

HISTORY OF SPECIAL INVESTIGATION BRANCH

Corps of Royal Military Police

(1945 - 1950)

VOLKSWAGEN and the SIB

The post-war history of the Volkswagen, and its incredible World-wide success, is solely due to the faith, belief and perseverance of five men. Four of them were soldiers in the British Army and the fifth, a talented German motor engineer, who turned the dream into a reality.

They are, Colonel C.R. RADCLYFFE, Royal Engineers., Major Ivan HIRST, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers., RSM Jack BURTON BEM, Special Investigation Branch, ROYAL MILITARY POLICE., Professor Heinrich NORDOFF, the German motor engineer who took charge of the company in 1949, and an unknown Royal Engineer bomb disposal officer. But lets start at the very beginning.

Dr Ferdinand Porsche, an accomplished Austrian motor engineer, designed a small four seater car in the early 1930s, with a flat four horizontal opposed, air cooled engine, thinking he could get one of the large German Motor Manufacturers to build the car. Unfortunately they were only interested in building large 6 cylinder engined cars and Dr Porsche had to shelve his ideas. At the 1934, Berlin Motor show he meet the new German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, and showed him his small car designs. Hitler, who today we would call a petrol-head, although he never learnt to drive any vehicle, invited Porsche to Berlin and after a few days discussion he announced to the World that the new German State was to build a 'Peoples Car' - *VOLKSWAGEN* – which every family in Germany would be allowed to buy and own through a state run finance scheme. He would build good roads across Germany for the German people to use and the concept got off to a great start. By 1936, the roads across Germany were being built and the first one connecting Berlin with the Ruhr, closely by-passing the market garden town of Hannover, was completed within nine months. Unfortunately, like many of Hitlers great ideas building the factory to make the cars was proving to be much more difficult than building the roads. None of the German Car Companies were keen to get involved, although hundreds of German workers had started paying for their cars through a state run finance scheme. The cost of the car was 990 Reichmarks, about £100, which many believed was a subsidised price, as it was estimated that the price per unit to build the vehicle was about 1000 Reichmarks. On average each worker had 22 Reichmarks per month stopped from their pay. Eventually, in May 1938, building the new car factory actually started.

The site chosen was just about as remote as one could find in Germany, 300 acres of mosquito-infested swamp near the Schloss Wolfsburg, the fourteenth century castle owned by Count Werner Von Der Schulenburg. Years later it was revealed that the Count had actually given the land to the Nazis in return for his being promoted a General in the Wehrmacht. The only good thing about the area was that the Mittelland Canal flowed close by, connecting Southern Germany with the Baltic sea ports in the north. Labour to build the cars would also prove to be a huge problem. There were no towns in the area, so Hitlers Architect – Peter Koller, designed a completely new town, which we know today as Wolfsburg, although at the end of the war the town still had no name. German construction workers were busy building Germany's western defence line, facing the French Maginot line, so unemployed Italian construction workers were shipped in to build the new car plant. About 30 prototypes of the new Volkswagen car were made at Stuttgart, at enormous cost and were tested to destruction by a German Army motor unit, so by the time the factory was ready to start production, every part on the new Volkswagen, the suspension, the air-cooled engine, the streamline body, seats and electrics had all been modified and well tested.

In August 1939, the very first Wolfsburg built cars rolled off the one mile long production line. In fact 210 cars were built before the outbreak of the second World War, when on the 8th September 1939, production of the Volkswagen car ceased and production of vehicles such as the four-wheeled drive Kubelwagen and the amphibious Schwimmkubel commenced. During the next four years the Volkswagen works was used to manufacture everything from parts for tanks, mine cases, aeroplane bodies, wings and engines and in the later years the body of the V.1 – the flying bomb, and V2 – the faster than sound rocket weapon. Because the town and car plant had never been included on any pre-war maps, it wasn't until June 1943 that the tall furnace chimney was spotted by RAF plotters examining photo-reconnaissance pictures and Bomber Command were alerted. The first bombing raids did very little damage and production continued. The large daylight bombing raids towards the end of 1943 and early 1944, caused a lot of damage and production eventually stopped during the last days of the war.

The Russian Army were the first across the Mittelland Canal but did not realise they had found a large car factory. The mosquitoes did what the German Army could not, and the Russians beat a quick retreat. The Americans were the next visitors but they too could not stand the mosquitoes. Colonel Radclyffe was looking for a decent repair workshop and sent in Major Ivan Hirst, a pre-war car man with a unit of REME engineers to sort the place out. Within hours of arriving, Major Hirst realised what he had walked into and the potential that existed. Firstly, they started clearing the debris from the generating plant building and discovered that the debris had been put there to disguise the fact that the furnaces and generating plant were still intact. It was at this point they discovered an unexploded bomb. The bomb was lodged in a very difficult place, between the tall chimney and the generator building. A bomb disposal team were called and took three days to remove it. Had this bomb exploded on impact, its doubtful whether there ever would have been a Volkswagen car today.

