

★ THE ALL-AMERICAN ★

JEEP



PHOTO: PHOTO/COLL-IBTECUSIB ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

This photograph shows Italian civilians in Messina, a city on the island of Sicily, giving flowers to US soldiers in August of 1943. The soldiers arrived in a Jeep, one of the most versatile vehicles the US armed forces had at their disposal during World War II. Created just before the war, the Jeep became a symbol of American design and manufacturing prowess.

LINDA McMAKEN

THE EDITORIAL CARTOONIST Bill Mauldin is famous for his World War II-era cartoons that examined the grit and resolve of the American soldier. One famous wartime piece depicted a grief-stricken GI covering his eyes while holding his service pistol to the hood of a battered and worn out Jeep, as if preparing to put down a faithful steed. The cartoon spoke to the bond that American troops in the Second World War had with their trusty Jeeps and echoed the relationship previous generations of cavalry troops had with their beloved horses.

The Birth of an Icon

In June of 1940, France surrendered to the invading Nazi armies after just six weeks of fighting. With the defeat of the French, whose armed forces were among Europe's best trained and armed, the US government realized that war with Germany was all but inevitable. As a part of the nation's preparations for war, Congress authorized a large increase in military spending, and the army quickly set about using these funds to modernize its equipment to meet the threat posed by the highly mechanized and mobile Nazi war machine.

At the time, the army had a number of vehicles at its disposal, including large trucks, which could transport troops but weren't highly maneuverable. A motorcycle offered maneuverability, but only carried one or two troops. During World War I, pack animals had been used for transporting equipment, but they were too slow for the age of fully mechanized warfare. The speed with which Germany's blitzkrieg tactics had overwhelmed the French army made clear that the US Army would need a versatile, light, yet rugged vehicle that could be used for reconnaissance or transporting small groups of soldiers and that had enough horsepower to carry military equipment where larger vehicles were unable to go.

One of the US Army Quartermaster Corps' first modernization projects involved a search for just such a vehicle, and the specifications the corps set for the design competition were demanding. The vehicle was to have a height of thirty-six inches, a maximum weight of around thirteen hundred pounds, and a carrying capacity of six hundred pounds, among other requirements.

In 1940, the quartermaster corps contacted more than 135 automobile producers and asked them to submit designs for the new vehicle. Despite the promise of a lucrative government contract, many manufacturers were not overeager to participate, and the lackluster response was likely because not only would the manufacturers need to meet the demanding design specifications, they would also need to work within strict time restraints. The terms of the quartermaster corps' request dictated that the winning company would have to turn in a working prototype within seventy-five days of the end of the competition and be able to deliver seventy prototypes for testing within forty-nine days of design acceptance.

One of the two companies that initially submitted proposals was a small automotive manufacturer located in Butler, Pennsylvania, called American Bantam. The company, which had been founded in 1929 as the American Austin Car Company, had experience producing lightweight sedans and roadsters that were similar to the type of vehicle that the quartermaster corps wanted. It was also in desperate need of a robust government contract. At the time of the design competition in 1940, the company was in dire straits and had already filed for bankruptcy. It could afford fewer than twenty full-time employees and did not even have an engineering department. If its design was not accepted by the quartermaster corps, the company was faced with the very real possibility that it would go out of business once and for all.



This small convertible was produced in 1939 by the American Austin Bantam automobile company. Experience producing light cars like this proved useful when the company began working on the design for the original Jeep.

With no formal engineering department, the design of the new vehicle was undertaken by American Bantam's president, Frank Fenn, and factory manager Harold Crist. Both men made significant contributions to the design of the vehicle, but many automotive historians credit a man named Karl Probst as the primary architect of American Bantam's design.

Probst had studied engineering at Ohio State University in the early twentieth century but left before completing his degree. He later worked as an automotive engineer throughout the 1920s and 1930s and was employed as a consultant for American Bantam when the company approached him to work on the quartermaster corps' vehicle. The company was too short of cash to pay him for his efforts but offered to pay him upon acceptance of the prototype. Probst was not interested in taking on a complicated design project for no pay, but he was allegedly inspired to take up the job after hearing Winston Churchill give a rousing speech on the radio.

After joining the American Bantam design team, Probst worked furiously to meet the tight deadline set by the army and completed the design in just a few days. Fortunately for American Bantam, only one other company—Willys-Overland, also a small operation in search of a much-needed contract—had submitted a proposal.

