

BIRST AND LAST

In the mid-1990s two ex-British Army officers created their take on the perfect special forces' vehicle. This is the story of the one and only BIRST MWP...



Gary takes the
BIRST Mobile Weapons
Platform for a spin

If you had the choice, which would you like to own? An early Stage 2 One Ten powered by a 3.5 V8, or a unique V8 BIRST MWP Fast Strike Vehicle? They are, of course, actually one and the same, because it was the One Ten that was turned into the MWP. It is a fascinating vehicle that its makers clearly hoped would be a commercial success, but it was not to be.

As far as that One Ten V8 is concerned, the story goes back to 27 March 1984, which is the day it came off the production line at Solihull. It was delivered to Marshall of Cambridge three days later. The records at the British Motor Museum reveal that it was a basic truck cab soft top or hard top finished in Trident Green. What Marshall converted it into isn't known, but the work must have taken several months because the vehicle wasn't registered with its Preston, Lancashire number B655 VBV until 6 September. Three and a half years later it was sold to its second owners and moved to Egloskerry near Launceston in Cornwall.

DVLA records show that it didn't officially change hands again until December 1996, but by then it had been transformed into something that has variously been described over the years by those who have seen it as a 'Mad Max film prop' or a 'Judge Dredd sports soft top'. Understandable though these comments might be, ➔



BIRST MWP FAST STRIKE VEHICLE

back in the day the BIRST MWP was actually a contender in a potentially lucrative defence contract that also attracted the interest of much bigger players.

The company behind the MWP was British Independent Reconnaissance and Strike Technology (UK) Limited, founded in 1990 by two ex-army officers who described themselves as each having '12 years British Army experience serving in many different theatres, with combat experience in standard military operations'. One also had 'two and a half years special forces experience'. Because of their military background we won't be revealing their names here.

BIRST (UK) Ltd was a sales and marketing company, and construction of the vehicle was handled by another outfit, Deon Limited, which seems to have been owned by one of BIRST's founders. Close examination of period photographs of the vehicle reveal that it carried blue oval 'Deon' badges front and rear.

At the time, BIRST described the MWP as 'a tough and highly versatile vehicle which can be individually tailored to meet the customer's exact requirements. The vehicle has a payload of 900kg using either the 2.5-litre direct injection turbocharged diesel or the 3.5 V8 petrol engine. High levels of mobility are achieved through the constant four-wheel drive and coil-sprung suspension.

'The BIRST MWP with its compact dimensions and light weight make it ideally suited for airpotability and rapid deployment. It can be carried in the C130 or helicopters such as the CH47 or EH101, underslung or dropped by parachute.

'It offers the customer extensive weapon and load carrying capabilities together with considerable personal equipment and ammunition stowage capacity, including up to twelve Milan, with a forward-mounted 7.62mm General Purpose Machine Gun, or other customer specified weapons.

'The BIRST MWP is offered as a fully-finished vehicle built to customer specification or can be supplied as a modular package for local assembly, in the United Kingdom or overseas'.



Bodywork is mesh-reinforced GRP mounted on a tubular steel spaceframe

To reinforce its vision of the MWP as a multirole vehicle, BIRST produced a series of illustrations depicting the Standard Utility model as well as variants fitted with a pintle mount, a ring mount, a grenade launcher, a soft top and a hard top with a 'command signals radar installation'.

Had any of the depicted variants been built other than the one you see on these pages, all would have shared the same 110-inch Land Rover chassis, and all would have had the same multi-tubular steel section space frame with roll cage and integral bulkhead.

