

Alfred Steer, War Crimes Trials Participant Responsibility and Justice

Alfred Steer was born on May 30, 1913, in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania, to Alfred (Sr.) and Selma Steer. He had two sisters, Elizabeth and Mary, and one brother, John. His father owned a dairy-supplies business and later sold life insurance. Alfred's parents were both Quakers and sent him to a Quaker school. He went on to earn his bachelor's degree in German from Haverford College in Pennsylvania in 1935. Alfred traveled to Germany to participate in a yearlong exchange program, where, in his words, he was "horrified at Hitlerism" and its potential to "spell the end of Western civilization."

In 1936, Alfred returned to the United States and studied German literature at Duke University, where he earned his master's degree two years later. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Alfred enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Placed in the U.S. Naval reserves, he taught German at Washington and Lee University until 1941 when he intended to start work on his PhD. However, in June 1941, Alfred was called to active duty by the Navy and thus forced to postpone his studies. Alfred was sent to Norfolk, Virginia, where he worked as an intelligence officer. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Alfred was sent there to take command of a ship.

On July 4, 1943, Alfred shipped out to the Pacific Theater of Operations. In summer 1944, he was the commander of a patrol craft during the invasion of Saipan. His ship, a key communications link between the troops on the shore and the supply ships out at sea, was a target for the Japanese. The following summer, Alfred took a ship that had been damaged by a kamikaze to San Diego for repair. He was there when Japan surrendered to the United States. Shortly after, Alfred went to San Francisco and then to Washington, D.C., on leave. While in the nation's capital, Alfred heard that interpreters were needed in Nuremberg for the war crimes trials. Tapping his fluency in German, he volunteered his services and was chosen.

In November 1945, Alfred arrived in Nuremberg, where he and U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Leon Dostert developed and led the language division, consisting of more than forty interpreters translating court proceedings of the International Military Tribunal. In addition to his work in the courtroom, Alfred traveled around Europe to recruit additional interpreters. When the trials were completed in fall 1946, he oversaw the project of translating the decision that would be read before the court. Afterward, he was placed in charge of the project to print 12,500 copies of more than forty volumes of court records and supporting documents in English, French, German, and Russian.

In December 1946, Alfred returned to the United States, left the Navy and a year later, married Elizabeth Kell; the couple had two children, Susan and John. He earned his PhD in German from the University of Pennsylvania in 1952. Alfred then taught at several universities across the country, including State University of New York in Binghamton, Columbia University, and the University of Georgia. At the time of Alfred's interview in 1996, he and his wife lived in Athens, Georgia, and had a granddaughter.