On July 25, 1940, the Quartermaster Corps accepted Probst's design and requested a prototype for testing. Overall, the vehicle fit the parameters set out for the competition, although the low weight specification would prove to be impossible to meet given the other requirements. Probst and Crist personally drove the prototype vehicle from the American Bantam headquarters in Pennsylvania to Camp Holabird in Maryland, where US Army test crews subjected it



PHOTO: BOB WISSALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Shown here is one of the Jeeps produced by American Bantam in 1940. Although American Bantam's design won the initial round of the US Army Quartermaster Corps' design competition for a rugged reconnaissance vehicle, the company ultimately only built around 2,600 vehicles, most of which were sent to Allied forces in the European theater of operations.

to a series of grueling challenges. Although the tests did eventually break the machine, it performed admirably. One of the officers involved in the testing at Camp Holabird, US Army Major Herbert J. Lawes, said of its performance: "I have driven every unit the services have purchased for the last twenty years. I can judge them in fifteen minutes. This vehicle is going to be absolutely outstanding. I believe this unit will make history." Following the prototype's successful trials at Camp Holabird, American Bantam set about making sixty-nine more units for further testing.

Although the army liked American Bantam's design, it was concerned that the small, financially insecure company did not have the resources to mass produce the vehicle to the necessary scale and wanted a backup plan. To ensure that its production needs would be met, the quartermaster corps decided to reopen bidding for the government contract to two manufacturers: Willys-Overland, the other company that had originally submitted a design, and Ford Motor Company, which had not responded to the initial call for designs but which the army approached now because of its proven ability to reliably mass produce vehicles. The army allowed the two new competitors to see American Bantam's prototype and study its design before submitting their own versions, an action that was permissible because the design belonged to the government, not American Bantam.

Willys-Overland quickly produced a prototype, called the Willys Quad, and Ford offered the Ford Pygmy as its pilot model. The army tested these two vehicles alongside the Bantam prototype, and all

PHOTO: EVRETT COLLECTION/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



This photograph from 1941 shows a team of soldiers getting airborne as they crest a hill in their Jeep. The Jeep's ability to tow equipment over rugged terrain made it invaluable to soldiers during wartime.

three manufacturers continued to refine their models and produce more prototypes. Each company produced more than one thousand vehicles for testing, and as the designs evolved, three models emerged: the Bantam BRC-40, the Willys MA, and the Ford GP.

Under the leadership of Willys-Overland's chief engineer, Delmar "Barney" Roos, Willys developed an engine, called the L134 "Go Devil," which gave the Willys MA more power than the American Bantam or Ford vehicles. This engine generated 105 pound-feet of torque, easily exceeding the eighty-five pound-feet requested by the quartermaster corps, and in tests, it ran for one hundred hours at four thousand RPM without failing. The Go-Devil also supplied enough power to allow the vehicle to climb a sixty-five-degree grade and gave it a carrying capacity of eight hundred pounds. Because of this new engine, the vehicle could also haul another one thousand pounds behind it via a trailer.

In the end, it was this engine that decided the contest. The army chose the Willys MA and gave Willys-Overland a contract to produce sixteen thousand vehicles by January 1942. However, the final design was modified to use the flat hood and flat, slotted grille of the Ford GP, and with these modifications, it became known as the Willys MB. The production contract went to Willys-Overland, but no one manufacturer can claim full credit for the design. Elements were taken from each of the American-Bantam, Willys-Overland, and Ford prototypes, and many of the design changes made throughout the extensive testing process can be credited to army engineers.

Under the Hood

The Willys MB had an official maximum speed of sixty-five miles per hour, although in test drives it had reached seventy-four miles per hour. The vehicle featured a three-speed manual transmission with overdrive, and Roos and his team gave it what they called a "Planadyne" suspension, which gave the vehicle its rugged ride, climbing ability, and formidable off-road capabilities. Its ground clearance was eight and three-quarter inches, and it had an eighty-inch

wheelbase, which meant that it could tilt up to fifty-five degrees without tipping over.

