

# ANNIE THE AMBULANCE

**T**HIS very distinctive Series I 80-inch field ambulance was assembled under licence by the Belgian firm Société Nouvelle Minerva SA, and converted to field ambulance configuration at the ABL (Armée Belge/Belgisch Leger – the Belgian Army) workshops, one of a remarkable total of 9905 80-inch and 86-inch Series I vehicles built by Minerva for both military and civilian use. Chassis number 2663 1963 was shipped from Solihull on 16 July 1952 in Completely Knocked Down (CKD) kit form and appears to have entered Belgian Army service in September that year, with the military registration number 15832. From 1986 it was in the Belgian Army Museum before being sold out of service in March 1995.

It was acquired in 1997 by Mike and Padeen Hardiman and brought back to the UK on a trailer behind their trusty SIII, a journey that was not without incident. "The 80 had been bought directly from the army by a Belgian enthusiast and was registered with the Belgian civilian number PDN 468 in June 1995," Mike tells me. "A Dutch friend of ours heard that it was going to be sold and tipped us off, knowing about our enthusiasm for Minervas. It turned out that the Belgian owner was about to get married but his fiancée was apparently not at all enthused with the Series I, so it had to go.

"We went over to see it and arranged to meet the seller at Fort V, also known as Fort 5, which is one of eight →

Between 1951 and 1956, almost 10,000 licence-built Land Rovers were assembled in Belgium, the majority for use by the country's relatively small armed forces. This ambulance was among them

Side profile of the ambulance is nothing if not distinctive...



No room in the back, so the spare is relocated to the front bumper of the 80in



Padeen and Mike Hardiman, and Annie



Hand-painted ambulance emblem

military fortresses dating from the 1860s that were built as a defensive semi-circle around the south of the city of Antwerp. It was a very appropriate place to meet because Fort V is located in what is now the suburb of Mortsel, just yards away from the site of the Minerva factory where the CKD Series Is were assembled in the 1950s. Padeen and I thought that it was interesting that the Belgian enthusiast was completely unaware of this fact!

"A deal was done and the 80 was immediately christened 'Annie the Ambulance'. Arrangements were made to collect her at Calais in August 1997 and bring her home to Bristol on a trailer behind our Series III. It turned out to be the hottest day of the year.

"We were the first off the ferry and any nervousness we had about clearing customs was immediately dispelled as we coasted through with no questions asked. We should have known that it wasn't going to be as easy as that, though, because on the long hill up out of Dover the traffic was almost at a standstill.

"At the worst possible place - the steepest part of the hill and with nowhere to pull over - the traffic ground to a halt, and things were not looking good. The Series III started to overheat, and as the traffic ahead began to creep forward we had to use low-box and four-wheel drive to inch our way up. Eventually the cause of the problem came into view, with a car embedded in the front of a truck on the last roundabout on the hill. We squeezed past with barely an inch to spare on either side of the trailer, so Annie's arrival in England was rather more fraught than we would have liked.

"We stopped at the first services on the M25 to allow the Series III to cool down, and an AA patrolman wandered over to have a look at Annie.

"A Dutch friend of ours heard that the ambulance was going to be sold and tipped us off"



The extended tarp is referred to as a bustle

He turned out to be a Land Rover enthusiast, and by the time he'd finished looking at, in, and under the 80 we'd been given a comprehensive and free-of-charge AA inspection."

As soon as Annie arrived at her new home in Somerset, she was registered in the UK for the first time with the age-related number GSJ 641. Mike and Padeen had hoped to obtain more information on her service history, but so far not much has come to light other than her stay in the Belgian Army Museum, where in 1986 she was fitted with a reconditioned engine converted to run on unleaded fuel.

"Annie is at heart a standard Belgian Army 80-inch with a 2.0-litre engine and the normal Minerva all-steel body with the very distinctive front wings," Mike tells me. "Each infantry division was allocated medical support capabilities, including field ambulances to evacuate battlefield casualties to the forward dressing stations.

"Turning an 80-inch Land Rover into a vehicle capable of carrying two full-length stretchers was achieved by doing exactly what had been done to the licence-built Willys Jeeps that had served with the Belgian Army before the arrival of the Land Rovers. A pivoting A-frame was mounted on the tow hitch that supported a frame that extended 1.3 metres rearwards and allowed the stretchers to extend out of the back of the 80. An extra canvas tilt piece, known as a bustle, covered the frame and the stretchers. The spare wheel had to be relocated to the front bumper, and the rear light units were mounted on L-shaped panels fixed to the rear crossmember.

"Annie is finished in the colours of a medical reserve unit and would have been used to supplement regular unit vehicles, which is why there are no lion head unit badges as



Fold-down frame gives the 80in extra length



Swing-up A-frame supports the stretchers



Original seats replaced with Exmoor Trim items



No need for outside doorhandles when you can just reach inside



Livery details were added

typically found. The vehicle also has the later vinyl treated tilts that replaced the earlier standard canvas ones.

