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"ST. LO SPECIAL"



St. Lo Special LITAGOC
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YOUNG, M.

Winter Weasel

David Bentley couldn't wait to try his newly-bought M29 Studebaker Weasel out when snow fell on the Pennines

These days, the chances are that, every time you stop at the temporary traffic lights by some roadworks, there will be a mini digger on tracks: the machines have become ubiquitous among the paraphernalia of highway maintenance. It wasn't always this way of course, someone had to invent them and, like so many aspects of technology, it was World War Two that provided the catalyst to push things forward.

Tracked vehicles were still in their infancy between the wars as conversions like the Kegresse system was experimented with, and tested by, various armies. Things progressed quickly and by the time World War Two was underway the German and US Armies made widespread use of full and half-track technology.

The advantages of tracks for operation in difficult conditions like those low ground pressure exerted, were well known and experiments took place to develop smaller tracked vehicles; German NSU developed the Kleines Kettenkraftrad, generally referred to as the Kettenkraftrad, and American Studebaker produced the M28/29 Weasel cargo carrier.

Development of the Weasel began in 1942, in order to meet a requirement by the First Special Services Force for a proposed operation in Norway targetting power plants and establishments where the German atomic weapons development was being carried out.

The 1st Special Service Force was an elite American-Canadian commando unit in World War Two under the command of the United States Fifth Army which was formed in 1942 and trained at Fort William Henry Harrison near Helena, Montana.

The unit served in the Aleutian Islands and fought in Italy and southern France before being disbanded in December 1944. For the proposed operation the 1st Special Service Force needed vehicles that could cross snow and tow ski troops. The idea for the Weasel came from the work of eccentric British inventor Geoffrey Pyke - who was known for clever, but unor-

'St Lo Special' is the name of a Weasel in a famous wartime photograph reproduced here
INSET: The 'St Lo Special,' an M29 Weasel of Charlie Company of the 121st Engineer Combat Battalion of the 29th 'blue and grey' US Infantry Division in Normandy
(CONSEIL RÉGIONAL DE BASSE-NORMANDIE/NATIONAL ARCHIVES USA)



SPECIFICATIONS

Make **Studebaker**
Type **Cargo Carrier**
Model **M29 Weasel**
Nationality **USA**
Year **1943**
Production Run **1943-1945**
Engine **Studebaker**
Type **6-170 Champion**
Fuel **Petrol**
Displacement **2,779cc** (169.6 cid)
Power **65bhp @ 3600rpm**
Torque **125lbs/ft @ 1,600 rpm**
Transmission **Manual**
Gears **3F, 1R, two-speed transfer box**
Suspension **Transverse leaf spring**
Crew/seats **Two/four**
Armament **n/a**
Armour **n/a**

Dimensions(overall)
Length **3194mm** (10ft 5.75in)
Width **1524mm** (5ft)
Weight **2,460kg** (5,425lbs)
Vertical obstacle **610mm** (24in)
Trench **914mm** (36in)
Approach Angle **90°**
Departure Angle **60°**

ABOVE: *The Pennines double as Bastogne in '44*
MAIN IMAGE: *The M29 Weasel makes light work of the snow-covered track*



'The idea for the Weasel came from the work of eccentric British inventor Geoffrey Pyke'



Although the Weasel might have the edge in deep mud and snow, the MB/GPW's off-road ability is legendary

thodox, ideas - when he proposed a fast and light mechanised machine. Its specifications included the ability to move quickly and easily through snows, be air portable, be able to be dropped by parachute and carry a cargo.

Ultimately the Norwegian operation was cancelled but the Studebaker Company accepted the challenge of designing the versatile new vehicle. In fewer than 60 days they had a prototype, which, after testing and improvements, was standardised as the M28 Cargo Carrier. The M28 Weasel had two seats, rear-mounted engine and driven front axle with sprockets for the tracks which ran on four pairs of track rollers. Soon afterwards a revised version was developed and standardised in November 1943, as the M29. A four-seater, it had the engine offset at the front

right and a driven rear axle. Its tracks sloped downwards to the front over eight sets of track rollers on improved suspension that comprised transverse leaf springs. A third and final version of the Weasel was the M29C, an amphibious version that added watertight cells for buoyancy and twin rudders at the stern, of which more than 10,600 were made.

The M29 Weasel proved to be a versatile vehicle that could be used for command, radio, ambulance, signal line laying roles and transporting cargo in difficult terrain such as snow

but also sand and deep mud. As a result it was used in Europe, the Pacific and Alaska and, by VJ Day in August 1945, in excess of 15,000 had been built.

In Europe for example, Weasels were used to resupply frontline troops in difficult conditions when wheeled vehicles were immobilised such as during the Battle of the Bulge and the fighting in the Hurtgen Forest. During the decades after the war, some Weasels remained in US Army hands and saw service in Korea, while war surplus Weasels became popular because of their off-road ability and were used by the organisers of the 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley, California and in support of Edmund Hillary's South Pole Expedition.

After reading about rubber tracks for Weasels on the website of the Dutch MV specialists, Staman International Trading, US military vehicle enthusiast, Dave Bentley saw one advertised and bought it almost on impulse.

The seller was





'The Studebaker Company accepted the challenge of designing the versatile new vehicle'

Degsy, a well known and long-standing military vehicle enthusiast from North Wales and before long, back home near Oldham, David was taking his H-licence so he could use it on the road legally when required.

Having been restored, the Weasel didn't need much work at all. David cleaned out the radiator as a precaution and changed the head gasket.

He discovered that the gearbox, a three-speed unit coupled to a two-speed transfer box developed an oil leak under load but he was able to cure this with some online advice from other Weasel owners. Rubber tracks were no problem for the machine but when it came to getting some of the track rollers overhauled, a solution was closer to home.

David discovered that Reliant Rubber Engineers Ltd was just over the Pennines in Batley, West Yorkshire and that it made rubber tyres for traction engines, tanks and the like. When he took some track rollers to be re-tyred, the company was working on



ABOVE RIGHT: David Bentley in the offset driving seat of the M29
TOP: The frozen snow on the incline could be a challenge to vehicles but these two coped
BELOW: The bleak midwinter livened up by a pair of classic military machines



a set for a Panther tank for a customer in Australia so the small Weasel ones weren't a problem at all. Interestingly, the rubber which to be replaced, although very worn, still bore BF Goodrich's trademark and dates that included October, November and December 1944.

Knowing that the Weasel was designed for use in snow conditions, David didn't hesitate to get his newly-bought M29 Weasel out when it snowed in the Pennines last month.

He rounded up his friend and a few fellow kitted-up, MV enthusiasts including Roger Brereton with his camera, and went out on some snow covered Pennine lanes. On being asked how it worked and handled, David just grinned from ear to ear before saying: "It was great but a really cold day".

Roger confirmed this, saying that: "I was shivering so much I found it difficult to hold the camera still enough to take the pictures."

It's amazing how much fun you can have at just 36mph! ◀