The army's official designation for the vehicle was the "Truck, ¼-Ton, 4 x 4, Command Reconnaissance," reflecting its payload capacity, four-wheel-drive capability, and intended mission. Of course, such a bland name would never do for such an iconic car, and very early on it picked up a number of appellatives. An article in *Popular Science* in May of 1941 refers to the vehicle as a "bug." Other early nicknames included blitz buggy, beep, puddle jumper, and iron pony. The vehicle's lasting name, however, comes from obscure origins.

Many sources contend, following popular lore, that the word jeep is derived from the sound of the initialism GP, which is short for "general purpose" and was used in the name of the Ford prototype. Another explanation that has been suggested notes that the word jeep appeared in a Popeye comic in the late 1930s in reference to Eugene the Jeep, a magical, four-dimensional being who helps Popeye and his friends in their adventures. A member of the US Army Quartermaster Corps, Major E. P. Hogan, claimed that jeep was "an old army grease monkey term that dates back to World War I and was used by shop mechanics in referring to any new motor vehicle received for a test." Some soldiers joked that jeep was an acronym for "just enough essential parts," reflecting the car's rough ride and utilitarian nature. Whatever its source, the name was popularized after a reporter for the *Washington Daily News* asked a Willys test driver what the vehicle was called. Repeating the name he had heard Camp Holabird soldiers use, the driver said, "It's a jeep," and the name stuck. During the war, Willys-Overland applied to copyright the brand name Jeep, and the first civilian Jeep brand vehicle was put on the market in 1945.

War Service

When Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, the need to get more vehicles into the field became dire. To facilitate production, the US Army Quartermaster Corps issued a second production

Old Faithful

ONE PARTICULAR JEEP, known as "Old Faithful," served for eighteen months in the US Marine Corps and saw action at beach landings in the Pacific theater of operations at Bougainville and Guadalcanal. At Guadalcanal, it is believed to have been the first Jeep to land on Lunga Point, where it was damaged by shrapnel from Japanese artillery fire. Many officers and military leaders had the privilege of riding in Old Faithful, including Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and US Navy Admirals Chester Nimitz and William F. Halsey.

After finishing its tour of duty, Old Faithful was awarded a ceremonial Purple Heart and rolled out on a war bond tour. The Jeep is now retired at the US Marine Corps Museum in Quantico, Virginia. After the war, military surplus Jeeps like Old Faithful were sold, and it is no surprise that many of the first people in line to buy them were former GIs. —LM

contract to Ford to manufacture the Jeep according to the Willys MB design. That way, there would be multiple factories producing the Jeep in case one was attacked by enemy saboteurs. When the vehicles were produced by Ford, they were known as the Ford GPW. Over the course of the war, Willys and Ford combined to produce more than 637,000 Jeeps. The two models were functionally identical, with only subtle differences in their appearances. For instance, at one time Ford's Jeeps had a nine-slot grille, while Willys-Overland used the familiar seven-slot grille still found on the Jeep today. American Bantam ultimately only produced around 2,600 of the vehicles during the war, and most of the Jeeps they built were sent to British and Russian forces under the terms of the Lend-Lease Act.

The Jeep's features made it well-suited to conditions encountered on a variety of battlefields. Its floor-mounted, push-button ignition meant that a soldier in the field didn't need to keep track of keys. The lack of doors also made it easy to get into and out of the vehicle quickly, especially under fire, and for a four-wheel-drive vehicle of its size, it was quite fuel efficient. With its standard spare gas can, the vehicle had an impressive range of nearly three hundred miles.

Despite being designed primarily as a reconnaissance vehicle, the Jeep proved to be formidable in combat as well and was capable of mounting a .30- or .50-caliber machine gun, antitank weapons, or rocket launchers behind the two front seats. The Allied armies used Jeeps in combat against German forces as well. For instance, David Stirling, founder of the British Special Air Service (SAS), which is an elite commando unit that still exists today, made extensive use of



This photograph from 1942 shows three soldiers on patrol in a Jeep that has been outfitted with a machine gun, one of the offensive weapons, including rocket launchers and anti-tank weapons, that the Jeep could mount.



PHOTO: WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



PHOTO: SHARROTSALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Top: Members of the US armed forces are shown driving a Jeep off a landing craft at a harbor near a port city in Morocco as a part of landing operations during the North African campaign. Above: Shown during a moment of shared levity late in the war, Supreme Allied Commander US Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower sits in the front passenger seat of a Jeep and smiles for the camera, while US Army General Omar Bradley covers his face and laughs in the back seat.

