possibly for a suicide plan. Because of her small size (5 feet tall weighing 90 pounds), she was an ideal selection for flight-testing this unusual weapon. The V-1 and a later version, the V-2, rained terror on London during the closing days of World War II and became the basis of some postwar efforts towards space flight in the free world.

But, back to our conversation that evening. She described how, in the last days of World War II, she spent time learning the streets of Berlin in detail from the air in case such knowledge would be needed. Towards the end of April 1945, Colonel General Ritter von Greim was ordered to report to Adolph Hitler in the Reich Chancellery bunker where the German government was now located. Hanna insisted on accompanying von Greim because of her knowledge of the area, but von Greim insisted on flying because Hanna had never flown under fire. The Russians had invaded the city, and much of it was under their control.

They took off from an airfield outside Berlin in a Fieseler Storch and headed toward the city. As they neared their destination, flying at treetop level, von Greim was wounded by Russian ground fire, so Hanna reached over his shoulders to fly the airplane. She located a wide street near the Brandenburg gate that was still controlled by the Germans and made a successful landing. They hailed a passing military vehicle and made their way to the bunker where Hitler appointed von Greim as the head of the German Air Force, succeeding Goering whom he believed had betrayed him.

They stayed in the bunker for three days and were prepared to commit suicide with the members of the government, Adolph Hitler and his mistress Eva Braun.

But Hitler learned that Himmler, head of the Gestapo, was also deserting him and ordered von Greim to leave and make a final attempt to save the war effort. Hanna and von Greim knew it was futile, begged to stay but followed orders and managed to fly out of Berlin safely with Hanna as pilot.

They took off from a street near the Brandenburg gate, amidst a hail of Russian gunfire, and, as they climbed to rooftop level, they were captured in searchlights and surrounded by explosions. Only a few splinters hit the plane, and they climbed safely to 20,000 feet where they could observe Berlin beneath them in a sea of flames. The next day Hitler's suicide was reported, and a few days later the war with Germany was over. This conversation, fantastic as it was, has been verified, with slightly varying details, in several publications.

She obviously still had some feeling and admiration for Adolph Hitler but also some guilt feelings of what her countrymen had done during the War. She commented that the Allies should have stopped Hitler early on. Later she told me something of her personal postwar activities in confidence that I have never revealed and will never reveal. She wanted to make up for some of her country's terrible deeds during WWII.

It was a thrill and an honor to meet with this woman who was so prominent in aviation. It was also a little unnerving to meet with someone who had been so familiar with people who perpetrated the most horrific events of our century.

Hanna Reitsch was taken prisoner by the Americans in 1945 and held for 15 months. After the war, she continued to fly and traveled extensively throughout the world, notably establishing glider activities in India and Ghana.

It was in 1961 that she visited me. We took her on a tour of the facilities at Edwards Air Force Base. While someone was showing her one of the aircraft, I commented to the Air force officer standing beside me that this woman had flown the V-1. You can imagine the strange look that he gave me!

Her last visit to the United States was in April 1979 where, at the age of 67, she flew an out-and-return goal flight of 805 kilometers in a sailplane along the Appalachian Mountain range. My last contact with

her was in May 1979 when she invited me to visit her home in Frankfurt. She died in August 1979. So ended a 47-year flying career, which included 25 national, and world aviation records, five books and many exciting and risky flying activities.

One in a Million

By Karl Striedieck

Exuberant, mission-oriented, loyal and persistent are a few of the adjectives that could be used to describe this unusual person, Hanna Reitsch. She threw herself into every endeavor she believed in with an irrepressible enthusiasm that almost assured a successful result.

Readers of books by and about Hanna may remember some of the accounts of her attempts to master new challenges by employing a simple, repetitive training aid such as a walking cane to serve as a stand in for an aircraft control stick. She would routinely spend hours at home rehearsing the moves needed to properly steer a new maneuver in a glider or power ship.

