Luftwaffe Eagle Johannes Steinhoff

Flying with skill and daring, the great ace survived the war and a horrible accident, living into his 80s.

This article was written by Colin D. Heaton originally published in World War II *Magazine in February 2000. Colin D. Heaton is currently working on a biography of Johannes Steinhoff with the help of the great ace's family.*

Johannes Steinhoff was truly one of the most charmed fighter pilots in the *Luftwaffe*. His exploits became legendary though his wartime career ended tragically. Steinhoff served in combat from the first days of the war through April 1945. He flew more than 900 missions and engaged in aerial combat in over 200 sorties, operating from the Western and Eastern fronts, as well as in the Mediterranean theater. Victor over 176 opponents, Steinhoff was himself shot down a dozen times and wounded once. Yet he always emerged from his crippled and destroyed aircraft in high spirits. He opted to ride his aircraft down on nearly every occasion, never trusting parachutes.

Steinhoff lived through lengthy exposure to combat, loss of friends and comrades, the reversal of fortune as the tide turned against Germany, and political dramas that would have broken the strongest of men. Pilots such as Steinhoff, Hannes Trautloft, Adolf Galland and many others fought not only Allied aviators but also their own corrupt leadership, which was willing to sacrifice Germany's best and bravest to further personal and political agendas. In both arenas, they fought a war of survival.

Aces like Steinhoff risked death every day to defend their nation and, by voicing their opposition to the unbelievable decisions of the Third Reich high command, risked their careers and even their lives. Steinhoff was at the forefront of the fighter pilots' revolt of January 1945, when Galland was replaced as general of fighters. A group of the most decorated and valiant *Luftwaffe* leaders confronted the *Luftwaffe* commander and deputy Führer, *Reichsmarschall* Herman Göring, with a list of demands for the survival of their service. Their main concern was the *Reichsmarschall*'s lack of understanding and unwillingness to support his pilots against accusations of cowardice and treason. They were being blamed for Germany's misfortunes. Steinhoff's frankness got him threatened with court-martial and banished to Italy, with similar penal-ties imposed upon others in the mutiny.

Steinhoff's recovery from injuries suffered during a near-fatal crash in a Messerschmitt Me-262 jet near the end of the war again illustrated his strength of will and character and his amazing ability to overcome all that life could throw at him. His story is an inspiring tale of moral and personal courage. Steinhoffdied in February 1994, shortly after this interview. He is survived by two brothers, Bernd and Wolf Steinhoff, his widow Ursula, and his daughter Ursula Steinhoff Bird, wife of retired Col-orado State Senator Michael Bird. During the interview, Steinhoff spoke candidly about many topics, including the war, his superi-ors and his philosophy about his country's role in the postwar period following the collapse of the Third Reich.

WWII: When and where were you born, General?

Steinhoff: I was born in Bottendorf, Thuringia, on September 15, 1913. This is a region in the middle of Germany.

WWII: Describe your family, childhood and education.

Steinhoff: My father was a millworker, mostly agricultural work, while my mother was a traditional housewife. She was truly a wonderful lady. My youngest brother, Bernd, is an engineer and lives in Columbus, Ohio, in the United States. My other brother, Wolf, is a doctor, and he lives here in Germany. I have two sisters, one living in Germany and the other deceased. With regard to my education, I attended *Gymnasium*, which is a little more involved than your traditional high school, where I studied the classics and languages such as French, English, Latin and Greek. It was truly a classical education that later served me well.

WWII: Your English is impeccable. How did you perfect it?

Steinhoff: I really picked up most of my English in the country-side and during the war, speaking to captured aviators and such. After the war I went to school to become more fluent.

WWII: What made you want to become a fighter pilot?

Steinhoff: Well, I studied how to become a teacher, in order to educate people, but with the conditions in Germany at that time when I was a young man I wanted to work but could not find a job. I then joined the armed forces and enlisted in the navy, where I served for one year. I was in the navy with another friend of ours, Dietrich Hrabak, and we both became naval aviation cadets. Later, we were both transferred to the Luftwaf fe after Göring became the commander in chief.

