

Crosley Wartime Project Revealed

by Peter Blackford

Nearly sixty years ago this week, little-known Crosley engineer George Looflirpa was approached by a representative of the Bulgarian government with a special request.

While unsure as to the future involvement of their government in World War II, there was a good chance that additional field cars would be needed by both their intelligence and top military officers. Since funds were limited, Crosley had been identified (with the help of U.S. General Thomas E. Swift) as a likely contractor for the project.

The requirements for the vehicle seemed simple enough: In keeping with the current government position, it must have a low profile, be low in cost, economical to operate, and be able to turn on a dime (or was that a Kopeck?). Seating capacity for four would be adequate, although six was preferred.

Rising to the challenge, George knew that several of the standards could be met by existing Crosley production vehicles: The company already had a relatively low profile in the American market, and was all but invisible overseas. This should address the first issue well enough, he reasoned; and even if they wanted to get fussy and talk about PHYSICAL profile, that would be a technical win as well. How many other cars could boast a smaller frontal area than the legendary Morris Minor, after all?

So far as cost was concerned, even if the then-current selling price was multiplied by 100 (a bare minimum, he believed, for a successful Government bid), it would still be far and away the least expensive vehicle development program in history.

Economy of operation, too, was easily achieved. After all, how many multi-passenger, enclosed vehicles could claim superior fuel mileage to the popular Indian motorcycles commonly used by military couriers? Yes, George and the Crosley had it under control.

The remaining hurdle to be overcome quickly turned into turning quickly. Sure, the Crosley had a very tight turning radius; in fact it was about the best on the market in that area. The operative word, however, was quickly. Try as he might, George found it virtually impossible to turn the Crosley quickly enough to meet the specification. Even exploring special driving techniques (such as those developed in the American South in the 1920's) resulted only in the replacement of many door handles, which had been worn off by frequent and sustained contact with the pavement. These handles, in fact, represented the most severe cost overrun of the entire program.

Agonizing over this problem one evening while reading a Doctor Doolittle book to his children, George hit upon the solution: When you redefine “turning” as “changing direction”, you don’t need to worry about *cornering* characteristics at all. If a car can be built to resemble the mythical Pushme-Pullyou, then his problem could be solved. The resulting vehicle was a resounding success, but has remained a closely kept military secret until today.

This early photo of the prototype, wearing appropriate camouflage paint, was taken outside the Egyptian Lacquer Works. It was there that the car’s special low-gloss paint was developed.

Alas, the veil of secrecy imposed by wartime conditions deprived him of bragging rights to this feat until long after his death in the early 1970's.

Although all technical drawings were mistaken for a copy of the owners manual and accidentally shipped to Bulgaria with the first vehicle, at least one civilian version of the vehicle (see second photo) survived and can be found today languishing in undignified fashion in West Lafayette, Indiana.

It had been used for promotional purposes for many years, and has now been put literally “out to pasture”.

Good thing George isn’t around to see it now.

Peter Blackford

P.S. Here’s one for the trivia buffs: What OTHER real vehicle was constructed in a very similar manner? And, for extra credit, what was its REAL commercial mission?

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