

TWO CREATURES OF THE DESERT...

Story and photos by Steve Purdy



JEFF JONES AND HIS 1943 FORD BURMA JEEP

It seems that interesting people and interesting vehicles usually go together.

I first met Jeff Jones about three years ago while vacationing in Arizona. He pulled into the parking lot of a rustic old restaurant just off I-17 north of Phoenix. It was his vehicle that caught my eye. I'd never seen anything like it before. It was olive-drab, with huge tires, a short-sided bed behind an open cockpit and an odd, asymmetrical grille fronting the high, stubby hood.

It reminded me of a pug-nosed dog in full snarl. Obviously a military vehicle, it was much bigger than a Jeep or a 3/4-ton Power Wagon but smaller than a deuce-and-a-half—obviously a cargo hauler of some sort. It came bouncing and grumbling into the parking lot chased by a huge cloud of dust and stopped abruptly not far away. I had to go over and ask about it.

“WHAT IS THAT THING?” I ASKED.

Jeff Jones, looking like a true desert guy, stepped down from his high perch and began the story.

That dusty old truck is called a Burma Jeep. Only about 6,000 of them were built by Ford in 1942 and 1943 for the Navy. The little brute was designed to be especially maneuverable—with tighter turning ability, shorter wheelbase and lower profile—to haul a ton-and-a-half of cargo at a time on the narrow, twisty Burma Road. It served that purpose with distinction, we're told.

Jeff was, as I vaguely recall, returning from a parade, and it was such a hot, windy day he just needed a break from his buffeting drive. The Burma Jeep has a windshield but no top or side windows. At full throttle it makes about 45 mph, generating lots of noise and demanding lots of tedious input from the driver.

After a pleasant chat and some photos, he left me his card and was on his way. That card floated around my desk for these past three years, reminding me of that great old vehicle and my desire to get the rest of the story. Since my pretty blonde and I were headed to Arizona to do another travel story on the area—this time testing a Lexus RX350—I emailed Mr. Jones and shortly received a phone call enthusiastically inviting us to stop by for a closer look, more background info and, best of all, a ride.

It was not easy finding his place in a small desert settlement near New River. The navigation system in the Lexus was of little help. When we finally pulled up his long bumpy driveway, he was waiting for

us on the shaded porch of his serene home. The Burma Jeep waited for us in the shadow of a big saguaro on the upper level of his steep circular driveway, grinning at me with that familiar asymmetrical grille. Jeff explained that he had postponed his plan to replace the leaky water pump just so we could have our drive.

Our walk-around was informative. We started with the huge 20-inch wheels which, like some other odd old military vehicles, have left-handed threads on the left side lugs and right-handed threads on the right side. Great for confusing the kid at the tire store, Jeff admitted mischievously. The cargo box, with short sides all the way around, measures 5-1/2 feet by 9 feet—just big enough to accommodate a regular size 1/4-ton Jeep. Originally, it had the typical military canvas cargo top held up with wooden bows—long gone now. A huge, two-ton winch is mounted to the front bumper.

Under the remarkably short hood, tucked way back into the cockpit, is a flat-head, inline Ford six of 226-cubic-inch displacement, making about 90 horsepower and a remarkable 180 pound-feet of torque. Access to most of the engine is through panels in the massive bulge between driver and passenger.

By the way, the asymmetry results from two-thirds of the grill being a conventional radiator and the other third a tool compartment.

This is Jeff's second Burma Jeep. His mother found the first one for him thinking it would be something he'd really like. He did, and he played with it for a few years, then sold it. It's not that he is especially fond of military vehicles in the first place. He just likes orphans—vehicles that are rare and no longer made. His first car at age 14 was a raggedy old '61 Corvair with no hood and clapped out body. But, it ran great.

Jeff found this Burma Jeep at an auction a few years ago and he couldn't resist it, remembering all the fun he had with his first one.

Though not an off-roader or desert rat, Jeff's sense of challenge and adventure revealed itself as he talked about a mud bog contest he found himself competing in not long ago. Normally he just uses the Burma Jeep for parades, military vehicle events and other sedate activities. After all, it's not really designed for off-roading. He went to this mud-lovers event just out of curiosity.

As the afternoon waned, none of the other vehicles had been able to get through the mud bog. The other competitors chided



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him relentlessly to give the Burma Jeep her head—let her dash into the mud. Finally relenting, he launched her into the bog in second gear, low range. In spite of all that torque she began to bog down about half way. Mud and water were oozing through the floorboards. He realized with a grin that he still had another gear, so he double-clutched, then triple-clutched and crunched her up into first (creeper) gear. She forged ahead powerfully, pushing through the mud like a snow plow, all the way to dry land. The crowd was amazed.

FINALLY, IT'S TIME FOR OUR RIDE.

I clambered up and across the hump into the side-facing passenger seat, stepping on the stiff canvas driver's seat. There was no other way to do it. Cockpit space is seriously limited, with the engine hump filling the space between the seats and just enough space on the floor in front of the driver's seat for the driver's feet and a couple of big levers. Jeff climbed in, squirmed into position and cranked her up. Since my seat was a tad higher and facing him I had a great view of all the mechanical things going on over there.

The brute reluctantly groaned and grumbled to life. We slowly trundled down his rocky driveway, both of us grinning ear to ear while my pretty blonde and our passengers waited with the Lexus. Geared low and stiffly sprung, the Burma Jeep is certainly designed for maximum hauling capacity. We could feel and hear the gears whining and all the mechanical parts doing their jobs without a hint of pretention or sophistication. Raw power and practicality is the name of this game. Struggling up a short hill, Jeff double-clutched into third gear as we advanced slowly and steadily.

We took a ride to the edge of the open desert at the end of his little settlement, where we stopped for some photos and more history. Posed there with dry wilderness in the background, the Burma Jeep looked to be in its element even though it was designed and built for the jungles of Southeast Asia. It suits the desert well.

Jeff is in his element as well, living simply and freely where the Arizona wilderness surrounds him—and his great old Burma Jeep. ■

STEVE PURDY of Michigan loves to drive and explore in Arizona. A writer, photographer, A/V producer and project manager with a political science degree, he began media projects in 1984, from the Cannonball Run. He's been Detroit Editor for TheAutoChannel.com, feature writer for *Cars & Parts*, co-creator/producer of the *Route One* TV pilot, race and auto show correspondent for WJIM radio and is owner of Shunpiker Productions.