Jeeps in his raids against German forces in North Africa. A member of the SAS later recounted an attack the group made on a German airfield in northern Egypt near the port city of El Alamein, during which the commandos destroyed several airplanes. Following the successful attack, the SAS man said he and his fellow raiders took off in their Jeeps, "engines growling in low gear, like a pack of mechanized wolves."

Jeeps were indispensable in the European theater and were flown into the D Day landings in Normandy on gliders. The Jeep was also



PHOTO: PHOTOCOLLAGE/ISTOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

This photograph, taken in Normandy in the summer of 1944, shows a column of American soldiers, on foot and riding in Jeeps, pursuing retreating German soldiers.

Utilitarian Beauty



PHOTO: PATTI MCCOY/ILLUSTRATION/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ONLINE
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The Museum of Modern Art in New York City has nine automobiles that exemplify machine aesthetics as a part of its collections. The only American car in the collection is this Jeep, a post-war Willys model from 1953.

DWIGHT EISENHOWER called the Jeep one of the six machines that helped America win the Second World War, but its impressive functionality and versatility did not prevent it from having an aesthetic appeal. In fact, Italian luxury automaker Enzo Ferrari once said that the Jeep is “America’s only real sports car.” The Jeep’s utilitarian nature and go-anywhere rugged power, coupled with a visually striking appearance, make it a uniquely artistic piece of machinery.

In fact, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City thought so highly of the Jeep’s artistic merits that it put one on display in 1951. Today, MoMA has a 1953 Willys–Overland model Jeep in its permanent holdings. It is one of nine cars in the museum’s collections and is the only American vehicle in the group. In an exhibition from 2002, the museum praised it as “quintessentially a utilitarian vehicle” and a “cultural icon.” —*LM*

A Jeep Festival

AMERICAN BANTAM ultimately produced very few of the total number of Jeeps that were produced during World War II, and the company ceased to exist after it was absorbed by another company in the 1950s. Nonetheless, the company's hand in the vehicle's creation is still celebrated during the Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival, an annual event held at a campground near the company's erstwhile headquarters in Butler, Pennsylvania. Over the course of a weekend, visitors to the festival can learn about the history of the Jeep and American Bantam's involvement, shop for rare Jeep parts from dealers or other Jeep souvenirs, participate in trail rides and obstacle courses in their own Jeeps, and a variety of other events that celebrate the Jeep's history and the community of Jeep owners. —LM

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PHOTO: CHRONICLE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

This photo shows soldiers driving Jeeps that have been refitted with steel wheels so they can haul cargo on railroad tracks. One of the hallmarks of the Jeep was its incredible versatility in both combat and noncombat situations.

well-suited to combat in the Pacific theater of operations. Once, on the Japanese-held island of Saipan, the US Marines successfully attacked a hardened Japanese position with a fleet of Jeeps armed with rocket launchers. Jeeps weren't just combat vehicles, either. Over the course of the war, they were used in endlessly inventive ways. They served as improvised snowplows and bulldozers, laid cable during the construction of airfields, towed equipment and airplanes, and were fitted with steel wheels so they could drive along railroad tracks. Jeeps also served as battlefield ambulances with a back seat that could be converted in seconds to a stretcher.

Soldiers found that the Jeep had a number of other noncombat uses as well. The flat hood provided chaplains with altars upon which they could hold services or platforms from which officers could address their troops. US Army General Maxwell Taylor, commanding officer of the 101st Airborne Division, used his Jeep's hood in just such a manner to welcome reinforcements to his unit. Rations were often heated on a Jeep's manifold, and soldiers could drain a bit of warm radiator water to shave. British Field Marshal Sir John Dill once said of the Jeep: "It can do everything but bake a cake."

From periods of turmoil and chaos emerge icons. Such is the case for the Jeep, whose all-American bona fides were forged at a time when the country was facing some of its darkest hours. From the arid deserts of North Africa to the humid jungles of the Pacific, from the beaches of Normandy to the freezing steppes of the eastern front, the Jeep went everywhere that Allied soldiers fought. Born to meet the army's changing needs on the eve of conflict, the humble Jeep did no less than help the Allies win World War II. It proved to be a remarkably versatile vehicle with a rugged and durable nature that made it an indispensable part of the American war effort. The history of the Jeep's origins and war service makes it a potent symbol of American ingenuity and industrial prowess. ■