Word soon spread locally that the British were about to start up car production again and Major Hirst was inundated with displaced person, who were looking for work. Most were hungry, dirty and in some cases very ill. He set up a medical team to examine each worker they employed, arranged for them to be fed and housed, then set them to work clearing and cleaning the production halls. Within days people started to return parts of the plant that they had hidden before the Russian Army arrived. Major Hirst and his team were told where complete cars were hidden, engines, wheels and hundreds of spare parts. A large warehouse was discovered in nearby Brunswick containing about one hundred brand new Schwimmkubels, together with a large number of new engines. The Schwimmkubel was an interesting vehicle. It was designed around the Volkswagen, same suspension and engine but with a take off drive from the prop shaft to run a propeller at the rear and an exhaust fitted high at the back. The body was a watertight, open four seater with a large plate around the front and sides, that prevented the bow wave from entering the car. I have driven a Schwimmkubel off the quayside at Wolfsburg into the Mittelland Canal at about 20mph and not a drop of water entered the vehicle. The German Army used them in the east when fighting the Russian Army so that troops could cross rivers and canals where bridges had been blown up by the retreating Russians.

By the first week of August 1945, Major Hirst and his team had built their first new Volkswagens and sprayed two in British Army khaki green with the new BOAR flash painted on the right front mudguard. He took them to Rhine Army HQ at Bielefeld and told Senior Officers that if he was allowed to start production, so the cars could be used by the British Army, it would save much needed money buying Jeeps from the Americans. In fact the British Army had come to know and respect the German Kubelwagen in North Africa, where it out performed the American Jeep, was far more economical and its air-cooled engine would start on the hottest of days, never overheating.

He returned to Wolfsburg with an order for 250 units.

Production then started in earnest and a Wing Commander Richard Berryman OBE, was sent to join Major Hirst to help locate raw materials. One of the biggest problem was tyres. The Dunlop factory in Hannover was found to have a large stock of synthetic rubber compound and a specialist team of REME engineers went from the UK to Hannover, cleaned up the factory and set about producing the tyres Major Hirst wanted. Wing Commander Berrymman found a source in Switzerland willing to supply glass windscreens and windows together with other parts in exchange for new cars and a barter deal was set up with Colonel Radclyffe`s approval. Within ten weeks the British Army had 250 new Volkswagens, replacing many war-worn Jeeps and other small cars. Major Hirst was told to continue production of cars for the use of the British Army, and the British Control Commission ordered 300 new Volkswagens which they considered ideal for the newly started Germany Postal Service. The War Reparations Board sent a new Volkswagen in civilian colour black to England to show to the British car manufacturers, in the hope that one of them would see the potential and take control of the factory. A British Car Commission visited Wolfsburg headed by Lord Rootes. When he saw the tarpaulin covered roof, bomb damaged walls and the fact that production stopped on days when there was heavy rain, he was appalled and told Major Hirst he was making a `white elephant`. Worse still, on his return to the UK a few days later, he wrote a letter to the British Government, telling them that the vehicle did not meet the fundamental technical requirements of a British built motor car, it was ugly, bizarre, noisy and would be commercially a complete uneconomic enterprise. He suggested that the factory should be closed down and the buildings raised to the ground.

The War Reparations Board offered the factory to the Americans but they turned it down. Even the French Government, who were offered the factory for free, turned it down, saying that the vehicle would always be tarnished with the Nazi image. Major Hirst continued producing cars for the British Military and a few to other occupation forces, including the British Control Commission, but as raw materials became harder to find in Germany, so more cars went through the barter system, mostly to Swiss dealers. The Americans in the South of Germany refused to allow car manufacturers in their zone of occupation, Daimler-Benz – now known as Mercedes, Auto Union, now known as Audi, or the Opel car company, now part of General Motors, to resume production, believing that all German business should be suppressed for at least five years.

In October 1946, Major Hirst issued a report that after one year the British Army had produced its ten thousandth Volkswagen car using 400 civilian workers, mostly re-trained displaced persons and 46 REME personnel, 30 of them Sergeant instructors who had trained the work force and were now the production line managers. It was an achievement unsurpassed in the history of REME. Unfortunately, the Americans did not share his enthusiasm. One American writer called it a – *pathetic celebration* – when most of Europe was starving, the British Army were building civilian motor cars.

Reports then started to appear in the American press that a huge Black Market in cars was being run by the British Army at Wolfsburg and many new Volkswagen cars in civilian colours could be purchased in neutral Switzerland. This was in fact quite true, civilian coloured Volkswagens were available to Swiss buyers. The black market stories reached London and in the spring of 1947, two London newspapers carried articles about the British Armies involvement in this black market in Volkswagen cars, now stretching across the whole of Europe. The British Government panicked and tried to reorganise the Management at Wolfsburg by appointing an industrial lawyer from Berlin – Dr. Herman Munch to take charge of Volkswagen. Unfortunately, there was no Volkswagen company at Wolfsburg to take charge of, the employees were all working for the

British Army through the PCLU – Pioneer Corp Labour Unit and Major Hirst refused to take orders from Dr. Munch, although he provide him with an office and access to the factory. The Army Chief of Staff in London was asked to look into the matter and the Special Investigation Branch of the Royal Military Police was instructed to investigate.