WWII: When did you start flying?

Steinhoff: That was in 1935, along with Hrabak, Trautloft, Galland, [Gunther] Lützow and many others. We trained at the same school and became friends with many other flight students, most of whom became very successful and highly decorated aces. Unfortunately, not all of them survived the war, and every year we lose someone else.

WWII: Describe your first combat. What was it like for you?

Steinhoff: It was late 1939, well after the Polish campaign, while I was assigned in Holland. We were flying against the Royal Air Force (RAF) bombers that were attacking coastal industry. That was long before the Battle of Britain, but I could see that things were going to get more difficult. I attacked a flight of Vickers Wellington bombers and shot one down. It was rather uneventful, but later I shot down two more over Wilhelmshaven, when I was *Staffelkapitän* of 10/JG.26 "*Schlageter*" [10th *Staffel* (Squadron) of *Jagdgeschwader* (Fighter Wing) 26] toward the end of 1939. I was then transferred to 4/JG.52 in February 1940, where I remained until the start of the French campaign and the Battle of Britain.

WWII: What was fighting on the Channel coast like?

Steinhoff: Well, the British were born fighters-very tough, well trained and very sportive. They were brave, and I never fought against better pilots at any time during the war, including the Americans.

WWII: What was the difference between fighting the Americans and the British?

Steinhoff: Well, first of all, when we fought the RAF, it was almost evenly matched in fighters against fighters, so true dogfights, even in the *Schwarm* [German fighter formation], were possible. That was the truest test of men and their machines, and only the best survived. You learned quickly, or you did not come back. When the Americans arrived, they came over in such force that by the time I arrived back from Russia to fight them, there was no opportunity to engage in that kind of sportive contest. Attacking hundreds of [Boeing] B-17 and [Consolidated] B-

24 bombers with fighter escorts was not what I considered sportive, although I must admit it had many moments of excitement and sheer terror.

WWII: In your opinion, what was the reason for the *Luftwaffe*'s failure to gain air superiority over Britain in 1940?

Steinhoff: There were several factors. First, there was the range limitation of our fighters. After arriving on station, we had about 20 minutes of combat time before we had to return home, and the British knew it. Second, we were sent on many bomber escort mis-sions, which eliminated our advantage of speed and altitude, both of which are essential to a fighter pilot's success, and we therefore lost the element of surprise. Another factor was the British use of radar, which was a shock to us pilots, although our leadership knew about it. This early warning system allowed the British to concen-trate their smaller force with greater flight time over the opera-tional area, engaging us at the most vulnerable moments. Another problem which hindered our success was Göring, who would not allow the war to be prosecuted according to logic. One example was when he altered the *Luftwaffe*'s targets from military and RAF targets to cities and docks, which proved disastrous in many ways.

WWII: How was it different fighting the British from the Soviets?

Steinhoff: The Soviets were disciplined, principled and somewhat intelligent, but not well trained in tactics. They were very brave for the most part, but unlike the British and Americans, they would break off combat after only a few minutes and a couple of rotations. The Soviet pilot was for the most part not a born fighter in the air.

WWII: From what I understand, all chivalry and sportsmanship was absent from the war in Russia; is that correct?

Steinhoff: Absolutely correct. In fighting the Soviets, we fought an apparatus, not a human being-that was the difference. There was no flexibility in their tactical orientation, no individual freedom of action, and in that way they were a little stupid. If we shot down the leader in a Soviet fighter group, the rest were simply sitting ducks, waiting to be taken out.

WWII: Ivan Kozhedub, the top Allied ace of the war, once stated that, when he fought against the *Luftwaffe*, the German pilots seemed to work better as a team, whereas the Soviets applied only a single method of combat, which he tried to change. Do you agree?

Steinhoff: Yes, that too is correct. We fought as a team from the beginning. We had excellent training schools and great combat leaders from the Spanish Civil War, as well as the early campaigns in Poland and the West, who led by example. We really teamed our trade during the Battle of Britain, and that knowledge saved many German lives.

