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Thank you, Major Hirst! – a ground-breaker for the Wirtschaftswunder at Volkswagen

- **Marking the 100th birthday of Major Ivan Hirst**
- **The man who turned a ruined armaments factory into a functioning car plant**

Wolfsburg, 1 March 2016 – His name is inextricably linked with the rise of Volkswagen to become Germany's largest car-maker, and yet he is not universally known: Major Ivan Hirst was responsible for Volkswagen as Senior Resident Officer of the British Military Government between August 1945 and April 1949. He laid the groundwork for the rapid growth of Volkswagenwerk GmbH in the era of Germany's Economic Miracle, or 'Wirtschaftswunder', and was instrumental in establishing Britain's role as a co-founder of the present-day automotive concern.

Ivan Hirst was born on March 1st, 1916 in Greenfield near Manchester. As the child of a business owner, he quickly became accustomed to breathing the oily air of his father's factory, which specialised in making precision mechanical equipment, including gauges and clocks. While studying optical engineering in Manchester, the young Ivan Hirst gathered experience which would play a major role in determining his future: He visited military training camps, and first came to Germany as part of a student exchange programme in the mid-1930s. On the outbreak of the Second World War, Hirst was commissioned as a Captain, and in 1940 was posted to France, where he became a battalion commander at the age of just 24. The establishment of the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), tasked with servicing the British Army's complex technical requirements, opened up new opportunities for the technically minded Ivan Hirst. From 1943 onwards, Hirst was commissioned as a Major in tank repair operations. He gathered valuable experience for his subsequent work in Wolfsburg in particular by setting up a large-scale REME workshop near Brussels.

Hirst did not hesitate when officers were called upon to volunteer for deployment with the British Military Government of Germany. His first mission in 1945 brought him to Wolfsburg, where trusteeship of the Volkswagen works had recently been handed over to the British by US troops following its allocation to the British occupation zone. With pragmatism, diligence and a gift for identifying what was essential, Major Hirst established a centralised REME repair workshop at the plant. The production order for 20,000 Volkswagen Saloons placed on August 22nd, 1945 enabled him to turn the ruined armaments factory into a functioning car plant. The start of production of the Saloon on December 27th, 1945 was the visible sign of a new beginning. Despite immense problems finding food and housing for the workforce, inadequate transport facilities and shortage of material supplies, the "Beetle" began rolling off the line.

Hirst improved the quality of the car, and built up a network of dealers and service centres. In November 1945 he demonstrated great faith in the Germans by giving instructions for the

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first election of an employee representation body known as the Works Council. Democracy and denazification were the watchwords. By the time the first cars were being exported to the Netherlands in 1947, Hirst had succeeded in establishing a flourishing business, for which a German manager was now sought. Heinrich Nordhoff, a former Opel manager, was the man the British found to steer the company through the post-war boom years following its transfer to German ownership in October 1949.

"Ivan Hirst was the right man at the right time in the right place," is how Dr. Manfred Grieger, Head of Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft's Corporate History Department, sums up the secret of the Major's success. "Thanks to his technical prowess and enthusiasm for cars, his improvisation skills, and not least his humanitarian yet ever professional approach in relation to the Germans, Hirst played a key role in ensuring that the factory founded by the National Socialists and initially scheduled by the British for dismantling was able to enjoy a new beginning." Ivan Hirst left Wolfsburg in August 1949 when his mission came to an end, and subsequently assumed other roles on behalf of the British Military Government. He died on March 9th, 2000. He is buried in Saddleworth cemetery, near to where he was born. Since the year of his death, the Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft Corporate History Department has annually awarded the Ivan Hirst Prize, named in his honour, to outstanding young scientists.

The key role played by the British and the work of Ivan Hirst during what was a crucial period for the modern-day Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft have since become more widely acknowledged, through the publication of a biography of Ivan Hirst and by celebration of the British-led era at the Volkswagen works. A visit to the plant in the Summer of 2013 by Major General Henderson, the senior representative of British Forces in Germany, together with a group of high-ranking German and British military officers, symbolised the close links between the company and its British co-founder.

So to mark what would have been his 100th birthday, Volkswagen is very pleased to say: "Thank you, Major Hirst!"

[Historical Notes 4 - Ivan Hirst / British Officer of Volkswagen's Postwar Recovery](#)

[Historical Notes 8 – Changing Lanes under British Command / The Transformation of Volkswagen from a Factory into a Commercial Enterprise, 1945 - 1949](#)

Note: Text and photos are available from www.volkswagen-media-services.com

Volkswagen Group Communications

Corporate History Department

Dr. Manfred Grieger

Phone: +49 (0) 5361 / 9-25667

Fax: +49 (0) 5361 / 9-76957

E-mail: manfred.grieger@volkswagen.de

www.volkswagen-media-services.com

www.volkswagenag.com