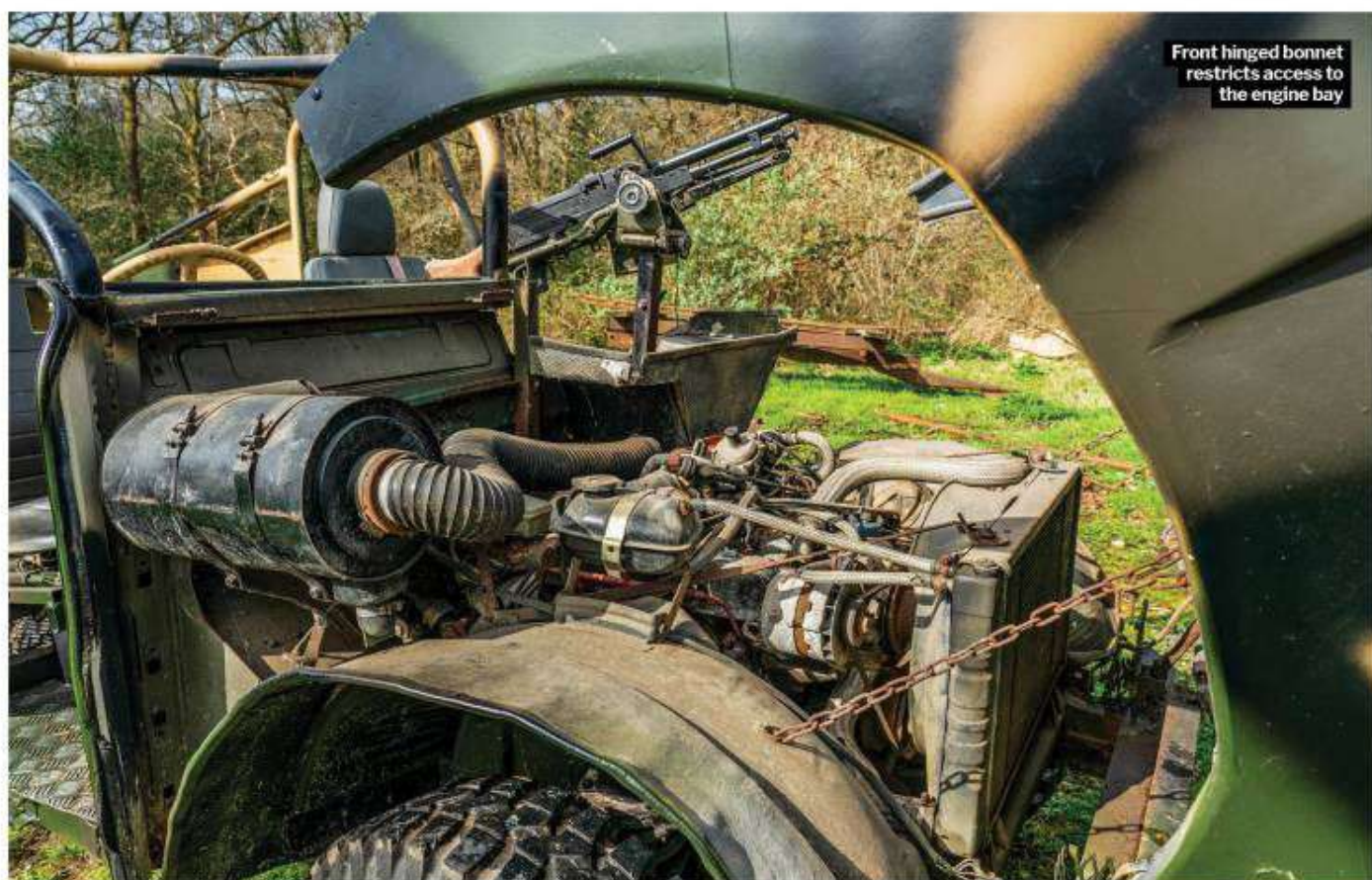
Front body, wings and bonnet were constructed in fire retardant BS Class 1 GRP with mesh reinforcement and underbonnet steel tubular reinforcement, with the bonnet hinging forwards. Rear wings and inner stowage bins were made from the same GRP as the front body but with tubular steel integral support, incorporating stowage for fuel, water, ammunition and other equipment. Limited mine protection plates were fitted under the front and rear seats. Front and rear departure angles were very impressive at 60 and 70 degrees



Would the BIRST MWP have withstood the rigours of military service? We'll never know...



Poor detailing and finish commensurate with one-off prototype status



Front hinged bonnet restricts access to the engine bay

Original 'Deon' badges were removed before Dunsfold acquired the vehicle



respectively, and ground clearance below the front axle, steering and suspension shield was 340mm.

As well as the pintle-mounted 7.62mm GPMG, weapons options included a .50cal Browning M2HB Heavy Machine Gun mounted on the ring mount on the roll bar, complete with a laser sighting system, a 40mm MK19 Grenade Launcher, a MILAN (Missile d'Infanterie Léger Antichar) anti-tank guided missile system, stowage for four rifles, and two four-barrel 76mm smoke and grenade launchers installed on both the front bumper and the rear tail-board.

Stowage for boxes of 7.62mm ammunition was installed in the front in an angle-iron frame fitted to the top of the map tray between the front seats. In the rear, stowage was provided for both 7.62mm and .50cal ammunition, and 76mm grenades in a rear compartment as well as in frames fitted to the sides of the vehicle.

The specification included Bridgestone Mud Dueler 750 R16 LT tyres with run-flat inserts, 12- or 24-volt electrics, and an electric winch mounted on the front bumper. Pick, shovel, and axe were mounted as standard on the front wings. Initial design drawings for the BIRST MWP were completed by designer Mark Robins as early as 1992.

