GODDESS OF WAR

Dunsfold's latest acquisition is a rare Belgian-built Minerva Blindé – an armoured and armed Series I with an intriguing military history and possible links to the Congo Crisis



Twin FN .30 cal armoured turret for the crew chief in the front passenger seat

It couldn't be anythings else: distinctive profile is unique to the Minerva Blindé

THIS armed and armoured Land Rover, or 'Jeep Minerva Recce' as it seems to have been known in Belgium, is the latest vehicle to join the Dunsfold Collection. I've already written about the Collection's Minerva field ambulance variant (*LRM* February 2026) and both vehicles share a common background.

By way of a quick reminder, the Belgian firm Société Nouvelle Minerva SA had won a contract to replace the Belgian military's fleet of ageing wartime Jeeps with Land Rovers, which would be assembled under licence at Minerva's factory at Mortsel, near Antwerp. Minerva had struck an agreement with Rover that would see the Solihull company delivering vehicles in Completely Knocked Down (CKD) kit form, which Minerva would then put together.

The Belgian government required that around 60 per cent of each Minerva Series I built should comprise components manufactured in Belgium, primarily as a way to kick-start domestic manufacturing and production 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, bulkheads, road wheels and fuel tanks would be fabricated locally in Belgium. Eventually, a remarkable total of 9905 80in and 86in Series I vehicles would be built by Minerva for both military and civilian use.

Minerva Land Rovers were therefore distinctively different from their Solihull counterparts, having all-steel bodywork with angular front wings, because Minerva didn't have the capability to replicate the distinctive curved shape of the factory-fit front wings. They also had 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 standard soft-top Minerva 80 was almost 450lb (200kg) heavier than a Solihull 80in 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 6-volt battery was fitted under the bonnet while a second 6-volt battery was mounted under the driver's seat.

Quite why the Belgian authorities felt they needed to order nearly 10,000 Land Rovers is a mystery, at least to me, and the last 86in vehicles were not delivered to Minerva until October 1958. Remarkably, there were still around 1000 Minerva Land Rovers sitting new, unused and unissued →



Armoured rear side panels are specific to the UDA/VVE Air Commando Minervas

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.

Dunsfold's Philip Bashall tells me how he came to acquire the Minerva 'Blindé', which incidentally means 'armoured' in French: "I'd been aware of it for quite a while, and earlier this year owner Christian Delhaye in Belgium agreed to sell it to me. It is chassis number 36635996 and it was despatched out in kit form from Solihull. It was assembled and completed at the Minerva works and entered service in September 1954, presumably as a standard Minerva soft-top 80-inch, and was converted in 1960 or 1961 to the Blindé version you see here. The conversion is thought to have been completed at the ABL (Armée Belge/Belgisch Leger – the Belgian Army) workshops."


Dunsfold's Philip Bashall has replaced the armoured aero screens with shaped acrylic blocks


Angular sloping front wings are unique to the Minerva-built Land Rovers

As I start to investigate Dunsfold's newest vehicle it rapidly becomes clear that there are some important gaps in what we know about these intriguing 'Jeeps'. Firstly, there doesn't even seem to be a definitive view on the number of Blindés built, with some saying there were two batches of 30 vehicles each, while others suggest one of 30 and a second batch of 36 vehicles, while other sources say the second batch was more than 36 vehicles.

All had the immediately recognisable frontal armour and the two semicircular bulletproof glass aeroscreens to protect the driver and front gunner. They also had angled front-mounted spare wheels behind which were metal slats that could be adjusted to restrict airflow to the radiator, or to close it off completely to protect the radiator and engine from small-arms fire.

There were two specific versions of the Minerva Blindé because one was destined to have an offensive role with the Belgian Para-Commandos, where they were used in a similar fashion to the British SAS Jeeps in the Second World War; the 30 vehicles in the other batch were intended for a defensive role serving with the UDA/VVE, the Air-Commandos. The Air-Commandos were the Belgian Air Force's Airfield Defence Units (known in French as Unités de Défense des Aérodromes and in Dutch as Vliegveld Verdedigings Eenheden). The Jeep Minerva Recce entered service with the UDA/VVE in 1961, replacing the unit's M8 Greyhounds, which were WW2-vintage 6x6 light armoured cars built by the Ford Motor Company. They were not Ford's greatest bit of kit.




Crew layout was driver left, crew chief front right, rear gunner in the tub. Note the centrally-mounted radio



Rear stowage box designed to take standard jerry cans

As Philip explains, there are several detail differences between the two versions: "The biggest visual difference between the Minerva Recce of the UDA/VVE Air-Commandos and the Blindés used by the Para-Commandos is the armour of the rear tub. The Air-Commandos have the two lateral armour plates on the side and the fixed rear armour, while the Para-Commandos only have the rear armour on the tub and it is mounted on hinges to allow loading onto the Belgian Air Force transport aircraft of the day, including the Fairchild C.119G Flying Boxcar.

"Para-Commando vehicles also had smaller frontal armour in front of the driver and front passenger and the twin machine-guns, and the rear basket is also smaller than those on the Air-Commando Blindés. Para-Commandos also had a special full-length exhaust to make them quieter, which was not necessary for Air-Commando vehicles on airfield defence duty.

Not a mysterious part of the weaponry but an ultra-rare Minerva fire extinguisher





Operation Dragon Rouge keyring is an interesting nod to the Blindé's role in the Congo

"In terms of armament, both versions started out with twin .30-calibre machine-guns in front of the right-hand passenger seat and a single pintle-mounted .30-cal on the rear tub. The Air-Commando vehicles retained this set-up throughout their service, but the .30-cals were replaced with FN 7.62mm MAG machine-guns on the Para-Commando vehicles.

