

*Feb 28, 1944:*

## Test pilot Reitsch pitches suicide squad to Hitler

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Hannah Reitsch, the first female test pilot in the world, suggests the creation of the Nazi equivalent of a kamikaze squad of suicide bombers while visiting [Adolf Hitler](#) in Berchtesgaden. Hitler was less than enthusiastic about the idea.

Reitsch was born in 1912 in Hirschberg, Germany. She left medical school (she had wanted to be a missionary doctor) to take up flying full time, and became an expert glider pilot--gliders were motorless planes that the Germans developed to evade strict rules about building "war planes" after WWI. In addition to gaining experience with gliders, Reitsch also did stunt flying for the movies. In 1934, she broke the world's altitude record for women (9,184 feet). An ardent Nazi and admirer of Hitler, she was made an honorary flight captain by the Fuhrer, the first woman to receive such an honor. In 1937, the Luftwaffe, the German air force, put her to work as a test pilot. Reitsch embraced this opportunity to fly as part of what she called Germany's "guardians of the portals of peace." Among her signal achievements was the testing of a proto-helicopter in 1939.

Reitsch came closer than any other woman to seeing actual combat during [World War II](#), depositing German troops along the Maginot Line in France during the Germans' 1940 invasion by glider plane. She won an Iron Cross, Second Class, for risking her life trying to cut British barrage-balloon cables (the balloons were unmanned blimps, tethered in one place, from which steel cables dangled so as to foul the wings and propellers of enemy aircraft). Among the warplanes she tested was the Messerschmitt 163, a rocket-power interceptor that she flew 500 mph. While testing the ME 163 a fifth time, she spun out of control and crash-landed (even though she was injured during the crash, she nevertheless managed to write down exactly what happened before she passed out from her injuries). For this, Hitler awarded her an Iron Cross, First Class.

It was while receiving this second Iron Cross from Hitler in Berchtesgaden in 1944 that she pitched the idea of a Luftwaffe suicide squad of pilots who would fly specially designed versions of the V-1. Hitler was initially put off by the idea, only because he did not think it an effective or efficient use of resources. But Reitsch's commitment persuaded him to investigate the prospect of designing such planes, at which point she put together a Suicide Group and was the first to take the following 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." The squad was never deployed.

Reitsch was one of the last people to see Hitler alive. On April 26, 1945, she flew to Berlin with Gen. Ritter von Greim, who was to be given command of the Luftwaffe. Greim was wounded when Reitsch's plane was hit by Soviet anti-aircraft fire. After saying farewell to the Fuhrer, tucked away in his bunker, she flew Greim back out of Berlin.

After the war, Reitsch was captured and interned by the U.S. Army. She testified to the "disintegration" of Hitler's personality that she claimed to have witnessed during the last days of the war. When released, Reitsch continued to set records, including becoming the first woman to fly a glider over the Alps. In 1951, she published her autobiography, *Flying Is My Life*, and from 1962 to 1966 she was director of the national school of gliding in Ghana. She died in 1979, at 65 years old, only one year after setting a new women's glider distance record. In her career, she set more than 40 world records for flying powered and motorless planes.

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