

Ford Universal Carrier

By **George Mele**, #10010, *Crownsville, Maryland*

Fifty-eight years ago in the summer of 1944, a young British army private assigned to a Vickers machine gun platoon drove his Ford universal carrier ashore on a Normandy beach. He drove and fought for the next year through Normandy, northern France, and into the Low Countries. By the end of the war he had logged over 4,000 miles behind the wheel of that carrier which, he related “was so bloody worn out that it burned more oil than petrol.” Both he and the carrier miraculously survived without serious injury save for an incident in Holland where the carrier threw a track while traversing a roadway on a dike and nearly tumbled down a twenty-foot embankment into the water.

Private Ronald E.G. Davies had joined the British Territorial Army, roughly the equivalent of our National Guard, in 1939 expecting only some short-term service and a bit of excitement. As the war began, he was mobilized into permanent service and served in the invasion and occupation of Iceland and then trained in Scotland and northern England for the cross-channel invasion. Ron very modestly talks of his *undistinguished* service and is proud of the fact that he managed to complete six years of service beginning and ending service as a private soldier without promotion.

Today, Ron Davies (a sprightly 82 year old), remains active as a curator with the Smithsonian Institution Air and Space Museum as an expert in post-war transport aircraft. He is also a noted publisher of aviation books with over 20 titles to his credit and has appeared on numerous *History Channel* and *Discovery Channel* documentaries discussing aviation-related subjects.

I first met Ron several years ago at an open house at Allan Cors’ Virginia Military Vehicle Museum in Nokesville, Virginia. Bill Wilson and I were taking photos and measurements of the universal (Bren gun) carrier displayed at the museum to assist in the restoration of Bill’s carrier. After a few minutes conversation, Ron related to us some of his experiences with similar carriers in World War II. Bill extended an invitation to come see his carrier when restoration was complete.



Bill Wilson’s restored 1943 Ford of Canada Universal Carrier No. 1, MK II presents some color controversy. It is a semi-lustre olive, recreated by a computer that matched the factory original paint found on underside of engine covers. The serial number is George Mele’s birthdate, the range however is correct for the vehicle’s age. The carrier was named ‘Frankenstein’ because it was completed with many diverse parts and has come back ‘from the dead.’



Ron Davies gets assistance from Rose Wilson as he proceeds to get in to the driver's seat of the Bren gun carrier and looks extremely pleased once settled in,



Finally, last fall, the carrier was finished. I phoned Ron to invite him to see and drive the carrier, and to give a short address to the members of the Washington Area Collectors/Blue-Gray Military Vehicle Trust (WAC/BGMVT) at their annual picnic. Bill and Rose Wilson graciously hosted this gathering of over 100 members and guests at their beautiful fifty-acre farm in the suburban countryside near Annapolis, Maryland. Members were invited to bring their vehicles to display or drive through the fields and trails.

Ron accepted the invitation and presented an interesting and informative account of his days as a soldier and carrier driver and some of his experiences in Normandy and Holland. He proceeded to the carrier, eager to see if his driving skills remained after the passing of 57 years. After a short orientation by Bill Wilson on the controls and starting procedures, Ron eased himself into the driver's seat and began to run the carrier at top speed

through the hayfield. He then demonstrated spinning the carrier in its own length and took club members and guests for rides through the farm.

Bill then cranked up his finely restored 1945 Ford M20 armored car - twice MVPA National Best-in-Class and also provided demonstration rides. He was quickly followed by Phil Ulzheimer who gave club members thrilling rides on his beautiful and fine-running NSU Kettenkrad tracked motorcycle, also an MVPA National Best-in-Class vehicle. After about 45 minutes of driving the carrier stopped running - victim of fuel problems caused by MTBE reformulated gasoline causing rapid corrosion and sedimentation. However, it was readily apparent that Ron had maintained his mastery of the universal carrier and had a fun time demonstrating those skills.



Rose Wilson in gunner's seat, while Ron Davies starts the engine



...and away they go heading towards a hayfield!

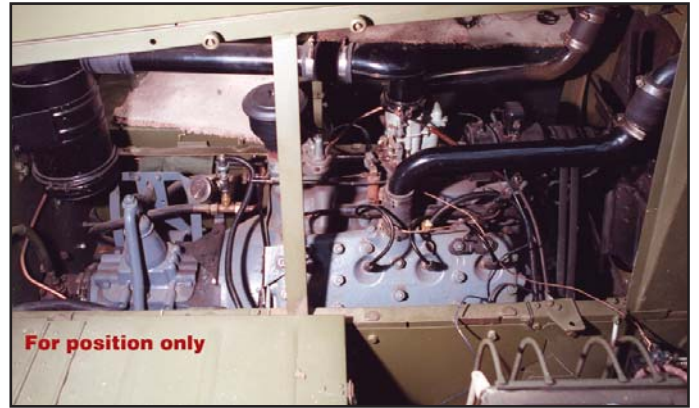


Bill Wilson and Ron Davies discuss WW II helmets.

Bill Shady Wilson is a retired Annapolis businessman with 45 years experience in auto body and frame repair. Several years ago he retired to his farm to pursue his varied interests. These include building and running a restored hundred-year-old sawmill, restoring a wide variety of military and farm machinery, and maintaining his family farm in beautiful condition. Bill has restored numerous vintage vehicles and presently owns a 1965 Mustang convertible, a Morris Minor convertible, a 1936 Chevy business coupe, a dune buggy, and the two award-winning military vehicles.

Bill found the universal carrier at a farm auction in Pennsylvania. Stripped of superstructure and controls, it was used as a log skidder to bring timber out of heavy woods. A true basket case, this rusty hulk with broken tracks, damaged bogey wheels and many missing parts presented a true challenge to even an experienced professional like Bill. Assistance was provided by Brian Asbury of Canada, who provided numerous key parts, manuals, and technical advice and assistance. Over 3,000 hours of effort was expended over a three-year period in restoring the 1943 Windsor, Ontario-produced Ford Number 1 Mark II universal carrier to factory-new condition.

While Bill performed much of the skilled labor, a group of retired *assistants* helped with the grinding, scraping, sandblasting, and assembly tasks. A carrier is an extremely difficult and complex vehicle to restore. For example, each track assembly consists of over 500 separate pieces and requires 150 precision welds to complete. Restoration tools and techniques ran the gamut from the latest CAD-driven laser cutters to duplicate the superstructure to extensive bashing with 8-pound sledge hammers to fit and assemble the armor and rivets and to hammer peen track pins. Restoration data was obtained from several museums in the U.S. and Canada and via the internet to tap overseas sources of information.



The original Ford 85 hp engine. Note the installed #19 wireless set in foreground. The oil filter has since been added.

The now, fully-restored carrier, carries the markings and on-board equipment of a British Third Infantry Division vehicle as landed on Sword Beach during the D-day invasion. Its original Ford 85 hp flathead V8 runs very strong and

propels the 4-ton vehicle up to about 35 mph. It has garnered several awards including five awards at the 2000 Aberdeen East Coast Show including Best in Show and and last summer won Best-in-Class for restored foreign vehicles at the MVPA National Convention at Fort Lee, Virginia.



Anti aircraft mount and Enfield grenade launcher in mount.



The 'over the hill gang' restoration crew – together put 3,000 man hours into the carrier. (L to R) Hugh Williams, Bill Wilson, Sr. #7486, George Mele #10010, and Lou Stone.