The finished vehicle, based on the second-hand 1984 One Ten V8, was exhibited for the first time at the Royal Navy British Army Equipment Exhibition held at Pegasus Village, Aldershot, between 3-8 September 1995. Shortly afterwards, BIRST's chairman was contacted by a retired Malaysian army colonel who had attended the RNBAEE event, and he passed on the very interesting news that the Malaysian military wanted to procure a number of 'Special Forces Fast Strike Vehicles'.

On the face of it, the MWP was a good fit when compared against the Malaysian requirement, although the customer specified a diesel engine rather than a




Standard handbrake relocated and bolted to the chequerplate floor panel

petrol V8. And what's more, the procurement documentation indicated that the eventual requirement might be for up to 39 vehicles. For BIRST, it could have been the breakthrough sale the company needed.

However, as the procurement progressed it became clear that the Malaysian government's budget for the project was not going to allow them to acquire even the first six or eight vehicles, let alone the 39 they'd have liked to buy, and the final procurement seems to have been for just four, at least initially, because this was all the military's budget could accommodate.

BIRST's formal response to the Malaysian government's invitation to tender to supply four Fast Strike Vehicles was submitted via BIRST's Malaysian agent on 7 May 1996. BIRST's proposal also included a





**"Very few people
have heard of this
fascinating vehicle,
it rarely appears in
Land Rover books"**

**Cut and shut dashboard
from the One Ten**



This is the Defender 110 that was put forward by Land Rover for the Malaysian Fast Strike Vehicle contract, now also in Dunsfold's care

detailed Logistic Support System for its vehicles, including a one-year warranty, parts packages covering routine maintenance and repairs at unit and workshop levels, together with maintenance manuals and other documentation. Availability of spares was guaranteed for a period of ten years, and a full training and handover package was also defined that covered operator instruction and both field and workshop servicing and maintenance training, which would be completed in Malaysia by BIRST's operatives.

Two other proposals from the UK were allegedly received by the Malaysian government: one from Procurement Services International Ltd offering a Land Rover 110-based vehicle built by Glover Webb, and one from Land Rover itself, also with a design based on the One Ten. The Malaysian government finally decided in favour of the Glover Webb vehicle, and in November 1996 the UK government granted an export licence for the vehicles to PSI Ltd.

And that was pretty much the end of the story for the BIRST MWP. There were flickers of interest in the vehicle from a couple of countries in the Middle East and Africa, but no further examples appear to have been built.

On 13 December 1996 the one and only BIRST MWP was finally registered with the DVLA in the name of the company's founder and managing director, and in late 2010 Dunsfold's Philip Bashall received a call from him asking if the vehicle might be of interest to the Collection. Philip concluded a deal in mid-November 2010, and BIRST's MD said how delighted he was to see the unique vehicle join the Dunsfold Collection as an example of a Land Rover-based design "that didn't quite make it," adding that he would, "be pleased she will be resting in such hallowed company."

Very few people have heard of this fascinating vehicle, and it rarely (if ever) appears in any of the many Land Rover books. Former LRM contributor Bob Morrison apparently saw it and photographed it at RNBAEE in 1995, and BIRST managed to secure an entry for it in the 1996-97 edition of Jane's Military Vehicles and Logistics.

It drives well enough although the engine is smoking badly. The overall build quality screams 'rough and ready prototype' at you, and it's difficult to imagine that it might



Malaysian army Glover Webb Light Strike Vehicle operated by the Special Services Group or Grup Gerak Khas (GGK)

have been a serious contender to win the Malaysian contract. When I stop to allow snapper Craig to do his stuff, someone wanders over and suggests it would not look out of place in the *Barbie* film painted candy pink, which seems to be a tad harsh, although take off the weaponry and I suppose the MWP does have a hint of macho beach buggy about it.

BIRST never actually fitted a diesel engine in the MWP despite offering it in its tender, presumably because it was waiting to see if its vehicle had been shortlisted before incurring the additional cost of sourcing and installing a 300Tdi. That's why the vehicle is still V8-powered today.

Happily, Land Rover's own 110-based proposal to the original Malaysian invitation to tender also survives, and its liberation from the Solihull factory scrapyard and delivery to the Dunsfold Collection was facilitated by Roger Crathorne, but that's another story. Two very different approaches to the same military requirement, neither of which was successful in the end. They are unique and fascinating survivors. Now all the Dunsfold Collection needs to do is track down one of the demobbed Malaysian Glover Webb vehicles.