

## A Chance Encounter with Hanna Reitsch

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In November 1959 I was a final year BSc student at Central College, Bangalore. Three years earlier I had been rejected by a NCC air wing officer who had come to St Josephs College, where I had finished my Intermediate examination, to select students for the air wing. Some of my good friends made the grade and I had the habit of visiting them in their aero modelling room at Central College. I was also an avid reader of World War 2 story books from a nearby circulating library and had read about Hanna Reitsch and her exploits during the war. To put it mildly I was in awe of her skill and courage and she was an inspiration for a teenager aspiring to be a fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force!

Jakkur airstrip was half way between Bangalore and Yelahanka, which was a disused WW 2 airfield then. It was the home of the Bangalore Gliding Club (BGC) and the gliding instructor was a Mr Batliwalla. NCC senior wing cadets were given gliding training there. I used to visit the club now and then in my spare time and hang around for hours till one of my NCC friends took pity on me and gave me a ride in a Slingsby T-21B trainer at Re 1/- per winch launch. The friend would fly the glider and we would come down from about 800 feet Agl in three minutes. For me it was a terrific thrill which would last about three months till I was able to save one more rupee! Gliding club personnel knew me as a novice gliding enthusiast and tolerated my occasional visits.

One day in November 1959 at Central College, an NCC air wing friend said 'Raj! Do you want to see Hanna Reitsch in action?' Seeing my incredulous look, he said 'She is coming to Jakkur today to hand over a glider presented by the West German government to India. Be there at 11 am'. So saying he jumped into the NCC jeep which was going to Jakkur with a couple of other senior cadets and vanished. I looked at my watch which said 10 am and if I missed the morning lectures I could make it to Jakkur on my bicycle. I pedalled furiously and got there just as a car rolled up and out stepped a diminutive blonde woman wearing a cream corduroy overall and a red scarf. She appeared to be in her late forties and no more than 5 feet tall. She was accompanied by Mr Batliwalla. Sqn Ldr DI Sargon who was the commanding officer of the NCC Air Squadron was also present at the BGC along with a few senior air wing cadets. (In 1962, Sqn Ldr Sargon was the Chief Flying Instructor for the Intermediate stage of training on the T6G-Texan at Air Force Flying College, Jodhpur. I flew the final test for the Intermediate stage with him and passed!)

There must have been about a dozen people assembled in the verandah of the flying school building and we sat down in a circle so that every one could see Hannah. She spoke English with a German accent but all of us could understand her. She gave a brief presentation on the

Schleicher K-7 twin seat glider trainer which was being handed over to the BGC. She said she had already handed over one such glider to the Delhi Gliding Club at Safdarjung airport.

The K-7 was a high wing glider and its most interesting feature was the 5 degree forward sweep of the leading edge of the wing. Both the fuselage and wing were covered with doped fabric and the tandem seat cockpit had dual controls with a single piece perspex canopy. The glider had been positioned at the national highway end and the tow cable was attached. Hannah and Mr Batliwalla walked to the glider for the inaugural flight of the K-7 at Bangalore and strapped up. Hannah sat in front, put on a pair of sun glasses and was clearly in command. The weather was fine with only a light wind and soon the winch launch began. The tow cable must have been released by Hannah at about 800 feet agl. She turned on to the reciprocal heading and dived fairly steeply towards the watching crowd of about 25 people. At about 500 feet agl she pulled up for a loop and on completing the loop banked steeply to the right and smoothly reversed into a high wingover to the left and lost height. The glider was now on final approach for landing and we saw her skimming the fence with the dive brakes open and execute a smooth touch down on the mono wheel under the fuselage. The gathering of BGC personnel and NCC cadets broke into a round of applause as everyone was impressed by this brief display of skill and showmanship. The glider had rolled some distance away and the BGC jeep went to pick up the pilots. Unfortunately I could not wait any longer as I had a lecture to attend at the college and had to reluctantly head back. Not many in Bangalore took note of Hannah's visit! Very few knew she was the only woman to have been decorated with the Iron Cross First Class by Hitler.

A year later in November 1960 soon after I had appeared for the Air Force entrance examination I was able to get a launch in the K-7 with my NCC friend who had been cleared to carry passengers. Even with my limited gliding experience I could make out that the sink rate of the K-7 was much less than that of the Slingsby T-21B.

The Bangalore Gliding club moved to a location south of Pune by the mid 1960's but I was told that the K-7 was damaged beyond economical repair in an accident before the move.

Seeing Hanna Reitsch in real life is a memory which has stayed fresh in my mind all these years.