"Our example also carries a .303 Bren Gun mounted on the left-hand front wing, an American bazooka, various small arms and a host of other equipment including radios, which together with the steel bodywork and the armour panels means the all-up weight is very high for an 80-inch Land Rover, just as it was on the British SAS Jeeps and Series I vehicles. The rear springs on the Minerva were uprated to 14 leaves to carry the load!"

Importing ex-military vehicles with armaments in place, even if they are certified as officially and properly deactivated, can be a fraught business, and so it proved to be in this case. "Christian Delhaye, the previous owner, had managed to find the right Belgian-made deactivated weapons that were correct for a UDA/VVE Blindé," Philip tells me. "These were manufactured by Fabrique National, better known as FN, at Herstal in Belgium, and were versions of the American Browning .30-cal M1919. As well as the British Bren Gun mounted on the left front wing, it also carried two FN rifles that are early versions of the SLR that was issued in the UK in the 1970s.

"These correct weapons were a real bonus. Apart from the fact that the UK's regulations on deactivated weapons changed recently, which meant the Belgian paperwork was no longer acceptable, so sadly I had to leave the weapons behind in Belgium. Replacing the Bren and the bazooka was easily done, because I already had examples of both in my collection here, but I had to purchase replicas of the FN .30-cals which aren't strictly correct but do the job. The rifle is an Airsoft SLR which will do for now."

Dunsfold's vehicle, which carries military registration 32176, served with the UDA/VVE, which was established in 1951 as a specialist unit within the Belgian Air Force specifically to provide airfield defence and security for military aviation installations. The UDA/VVE evolved from earlier formations including the Belgian Auxiliary Air Police Service (BAAPS) and the Military Aviation Police and Guards, which were active immediately after the Second World War.

The primary mission of the UDA/VVE was to defend airfields against intruders and potential threats, a role distinct from the Belgian army. Their training focused on airfield security, tactical defence, and rapid response, often including exercises in patrolling, checkpoints, and perimeter defence. Highly trained, the UDA/VVE was seen as an elite unit on a par with special forces units in other countries.

Christian Delhaye has researched the vehicle's history and discovered that 32176 was at one point based at Brustem Saint Trond/Sint-Truiden which was a significant Belgian Air Force base but also housed the Air-Commandos training establishment. The vehicle still shows traces of lettering on the armour plate below the right-hand bulletproof screen that reads in French 'C. Perf' for Centre de Perfectionnement, and in Dutch 'Verv.C' for Vervolmakings Centrum.

Christian has also found a period photograph of the vehicle taking part in what appears to some sort of parade, as well as a superb →


US bazooka mounted behind side armour plate


Folded ground mount for the .30-cal Brownings

photo of the vehicle taken at Brustem in 1963 with a member of the UDA/VVE who served with the vehicle back in the day. In 2013 Christian managed to track down the veteran and reunite him with the Land Rover that had been part of his life 50 years before.

Philip is steadily working his way through a list of jobs: "The bulletproof glass in the front screens is 40mm thick but was in very poor 'milky' condition, so I looked into replacing it. The cost was extortionate and not having won the lottery I decided to use polycarbonate instead. Two 40mm blocks still cost over £350, but once trimmed to fit and put in place, they have transformed the appearance; and you can see where you're going now. Christian had replicated a replacement rear gunner's seat frame but hadn't installed it; that's now also in place.

"There was no import duty to pay due to the vehicle's age, and neither was an MoT required, but getting it road-registered in the UK meant arranging for the DVLA to inspect the vehicle to confirm the chassis number, which is quite hard to see on a left-hand drive 80. The conversation about whether the vehicle was modified from standard was an interesting one! On the to-do list are sorting the totally worn-out steering box, fixing the dragging clutch, and getting the brakes to work properly. I also need to reproduce a centre spot-lamp and change some of the seatbacks at some point."



Dunsfold's vehicle in service with UDA/VVE's C.Perf





Photo (centre) taken at Brustem in 1963. The same Air-Commando reunited with his vehicle 50 years later

The Minerva Blindé is known to have seen active service in the Congo Crisis, which began almost immediately after the Congo (now Zaire) became independent from Belgium in 1960 and lasted until 1965. It is rumoured that a significant number of Blindés were either lost or abandoned during the conflict.

Another enduring story has it that Blindés were used by the infamous 'Wild Geese' Anglo-Irish mercenary Michael 'Mad Mike' Hoare during his two mercenary adventures in the Congo, firstly in Katanga in 1961, and perhaps more likely during the Simba rebellion in 1964. During the latter, it is known that Mad Mike's 5 Commando of 300 men, comprising mostly South African, Rhodesian, British, Belgian, Irish and German mercenaries, used 'Jeeps' and worked closely with Belgian paratroopers.

The Belgian Paras and Hoare's 5 Commando are estimated to have saved the lives of some 1800 Europeans taken hostage by the Simbas, most notably when Hoare's mercenaries 'worked in concert with Belgian paratroopers, Cuban-exile pilots, and CIA-hired mercenaries and saved 1600 mostly European civilians in Stanleyville [modern Kisangani, Congo] from the Simba rebels in Operation Dragon Rouge'. Perhaps it is of some significance that Dunsfold's Blindé arrived from Belgium with a key-fob engraved with the words 'Dragon Rouge'.

