



## **Bounden Duty**

The Memoirs of a German Officer 1932-1945

by Alexander Stahlberg

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*“You will be my constant companion, you will be present at all my conversations, you will take brief minutes of our daily doings, in so far as they are important. You will listen to my telephone conversations, write for me and keep my files, both the military and some of the private ones.”*

Manstein to the author, 18 November 1942

Lt Alexander Stahlberg was personal ADC to Field Marshal von Manstein from 18 November 1942 until the end of the war.

His memoirs offers an insight into how the war was fought at the highest level in Germany. The broader historical picture is well-known but if you read this book you will get detailed descriptions of how Manstein, Hitler and his staff reacted at Conferences or on the telephone. How they thought, discussed, planned and, of course, negotiated with Hitler. Stahlberg also describes the atmosphere of uncertainty and suspicion within the Nazi state; how everyone had to be on constant guard as to what they said until they had cautiously weighed up the character of the person to whom they were speaking.

As a member of a long-established conservative and rich Prussian family Stahlberg moved in the highest political and military circles. Whilst still at University in Berlin in 1933 Vice-Chancellor von Papen selected him to be his press representative for the disastrous election campaign that brought Hitler to power. His father was a senior civil servant in the Prussian service. He was thus well-placed to observe Hitler's rise to power and the personalities involved. He shows that from the earliest days of Hitler's regime everyone was at risk of denunciation, even from within their own families. One of his mother's female friends became a committed Nazi and her tearful reaction to observing the fraudulent election results following the Reichstag Fire would be highly comical, were it not so tragic.

To avoid joining the Nazi party Stahlberg enlisted as a Trooper in the 6<sup>th</sup> Prussian Cavalry Regiment before transferring to an anti-tank battalion in a Motorised Infantry Division. He served in the front line throughout the early campaigns in Poland, France and Flanders. He took part in Operation Barbarossa as second-in-command of the anti-tank battalion of 12 Panzer Division, in Army Group Centre. After halting at Smolensk 12 Pz Div was redeployed to the Leningrad front. It was there that Stahlberg and some of his fellow officers began to doubt the higher direction of the war. Their mobile division was operating in forested, swampy terrain entirely unsuitable for tanks. Stahlberg describes an incident in which a tank reverses too far on a corduroy road, overturns into a hole and disappears from sight into a swamp.



In 1942, Stahlberg's cousin, serving in the Personnel Office in Berlin, secured a position for him with Field Marshal von Manstein in the hope of initiating the latter into the resistance against Hitler. As aide-de-camp to von Manstein, Stahlberg was his constant companion and listened to all his conversations. Stahlberg provides a verbatim account of one of the conversations following the encirclement of Stalingrad. In his words, Manstein bargains "*like a costermonger*" for troops, time or freedom of action. The advantage of a book like this is that it illustrates the mechanics of command at the highest levels. Because of the network of radio and other communication channels it becomes clear that there was no way that commanders could systematically have disobeyed Hitler's orders. At busy times occasional disobedience was possible but generally it was not feasible, for example, to withdraw from positions whilst pretending that they were still being held. Commanders behaving in this way would have been discovered and sacked instantly.

Stahlberg met the most senior commanders of the German Army and witnessed von Stauffenberg's attempt to recruit von Manstein into the military conspiracy. He also attended Führer Conferences and observed Manstein briefing Hitler and his cronies on many occasions. One of the most fascinating incidents concerns Hitler's visit to Manstein's headquarters at Zaporozhe before the Kursk offensive. The stage-managed swamping of the place by the SS reminds one of the impact of a US presidential entourage into a banana republic.

The book is notable for its sketches of the personalities of the time and what went on behind the war. Most vividly Stahlberg portrays Manstein's dealings with Hitler, from the first confused telephone conversation to the news of the Führer's death.

At the personal level, Stahlberg graphically depicts what he describes as his "*conflict between duty and conscience*". An inner struggle, shared with von Manstein and many others in the German military, to resolve the twin pulls of his military oath of obedience to the established government and a growing realisation of an intolerable situation at which his personal honour and sense of humanity revolted. At one point the author agonises about trying to shoot Hitler at close range at a conference but feels that he would probably fluff it due to the electric tension that always prevailed at them. Other conspirators felt the same.

This is a memoir from an unusual perspective – a junior staff officer with combat experience recounting his career with one of Germany's foremost commanders. I strongly recommend it.