"The 80 is plated for 75kph which is 47mph," Mike reveals, "but the combination of the relatively low speed, the large extension on the rear, and the forward-projecting spare wheel make it something I've never found particularly pleasant to drive. It was probably even less fun to be lying on a stretcher in the back."

Annie looks magnificently original and shows only 3700 kilometres on the clock, so I'm keen to know what work was needed after Mike and Padeen brought her back to the UK. "We replaced the worn seats with Exmoor Trim items which are correct other than the colour of the piping, which is brown rather than the original black. We also added some livery details following research via the Minerva TT Register VZW in Belgium, but other than that all we've had to attend to is routine maintenance.

"Annie's first public outing was at the 2004 Bristol Classic Car Show, where she was displayed on the Land Rover Series One Club stand. We were delighted as much for the Club as we were for ourselves, when Annie was awarded the Rosette and Cup for the Best Lightweight Commercial Vehicle at the show."

So how did almost 10,000 Series I Land Rovers come to be assembled in Belgium? Minerva started making cars in 1904 and by 1911 it was the largest car manufacturer in Belgium. Production continued during the inter-war years, and Minerva motor cars of this period were highly regarded, particularly in the UK. Despite their factory being destroyed by the United States Army Air Force in early 1945, Minerva attempted after the war to return to car making, initially building Standard Vanguards under licence.



Stretchers offer basic comfort for patients

"Annie looks magnificently original and shows only 3700 kilometres on the clock"

In early 1952, Minerva became aware that the Belgian Army was planning to replace its ageing wartime Jeeps, and the company approached Rover with the idea of manufacturing Land Rovers under licence. An agreement was reached, and following evaluation by the Belgian Défense Nationale of a single 80-inch shipped over from Solihull, Rover received an order for 2500 left-hand drive CKD vehicles.

The Belgian government required that around 60 per cent of each Minerva Series I should be components manufactured in Belgium, primarily as a way to revitalise local industry after the war, and this meant that the CKD kits shipped from Solihull did not have bodywork, seats, exhausts, tyres, radiator grilles, badges or electrical components. In due course, even chassis frames would be fabricated locally in Belgium.

Minerva Land Rovers were distinctively different from their Solihull counterparts, having all-steel bodywork with angular front wings and a steel radiator grille with a badge featuring the head of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom. Using steel rather than aluminium for the bodywork meant that a Minerva 80 was almost 450lb (200kg) heavier than a standard vehicle.

Minerva Land Rovers were also fitted with two front seats as standard, with a central toolbox, and had a shortened exhaust pipe that exited ahead of the left rear wheel. A six-volt battery was fitted under the bonnet while a second six-volter was mounted under the driver's seat.

My good friend the late John Smith carried out a great deal of research on the Minerva licence-build programme, much of which was published in his seminal book *Land Rover – The Formative Years 1947-1967*, and I am grateful to him for providing me with his assessment of the number of 80s produced by Minerva.



Angular front wings are a Minerva trademark



Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom



Annie the Ambulance is now in the care of the Dunsfold Collection



Red paint on the hub centres - a common Minerva feature - serves no practical purpose



Red makes it easy to locate

By July 1952 a total of 1895 of the original order of 2500 had been delivered, and over the following months a further 5964 left-hand drive CKD 80s were despatched out to Minerva, the last ones arriving in January 1954. That same month, Rover issued 946 chassis numbers to Minerva for the company to allocate to its own chassis being manufactured in Belgium, bringing the total number of 80-inch Land Rovers assembled by Minerva to 8805.

Bizarrely, around 2000 of these did not leave the Solihull factory until after the new 86-inch model was in production, and this led to litigation

between Minerva and the Rover Company, which John Smith summarised as follows: 'Minerva sued for damages to the tune of £25,000 for breach of contract over Rover continuing to supply 1953 80-inch CKD models during the six months after that model had in fact been out of production at the Solihull works. The deception may not have initially been obvious in Antwerp, but from Minerva's point of view it happened at a critical time, as from 1 October 1953 Minerva attempted to break into the civilian market. The Minerva civilian Land Rover was, however, still based on the outdated 80-inch Land Rover model.'

In late 1954, Rover's bosses agreed an out of court settlement with Minerva and went on to deliver 1100 86-inch vehicles to Belgium between January 1955 and October 1956, the majority at a generous discount.

Remarkably, there were still apparently around 1000 Minerva Land Rovers sitting new, unused and unissued in 1980, and the Belgian authorities were still taking partly-assembled vehicles from the original stockpile. As late as 1985, over 2500 Minerva Land Rovers were still in service, presumably including Annie the Ambulance.

Mike and Padeen very generously donated Annie to the Dunsfold Collection last year, and she debuted at the Collection's Friends and Supporters Day in September.

"The Minerva is a wonderful addition to the Collection," says Dunsfold's Philip Bashall. "Since she arrived, we've treated her to an engine tune and Collection volunteer Simon Greenwood carried out a carb rebuild.

"She bowls along very briskly now, despite the extra weight of the steel body. Annie will be appearing at the Collection's Spring Open Day on 25 April, and tickets are available on the Dunsfold Collection website."