



JEEP

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

U.S. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall said the Jeep was “America’s greatest contribution to modern warfare.”

“It did everything. It went everywhere,” wrote WWII reporter Ernie Pyle. “It was as faithful as a dog, as strong as a mule, and as agile as a goat. It constantly carried twice what it was designed for and still kept going.”

The first Jeep rolled off the production line on Aug. 1, 1941 — 85 years ago.

THE BIRTH OF THE GPW JEEP

With another world war brewing in Europe, the U.S. Army had needs — needs for which it wisely decided to begin meeting before the actual need arose.

One of those needs was for a general purpose quarter-ton “lightweight “reconnaissance vehicle” that would have four-wheel drive and could carry a light machine gun mounted in the back. And the Army needed it right away.

The request was sent out to 135 automakers in June 1940. Only three responded: Ford, Bantam and the

Willys-Overland Motors. Willys delivered its two prototype “Quad” vehicles — named that because of its four-wheel drive — on Armistice Day: just 75 days after the Army’s request.

The Army tested the prototypes from all three manufacturers and requested a number of changes. It awarded Willys a contract in July 1941 for 16,000 vehicles at a cost of \$738.74 each: \$16,841.41 in 2026 dollars.

Willys worked hard to keep the weight of what its “Quad” — which it now called the MB — under the Army’s requirement of 2,160 pounds.

It shortened nuts and bolts and produced thinner, lighter panels, single-piece wheels and rounded door cutouts. It also adopted the bodywork configuration from the Ford Pygmy prototype, including the seven-slot Jeep grille that is so familiar now.

The result was a 60 horsepower vehicle with a three-speed transmission and tires just six inches wide. The Jeep could go 65 mph and had a range of 285 miles on 15 gallons of gas.

It was easy to service and nearly impossible to get stuck, with the ability to ford streams or flooded

areas up to 40 inches deep.

Most of the Willys MBs were sent to Allies in England and the Soviet Union as part of President Roosevelt’s “Lend-Lease” program. By the fall of 1941, it was clear Willys couldn’t keep up with the demand for Jeeps, so the Army awarded a second contract — to Ford to build the new-and-improved GPW: “General-Purpose Willys.”

Ford, in fact, shut down all its production lines to build GPWs, military trucks, tanks, aircraft engines and gliders for the war effort.

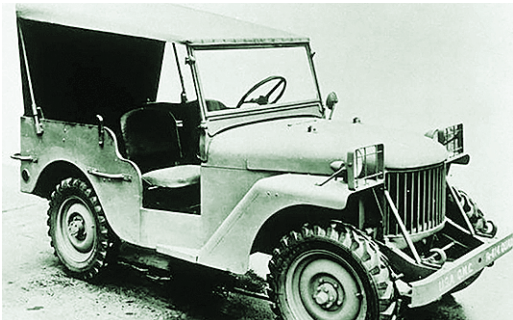
THE JEEP IN WORLD WAR II

Bantam had bought the assets of the bankrupt American Austin Car Company, the only U.S. maker of small cars at the time. It began working on an automobile for the Army in 1938, but Bantam’s engines could muster only 22 horsepower. The Army ordered 70 of its Mk. II/BRC-60 vehicles before moving on to the Willys “Quad.”



U.S. ARMY

The Willys “Quad” prototype, at right, was favored because of its powerful engine, which Willys was able to boost to 60 horsepower from its original 40 hp. Ford’s Pygmy prototype used a tractor engine, but Ford was able to get only 40 hp from it. The Army did like Ford’s integrated body styling, its front grille and the piano-style hinges for its motor compartment.



U.S. ARMY

The Jeep was used by every branch of the U.S. military, with an average of 145 assigned to each infantry regiment. The term “Jeep” had been around for years: it was Army slang for anything that was insignificant, awkward, or silly. “Jeep” meant foolish. Historians are unclear how this term came to apply to the much-loved utility vehicle.



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The Jeep’s power and durability gave it the ability to be used in all sorts of ways. Flying Jeep photos like this one inspired promotional posters and the nickname “Leaping Lena.” Jeeps became the American GI’s best friend, second only to his rifle, Jeep says today. One Jeep MB was even awarded a Purple Heart and sent home during World War II.

Ford also built an amphibious version of the GPW it called the GPA “Seep.” It wasn’t as successful as the larger, 2½-ton DUKW amphibious truck — it was slower on land than a standard Jeep and had a low freeboard in the water. Ford built 12,781 “Seeps” between 1941 and 1942. More than a third of them were shipped to the Soviet Union.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs that “(the) equipment ... among the most vital to our success in Africa and Europe were the bulldozer, the Jeep, the 2½ ton truck and the C-47 airplane. Curiously enough, none of these is designed for combat.” At left, Eisenhower tours newly liberated Normandy after the 1944 D-Day invasion.

MANUFACTURING JEEPS DURING THE WAR

Fifteen percent of all military vehicles produced during World War II were Jeeps. They were used extensively in both the European and Pacific theaters and were even carried into action on D-Day in gliders. Nazi generals admired the Jeep and were known to commandeer captured Allied Jeeps for their personal use.

1940
75
(PROTOTYPES)

1941
8,614

1942
120,000

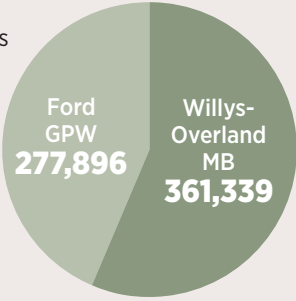
1943
210,000

1944
180,000

1945
130,000

The Military enforced strict rules to ensure parts could be interchanged between Jeeps built by Willys and Jeeps built by Ford. This included ordering Ford to stop stamping its logo into tailgates and other pieces of sheet metal.

Number of Jeeps manufactured between 1941 and 1945



Sources: Jeep, the Studebaker National Museum, National Museum of the United States Air Force, Military.com, MilitaryVehicle.org, War History Online