WWII: Why was the Russian Front such a hardship, since the Western Allies initially had much better aircraft and pilots?

Steinhoff: Well, the Soviet pilots did get better. In fact, there were some hotshot pilots formed in the famous Red Banner units, which had some of the best pilots in the world. I fought against them in the Crimea and Caucasus later. But to answer your question, the hardest thing about the Russian Front was the weather, that damned cold. The second thing, and probably the most important, was the knowledge that if you were shot down or wounded and became a prisoner of war-that is, if they did not kill you first-you would have it very bad. There was no mutual respect. You were safe only on your side of the lines. The Soviets did not treat our men very well after they were cap-tured, but then again as we have learned, the Soviets we captured did not always fare

well either, which was unfortunate. At least in fighting against the Americans and British, we understood that there was a similar culture, a professional respect. But with the Soviets, this was unheard of. It was a totally different war.

WWII: So, unlike the British and Americans, the Soviets did not treat fellow pilots and officers as gentlemen?

Steinhoff: It was definitely not there. There was no mutual respect. The Americans and British treated us as gentlemen, as we did our enemy pilots when they were captured. The Soviets had no concept of chivalry as a whole.

WWII: How did the Russian winter affect operations?

Steinhoff: Oh, it was very difficult. In many cases we had no operations. The cold would freeze all machinery and moving parts. Sometimes we could not fly because the snow was piled so high that we had no way to remove it. It was very poor weather, and navigation was absolutely impossible. This and the cold were the greatest handicaps. That was absolutely the worst time.

WWII: Some of the men you flew with became legends. For instance, in 1940 in France you commanded a young pilot named Hans-Joachim Marseille. What do you remember about him?

Steinhoff: Marseille was in my wing, 4/JG.52, just before the Battle of Britain and was there shortly after it started. I was his squadron leader, and I watched him. I knew he was a brilliant guy, very intelligent, very quick and aggressive, but he spent too much time looking for the girls, and his mind was not always on operations. He actually had to be taken off flight status on more than one oc-casion because he was so exhausted from his nights on the town, if you know what I mean.

WWII: So you would say he was a playboy?

Steinhoff: He was the perfect playboy, but a real fighter. But he was an individual, not a team player. He had seven victories when I fired him, not because he was not good, but because he was shot down four times while getting those victories. He had no concept of Rot-tenflieger [i.e., a wingman's responsibility], and many men did not want to fly with him as their wmgman, which is very bad for morale. I thought the best thing for him was to transfer him away from the women, and he became a legend in North Africa, of course, winning the Diamonds [to the Knight's Cross] and scoring 158 victories. He was a true character and was the epitome of the First World War fighter pilot, but we were not fighting the First World War.

WWII: I know this is difficult, but which of the men you flew with, in your opinion, became the best leaders?

Steinhoff: That would be impossible to answer, as we never had any really bad fighter leaders. You could not reach that position if you were not tested and deemed competent.

WWII: You later took over command of JG.77 in the Mediterranean after the death of Joachim Muencheberg on March 23, 1943. Did you know him also?

Steinhoff: Yes, he was very good and an outstanding leader, very successful. He was killed when his Me-109 lost a wing in combat over Tunisia, fighting against the Americans. I took over the unit, which I had served in before, as you already know.

WWII: You had many meetings with Göring. What was your per-sonal opinion of his leadership of the *Luftwaffe*?