When she visited us in 1979 she had occasion to once again use this training method because of a problem with my ASW-20 landing gear. Due to her small stature, she sat well forward in the cockpit and it was tough for her to slide the landing gear handle back and outboard for retraction, as it was behind her when in the up position. But with the right combination and timing of stick forward and gear handle movement the gear would stay up. To perfect this she would sit on her bed and go through endless cycles of this operation.

My first encounter with Hanna was at the World Championships in France in 1978 where she delivered a talk about gliding in the Alps. She had the audience, mostly guys, completely entranced with her accounts of scary low saves and descriptions of Alpine beauty. She got a laugh and probably spoke for many a careless glider pilot when she mentioned making many promises to God that she knew she might not be able to keep if she were delivered out of this or that predicament.

She had the knack for telling riveting, jaw-dropping stories about her flying adventures. I can remember a couple of sessions that began during breakfast at 8 and had me still hanging on every word at 11.

There were the Gigant (huge troop-carrying glider) stories, one of which involved a rope break (ropes, actually, for the two tow ships). There was an immediate need for a big pitch trim change, but the trim wheel was a huge device operated by a crewman behind the pilot. "Quickly Fritz quickly" she implored as she heaved back on the control wheel.

Hanna spent five weeks at Eagle Field in part to find a peaceful place to complete the manuscript for her fifth book, which concerned her career as a test pilot. Flying the Appalachians was another reason, and on April 7, 1979, just four months before she died, she set a women's world out and return record. The start and finish point was 30 miles away and I arrived in the Cessna just as she was opening the canopy. Characteristically, she began describing the flight in superlatives while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. Hanna was a living exclamation point.

She did have at least one weakness though. Like many of us she loved ice cream, and I remember many an evening meal when we had eaten a little too much but one of us suggested ice cream anyway. The phrase was always "A little ice would be nice."

Hanna was Germany's Amelia Erhart and, save for being on the losing side of a war, would have been treated more favorably by writers. She was apolitical, never having joined the national socialist party, but she was loyal to her country and refused to grovel to the post war apologists for the Third Reich. As result she had to endure the leper's life of a principled person who has been found to be politically incorrect.

She lived a penurious life after the war, surviving on book sales and anonymous contributions that appeared in her mailbox. She lived in a small fourth floor apartment in Frankfurt and had a secretary. She showed me models of some of the aircraft she flew and the poison capsule she was given in the bunker in case it came to that.

Undoubtedly, Hanna's gender had something to do with the path of her flying career. But there would have been no such career without her unusual zest for life and fanatical commitment to flying. She loved the sky and committed her life to it. Nothing else - marriage, money, politics, fashion, fame - mattered at all compared to her life-long compulsion to be in the sky.

Against all odds and obstacles, Hanna set the highest standard for following your dreams and living life to the fullest.

A phrase she used often that could be applied to her was: "Hanna, you have made it excellent!!!" I feel very privileged to have been counted as one of her friends.

Museum Musings by The President

Friday morning, June 29, Tryggvi Helgason and myself driving two cars and towing one large enclosed glider trailer arrived at the North gate at Edwards AFB. Having established security clearance previously with our base contact James Murray, we were quickly directed to the NASA parking area. James obtained additional security ramp visitors passes and guided us to a warehouse hangar to view and load the NASA Apex High Altitude Test Glider. We had worked for many months with long time Soaring friend, NASA's Cam Martin to learn the Apex project could possibly be turned over to the US Southwest Soaring Museum. We wanted this research aircraft as a typical example of work that NASA sometime gets involved with. With help from Jim's several co-workers, the Apex project was quickly loaded and we departed Edwards.

Next on our agenda was a trip to California City airport where Cindy Brickner directed us to Chris Manley's hangar where Chris had his like new 1947 Schweizer I-23, serial # 9. Previous conversations with Chris had convinced him the US Southwest Soaring Museum would be a respectable home for this fine example of America's first production all metal soaring machine. Now if we could convince one of America's 6 remaining privately owned Sisu metal glider owners to donate a Sisu to the museum, we could show the great advances in technology between the two modern aircraft.

George Applebay

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