RSM Jack Burton BEM, the most senior investigator in Germany, with 70 Section SIB RMP, based in Hannover, together with Sergeant John Morris SIB and an interpreter Sergeant Sanders set up Brunswick detachment 70 SIS , and were given two weeks to submit a preliminary report. It was an enormous task to complete in two weeks by just two investigators and RSM Burton was eventually given more time. They took statements from all the senior REME staff and inspected the production and account books under the control of a REME Adjutant and four Army clerks. Many of the first civilian workers were interviewed and there antecedent history recorded, including there time and treatment under the Nazis. British Military units who had received vehicles in BOAR were visited and there records checked and recorded. Six weeks later, RSM. Burton submitted his report to the Provost Marshal SIB in BAOR. Lt Col. Elliott. His deputy, Major Dawson, went to Wolfsburg for three days to verify RSM Burton`s conclusions, and then took the report to London.

He returned three days later with a big smile on his face. There was no black market in cars at Wolfsburg. The British Army were exonerated. Major Hirst`s bookwork was faultless. Every item found from the very first day he walked into the factory had been recorded. Every car made had been numbered and issued with registration documents. Every deal done with Swiss dealers had been recorded and currency balances worked out correctly. Every item supplied by the British Army, whether it be coal from the Ruhr or nuts and bolts from supply sources, paint etc, had been credited correctly. Every employee had been medically examined by Military doctors before being passed fit for work. All were issued with passes to allow them access to the production line halls. All were issued with overalls and footwear and every worker received one hot meal every day as part of their contract. A medical centre had been set up together with proper training courses on every aspect of production. Housing for nearly all the workers had been found or re-built in the town of Wolfsburg and all the properties had been correctly recorded as being used by the British Army. The factory was being run on Military lines and probable better than any comparable car factory in the UK. RSM Burton also pointed out how the barter system of trading was as old as the hills. It was not illegal under international law, as had been alleged in some of the news reports, and many countries around the world still used this system of trading. He urged the authorities to allow Major Hirst to continue making the vehicles as he saw fit, until World currencies had been re-established and a proper banking system returned in Germany. London agreed, with one stipulation. They required a monthly report from RSM Burton, until the factory was either sold or given back to the German Nation.

I was the Chief Clerk at 70 Section SIB at the time and RSM Burton asked me to help him with his reports, as they had been unable to find a suitable typist. He was having to spend at least four or five days each month at Wolfsburg, and with the continuing problems at Helmstedt caused mostly by the Russian Border Guards, he was having to work seven days a week. Wolfsburg was only twelve miles from the Russian border and all the unrest was taking its toll on the moral of the workforce who feared a Russian invasion. Production at the factory suffered and many feared the end of Volkswagen was only a matter of time. When the Berlin Air Lift started in June 1948, added pressure caused further problems, although orders for British Army Volkswagens increased. It was the ideal vehicle for use in the British sector in Berlin and many were issued to German civilians responsible for maintaining power, the telephones and other essential supplies.

In the Autumn of 1948, at the height of the unrest, Major Hirst became so worried about the moral amongst the factory workforce that he offered to resign his commission, register the company in Germany as a fully fledged Germany Organization, retain the civilian staff and many of his Army supervisors, providing he could take over the factory and the obligations to re-build the town of Wolfsburg, on the same terms that were being offered to foreign company's. The British Government ignored his request.

At about this time Heinz Nordoff, the German car engineer, was living in the British Zone and was looking for work. He went to Wolfsburg to speak to Major Hirst and offered his services. Major Hirst was aware of the German engineers pre-war successes, particularly when he was part of the management team at Daimler-Benz, racing cars around Europe. He was introduced to Dr. Munch, who took him to London and suggested to the British Government that being a car man, he would be a natural successor to Major Hirst, and the right person to eventually take control of the company so that it could be handed back to the German nation.

Thus in May 1949 – VOLKSWAGENWERK AG was formed, although the Town of Wolfsburg and the Volkswagen factory were not officially handed back to the German Nation until the 8th October 1949. Major Hirst and REME continued to produce cars for the British Army for another two years until finally at the end of 1951, Major Hirst was demobbed and returned to civilian life in England. RSM Jack Burton BEM, was demobbed in the Autumn of 1952, and he also returned to England.

Today, Volkswagen cars and vans are marketed in nearly every country on earth, thanks to the expertise and talent of five British Soldiers, one German car engineer and hundreds of displaced persons who found a new life in a remote part of West Germany.

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