Steinhoff: Göring was a good, brilliant leader before the war started. He was a great ace from the first war, and he was very en-ergetic and important in the buildup of the *Luftwaffe* in the 1930s, but during the Battle of Britain he became lazy. Göring started collecting his artwork, diamonds and precious stones and was no longer interested in the operation of the *Luftwaffe*. Toward the end of the war he was a nuisance, and I personally hated him. Many pilots died needlessly because of him, killed before they were able to lead. I went with Galland, Latzow, Trautloft and others to Berlin to see General Robert Ritter von Greim to have Göring removed and replaced, but this did not happen. Greim told us in January 1945 that it was too late, and that Adolf Hitler would never remove one of his oldest and most loyal friends from his post. This was what eventually led to the fighters' revolt against Göring, and he threatened to court-martial me and told Lützow that he would be shot for treason. Hitler ordered me, or rather banished me, to Italy for my own safety along with Lützow, and Trautloft was sent packing back to the East. Galland was replaced as General der *Jagdflieger* [general of fighters] by Colonel Gordon Gollob, who was a competent fighter and leader, but was a fervent supporter of Hitler and a nasty little man who was hated by almost everyone, including me. Needless to say, none of us Kommodores were very enthusiastic about it, and we refused to accept it. All of the leaders remained loyal to Galland and stayed in contact with him, which infuriated Gollob and Göring, since it showed that the highest ranking and most decorated men in the fighter force were still going to do things their way.

WWII: I have been informed by all of the alte Karneraden [old comrades] that Gollob was an egomaniac who was marginally capable as a leader but did not gain the trust of his men. Is that true?

Steinhoff: Well, I will say this, then I will say nothing else about Gollob. Losses soared under his leadership everywhere he went, much like Göring in the first war. He placed leaders in command of units not because of their competence, but due to their loyalty to the Nazi Party, which were very few in the Jagdwaffe [fighter arm].

WWII: Do you feel that Galland's appointment as general of the fighters was good for the service, and if so, why?

Steinhoff: Definitely. Galland was a very energetic man, a strong leader and great fighter, successful, loyal to his men and a most hon-orable and honest gentleman. He was never awed by Hitler or swayed by Göring, and he always answered truthfully when they questioned him on any subject, regardless of how unpopular the truth might have been. Galland was a visionary who knew how to turn the tide in the air war and how to rebuild the fighter force, but his standing beside his pilots against Göring and Hitler, as well as many others, gave Hitler cause to replace him, which was a bad mistake. Honesty in Berlin was not always fashionable.

WWII: Tell about the occasions on which you met Hitler-what was your impression of him?

Steinhoff: I first met Hitler around September 3, 1942, when he awarded me the Oak Leaves [to the Knight's Cross]. He asked those of us present about the war, which we were supposed to be winning, and what we thought about the new territory being incorporated into the Reich in the east.

I mentioned something to the effect that "I hope the Führer will not become too attached to it, because I don't think we will be taking up long-term residence." He looked at me as if he was going to suffer a stroke. When he asked me to clarify my statement, I simply told him that since

the United States had entered the war, and they, along with Britain, were supplying Russia, and we had no method of attacking their industry beyond the Urals, I did not think we would keep making great gains. He sat silent for a moment, then said something like, "We will finish Russia soon, and turn our attentions to the West once again. They will see that supporting Bolshevism is not to their benefit." And then we were dismissed. I met with him again outside Stalingrad a few weeks later when he toured the front. He told me: "Now I have Russia, now I have the Caucasus. I am going to penetrate the River Volga; then after that the rest of Russia will be mine." I remember looking at the others around us and thinking that this guy was nuts! I met Hitler the next time on July 28, 1944, when I received the Swords to the Knight's Cross. That was a week after the bomb plot to kill him, and he was not the same man, perhaps more withdrawn and living in a fantasy where the war was concerned. All I wanted was to get my medals and get the hell out of there. I could not stand him. Well, the next time I was summoned to Hitler we Kommodores were in Berlin to meet with him and Göring just prior to the revolt. He was pacing back and forth, mumbling about the weapons we had, how we would show the Allies a thing or two, and so on. It was very depressing to know that our country was in the hands of this madman and the lu-natics around him. You know, after the July 20 plot to kill him, we were never allowed in his presence with our sidearms, which was a part of our service uniform. He trusted no one.

WWII: Do you feel that Hitler was indifferent to the plight of his people, the soldiers and the situation he created for himself?

Steinhoff: Yes, as you said, the situation he created for himself. He could have cared less about anyone else. But it was our fate to pay for his crimes, and Germany will never live that down.

