



WWII

# JEEP:

## The Birth of an Icon

General Dwight Eisenhower celebrated it as one of the most valuable weapons of World War II.<sup>1</sup> War correspondent Ernie Pyle called it “a divine instrument of military locomotion.”<sup>2</sup> Soldiers personalized it with names such as “Gracie” or “Betty,” reminiscent of the horses it replaced.<sup>3</sup>

The Jeep went almost everywhere during World War II; it was an essential all-terrain vehicle that changed the way we moved men and equipment. Ernie Pyle summed it up: “Good Lord, I don’t think we could continue the war without the jeep. It does everything. It goes everywhere. It’s as faithful as a dog, strong as a mule, and as agile as a goat. It constantly carries twice what it was designed for, and keeps on going.”<sup>4</sup>

It all started in Western Pennsylvania. Born out of a convergence of military necessity and corporate moxie, the prototype for the Jeep emerged from the American Bantam Car Company in Butler, Pa. Similar to many Pittsburgh companies, American Bantam’s work predated U.S. entry into World War II. The Army, recalling problems with the cavalry in World War I and realizing that modern warfare demanded a new approach, issued a call for proposals for a new lightweight all-terrain vehicle in 1940. Basing their specifications partly on previous models demonstrated by Bantam, the Army gave companies 25 days to develop a plan and 49 days to construct a prototype.

Bantam, after years of financial difficulty, was broke. The company had only a skeleton crew by the time the Army announced the bid. Nonetheless, Bantam gave the project everything it had and became the only company to successfully meet the



Interior of American Bantam Car Company, c. 1941. The plant was deemed too small for large-scale wartime production.

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library, Douglas Dow Collection.

deadline with all specifications. After the prototype passed a series of rigorous Army tests, American Bantam received a contract for 70 more vehicles for further testing; another contract followed for 1,500 cars in 1941. A new military vehicle was born, one that eventually transformed the civilian automobile market as well.

Alas, Bantam’s design was government property (as was the case with all U.S. military contracts). After 1941, they lost the larger production contracts to the Willys-Overland Company. To add insult to injury, the latter claimed that the design for the Jeep was theirs. Then in 1943, an official federal government investigation confirmed once and for all that the birth of the Jeep rested with the American Bantam Car Company.<sup>5</sup> Today, visitors can see this legacy first hand. The earliest surviving Bantam Reconnaissance Car, from that group of 70, is on loan courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, in the Heinz History Center’s exhibit *We Can Do It! WWII*.




Testing the turning radius of the Jeep.

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library, Douglas Dow Collection.

<sup>1</sup> By one account, Eisenhower’s selections were the Douglas C-47 Skytrain cargo plane, the bulldozer, and the 2-1/2 ton truck. See: Fred O. Newman, “On Keeping out of Jail,” *Popular Science* (February 1949), 294. Another broadly repeated story has Eisenhower including the Jeep as one of four “Tools of Victory,” along with, again, the C-47, as well as the bazooka and the atomic bomb, see: T. Rees Shapiro, “Edward Uhl, 92; helped invent bazooka, headed Fairchild Industries,” *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2010, accessed at [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/22/AR2010052203199.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/22/AR2010052203199.html).





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Ernie Pyle

Field testing the Jeep, 1940.

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library, Douglas Dow Collection.

<sup>2</sup> Pyle’s comments about the Jeep are also widely quoted. See the account on the website of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center: “War correspondent Ernie Pyle knew the value of the Jeep,” at [www.uaw-chrysler.com/images/news/earniepyle.htm](http://www.uaw-chrysler.com/images/news/earniepyle.htm), accessed February 10, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Sonkin, “Bleeding Betty’s Brakes; or, The Army Names a Jeep,” *American Speech* (Vol. 29; No. 4; December 1954), 257-262.

<sup>4</sup> “War correspondent Ernie Pyle knew the value of the Jeep,” at <http://www.uaw-chrysler.com/images/news/earniepyle.htm>; the exact date for the quote is reported as June 4, 1943, in: “Behind the Marker,” online feature about the State Historical Marker on the Jeep, posted at ExplorePAhistory.com: <http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-2F1>

<sup>5</sup> See: Herbert R. Rifkind, *The Jeep—Its Development and Procurement under the Quartermaster Corps, 1940-1942* (Washington, DC: Office of the Quartermaster General, 1943).