WWII: It is my understanding that despite the abuses hurled at the *Luftwaffe* by Göring and Hitler, the fighter force did have sup-porters among the Wehrmacht. For instance, General Hasso von Manteuffel stated many times that his panzer troops could have gained nothing if not for the *Luftwaffe* and that, without the industry to produce aircraft and the schools and leaders to train new pilots, the war was lost. Albert Speer also agreed. What is your opinion?

Steinhoff: They were absolutely correct, but we were receiving the blame, and most of it came from Göring, hence the revolt. He made all of the grand promises, and he boasted to Hitler that his men could accomplish anything at any time. Unfortunately, he did not consult us before he made these grand overtures.

WWII: What, if any, changes did you see after the United States entered the war, and what was your opinion about it?

Steinhoff: When this happened we were in the middle of the first Russian winter, and we were too busy to think about it. I was just south of Moscow when I heard the news. However, it later penetrated my mind that this was a decisive step. The Americans had tremendous willpower and an unmatched industrial capacity for building big bombers, fighters, ships and so on. It was more or less the end of the war--only time determined how long we would survive.

WWII: You transferred to the Western Front after a couple of years in Russia and the Mediterranean. How was fighting in the West then different from your experiences in 1940?

Steinhoff: Well, I can tell you, as soon as I took over command of JG.77 I was shot down on my first mission while attacking B-24 Liberators, and I knew right then that it was a totally different war from 1940. I also realized, as my plane tumbled out of control and I took to my parachute for the first and last time, just how much I had forgotten. It was different fighting the Soviets as opposed to the combined British and American forces, even though the Soviets outnumbered us even more. The Western Allies had improved their already first-rate equipment. I had also

forgotten how flexible they were and how they could alter their tactics to fit the situation and orchestrate brilliant attacks.

WWII: Why did the high command not consult the Kommodores and fighter leadership, who had the knowledge and experience, before implementing these absurd orders and recommendations?

Steinhoff: That is a question you historians will continue to ask long after we are all dead. I think that the mentality in Berlin was one of pride and ego. But at that time it was too late anyway.

WWII: From your wide experience, which aircraft was the most difficult to attack?

Steinhoff: The B-17 Flying Fortress without a doubt. They flew in defensive boxes, a heavy defensive formation, and with all of their heavy .50-caliber machine guns they were dangerous to approach. We finally adopted the head-on attack pioneered by Egon Mayer and Georg Peter Eder, but only a few experts could do this successfully, and it took nerves of steel. Then you also had the long-range fighter escorts, which made life difficult, until we flew the Me-262 jets armed with four 30mm cannon and 24 R4M rockets. Then we could blast huge holes in even the tightest formation from outside the range of their defensive fire, inflict damage, then come around and finish off the cripples with cannon fire.

WWII: Please describe your humorous encounter with a Lockheed P-38 pilot named Widen in Italy in 1944.

Steinhoff: This is a good story. I was test-flying an Me-109 with my aide near our base at Foggia. This was before I had been exiled from Germany, during my first tour as Kommodore of JG.77. Well, we were attacked at low level by a flight of P-38 Lightnings, about 100 American fighters in all, but the two of us figured, why not attack? We turned into them, and I flew through their formation going in the opposite direction, getting good strikes on a couple of them. I poured a good burst into this P-38 and the pilot rolled over, and I saw him bail out. I had this on gun camera also. Well, he was picked up and made a POW, and I invited him to my tent for a drink and dinner, as well as to spend the night. We drank some of the local wine... and drank and drank. I thought to myself, "What am I going to do with this guy?" Well, it was long after midnight, so I lay down in my tent and stretched my legs so I could reach his head. He woke up and said, "Don't worry, I won't run away, you have my word as an officer and a gentleman. Besides, you got me too drunk." We slept, and he kept his word, and I never placed a guard on him.

WWII: So you subdued your opponent with alcohol?

Steinhoff: Yes, that's right, and it worked very well, you know. He was a very likable man, and I was very pleased to have the victory, but as I told him, I was even more pleased to see him uninjured and safe.

WWII: Of all the Allied fighters you encountered, which was the most difficult to handle with a good pilot at the controls?

Steinhoff: The Lightning. It was fast, low profiled and a fantastic fighter, and a real danger when it was above you. It was only vulnerable if you were behind it, a little below and closing fast, or turning into it, but on the attack it was a tremendous aircraft. One shot me down from long range in 1944. That would be the one, although the P-51 [Mustang] was deadly because of the long range, and it could cover any air base in Europe. This made things difficult, especially later when flying the jets.

WWII: How did you get stuck as the recruiting officer for JV44?

Steinhoff: Well, after the death of [Walter] Nowotny, I took over command of JG.7 in December 1944, after the jets were dispersed to individual wings. I chose various squadron leaders, such as [Erich] Rudorffer, [Gerhard] Barkhorn, [Heinz] Baer and others. After Operation Bodenplatte and the fighters' revolt, I was, of course, sent back to Italy and fired from my job with the jets. Galland recalled me when he had permission from Hitler to create his own "Squadron of Experts," which was not the original intent, but this is the way it worked out. Galland gave me full authorization to scrounge and recruit the best pilots possible. I went to every bar and recreation hall, even a few hospitals and forward units, until I had about 17 or so volunteers, with more on the way. The list was impressive, and among this group were two or three inexperienced jet pilots, but they showed promise.

WWII: So the Squadron of Experts was just that?

Steinhoff: Yes, most of us had many kills, and nine of us had over 100 victories, and a couple, such as Baer, had over 200, and Barkhorn had 300. Everyone except a couple had the Knight's Cross or higher decorations and hundreds of missions, and most were senior officers led by a squadron leader with the rank of lieutenant general. It was quite a unit, and I don't think there will ever be another one like it.

WWII: Were the tactics pretty much the same with JV44 as with JG.7, or were there differences in attack strategy?

Steinhoff: Pretty much the same, I would say. The only significant difference was that we could pretty much create our own tactics on the spot to counter any new threat, whereas in conventional units you had to wait for a recommendation to be approved, and then the tactics authorized, which wasted valuable time. We found that attacking from the flank, entering the enemy formation from the side and attacking with rockets, brought many good results. It was like blasting geese with a shotgun. Attacking from the rear was also good, although targets offered a lower profile. When attacking from the side, we would lead the bombers a little, fire the rockets, then pull up or away and swing around for a rear pass on the survivors, where we fired our 30mm cannon. This would shred the bombers' wings or explode their bombs. Against fighters, one cannon shell was usually sufficient to bring it down.

WWII: Do you feel that the Me-262, if produced in larger numbers earlier, would have had any effect on the war?

Steinhoff: This is a very good and difficult question. Even if the jets were built in greater numbers, we did not have the trained pilots, or even the fuel. It was too late in the war, and we could not win. However, if we'd had the jets in 1943, things would have been different, I am sure, but that was not to be. That was our fate.

WWII: I spoke to Hajo Herrmann, who thought that the debate over the Me-262 between bomber and fighter commands was nonsense. He said that even though arguments could be made in favor of its use as either a fighter or a bomber, it should have been focused on as a fighter so late in the war. How do you feel about that debate?

Steinhoff: It was only possible to use the jet airplane as a fighter, as Galland was able to prove later in the war. This is right, because it was too late.

WWII: What did you think of the possibility of Heinrich Himmler and the SS taking over the operational control of the jets?

Steinhoff: Oh, yes, we were aware of this, but that was an insane idea. That was nonsense, it was not possible. The training time required and the personnel made it unfeasible. It was simply nonsense.

WWII: After the fighters' revolt, how did the fighter pilots feel about the war? What was their morale like?

Steinhoff: Gunther Lützow, Galland, Traut-loft and myself, as well as many others, were deeply involved. We were upset because the *Luftwaffe* was torn to pieces. Morale was very poor, Galland was standing all alone, and the importance of the fighters was negligible. It was a very bad time.

WWII: How many times were you shot down during the war?

Steinhoff: I was shot down 12 times. In the 13th incident I almost died from a crash.

WWII: How many times did you bail out?

Steinhoff: I only bailed out once. I never trusted the parachutes. I always landed my damaged planes, hoping not to get bounced on the way down when I lost power. I was wounded only once lightly, but never seriously until my crash.

WWII: Tell us about that near-fatal crash.

Steinhoff: Many writers have covered that, but hardly anyone ever asked me about it, except for Raymond Toliver, so here is the true story. I was taking off in formation on April 18, 1945, for my 900th mission. Galland was leading the flight, which included Gerhard Barkhorn, [Klaus] Neumann, [Eduard] Schallmoser, [Ernst] Fahrmann and myself. We were to fly formation and engage an American bomber formation. Our airfield had suffered some damage over the last several days due to Allied bombing and strafing attacks, and as my jet was picking up speed, the left undercarriage struck a poorly patched crater. I lost the wheel, and the plane jumped perhaps a meter into the air, so I tried to raise the remaining right wheel. I was too low to abort takeoff, and my speed had not increased enough to facilitate takeoff. I knew as I came toward the end of the runway that I was going to crash. The 262 hit with a great thump, then a fire broke out in the cockpit as it skidded to a stop. I tried to unfasten my belts when an explosion rocked the plane, and I felt an intense heat. My 24 R4M rockets had exploded, and the fuel was burning me alive. I remember popping the canopy and jumping out, flames all around me, and I fell down and began to roll. The explosions continued, and the concussion was deafening, knocking the down as I tried to get up and run away. I cannot describe the pain.

WWII: After you escaped from the plane, you were taken to the hospital?

Steinhoff: Yes, sure. They thought I would die. Even the surgeons had no idea that I would survive, but I tricked them.

WWII: For years afterward you continued to have surgery to correct the damage. Could you tell us about that?

Steinhoff: In 1969 a British doctor, a plastic surgeon, made new eyelids for me from the skin on my forearm. From the time of the crash until this time I could not close my eyes, so I wore dark glasses to protect them. I had dozens of surgeries over the years, and I recently had a heart bypass, as you know, which delayed our interview. I am now full of spare parts, you could say.

WWII: You still meet frequently with many of your friends and former enemies. Do you look forward to these gatherings?

Steinhoff: Yes. I used to meet with [Douglas] Bader, [Robert Stanford] Tuck and Johnny Johnson quite frequently, as well as many American aces such as [Francis] Gabreski, [Hubert] Zemke and others. We are all old men, wiser and appreciative that no one holds anyone to blame for anything. We are a small fraternity, and we are all good friends.

WWII: How many victories did you have confirmed during the war?

Steinhoff: I had 176 victories, with seven in the jet.

WWII: Well, all of your old comrades and former enemies respect you greatly, including Hajo Herrmann, who came to see you in the hospital after the crash. You knew him, didn't you?

Steinhoff: Yes, I met him once or twice. I knew who he was. He was a good man.

WWII: You finally retired in the 1970s after many decades of service. How did you get in-volved with the Bundesluftwaf fe after the war?

Steinhoff: That is a long story, but a good one. I spent two years in the hospital after the crash, and I was still in my bed when I was approached by Trautloft and others. They convinced me that I could do much more outside the hospital than inside, so I decided to once again wear a uniform. The Communist threat was still a large factor, and as years went by we saw the Cold War more clearly than you in America did. It was right next door to us.

WWII: You have written several successful books about the war, and you are interna-tionally famous and highly respected. How do you spend your time today in retirement?

Steinhoff: I used to go on many speaking engagements, traveling as you know to all of the seminars, speaking to young people and telling them about what we did. I like meeting young people. They are the future, and we should take care of them.

WWII: Soon you will celebrate your 80th birthday. What advice do you have for the younger generations today?

Steinhoff: Oh, that is a very good question. I would tell them this: ***Love your country and fight for your country. Believe in truth, and that is enough.***