



# corsa

## communique

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## Dune Buggy Done Right: Deserter

*Joe Kraus*

**B**ack some time ago in the 1960s, long before \$2.00 a gallon of gas would ever be thought of, the major car manufacturers were introducing compact cars. This was mainly to compete with the entry of so many foreign cars being marketed in the USA. I, while in high school, worked for the local corner drug store. They were still lost in the 1950s. They had a large soda fountain. They served food as well as hand-dipped ice cream. If I was not at the fountain I was delivering drugs to homes in northeast Philadelphia with their delivery car, a 1964 Corvair 500. This is where I got hooked on the Corvair. I bought a 1965 500 as my first car and later purchased that 1964 delivery car.

One thing back then really caught my eye was dune buggies. The one thing I noticed was that they always were Volkswagen (yuck). They were just too small and not comfortable at all to drive for a six foot tall guy with size 12 wide shoes. I know that there were Corvair

conversions but I never saw one in Pennsylvania or New Jersey.

A few years ago my interest was kindled. Larry Asheuer of the Philadelphia Corvair Association purchased a dune buggy with a Corvair motor. I was without a convertible for a couple years, so I still had that itch too. So the hunt was on. I

wanted something different. And something I would not have to put a lot of money into. I drove as far south as Virginia looking at orphan cars, Corvairs, and kit cars. I was browsing cars on eBay daily. On one early Saturday morning, I found this all-Corvair yellow buggy on eBay. The body style was one I never saw before and



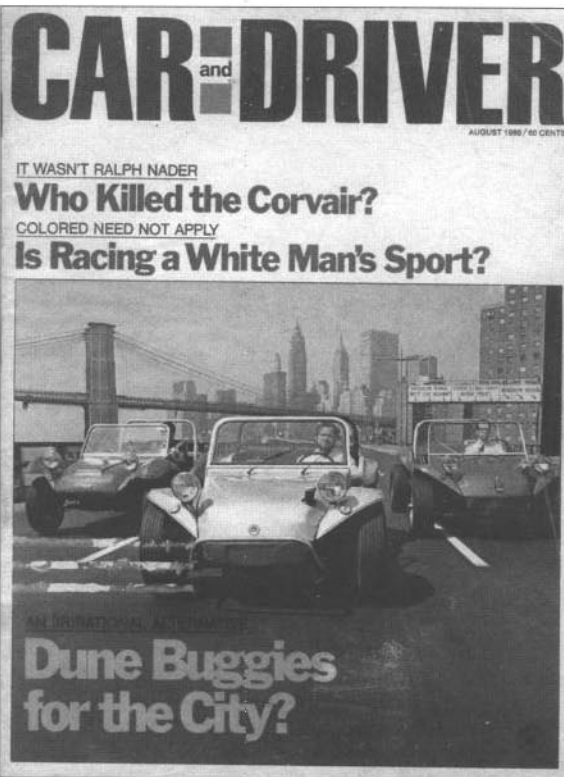


caused by carburetor flooding). I adjusted both carbs to a spot I thought would work in starting, and on the first try it worked. Varoom! Started right up. I balanced the carbs and it was a good strong running motor: tight, no pings, smooth running.

Next to check was the brake system, from the dual master cylinder to the lines, hoses, wheel cylinders, and brake shoes were all new, the drums were smooth and also looked new. The front tires were like brand new metric tires but totally dry-rotted. I replaced them, but not the rears because they were used but not dry-rotted. Everything else on the car worked. I took it to my friend's service station and got it Pennsylvania inspected. The car is now on the road. Slowly I took it to local events and twice to the New Jersey shore on a day trip. Before long my seven year old daughter was my sidekick.

After getting it home I researched using the web for the name tag that was in the car: "Deserter." Yahoo has two Deserter sites: [WWW.GEOCITIES.COM/DESERTEROWNERSGROUP](http://WWW.GEOCITIES.COM/DESERTEROWNERSGROUP) and [AUTOS.GROUPS.YAHOO.COM/GROUP/DESERTEROWNERSGROUP](http://AUTOS.GROUPS.YAHOO.COM/GROUP/DESERTEROWNERSGROUP). Also on eBay under Deserter one day popped up the August 1969 *Car and Driver* magazine, it was a dune buggy issue and it also had the essay "Who Killed the Corvair?" I knew I had one or two of these in my Corvair-related magazines and, lo and behold, Deserter GS with a mid-engine stock Corvair motor could go 0-60 in 4.7 seconds. There was also a Crown ad for converting a VW buggy to Corvair motor, boldly stated 123 MPH in 11 seconds. Farr out!

The Deserters mainly came about by the efforts of Alex Dearborn, of Marblehead, Massachusetts, and the support of many talented people including the staff of Autodynamics, Reeves Callaway of Callaway Corvettes. Alex wanted to sell a car like the Meyers Manx on the east coast. The idea was to come up with a better Manx, a clone with a longer wheelbase (84") for better road manners, and built with the needed engine coverage. The Manx was not legal in Massachusetts due to insufficient engine coverage. The GTs were more like



a sports car, with lessons learned from running the early Deserters in SCCA road races, quarter mile ovals, ice races, and Pikes Peak.

There were four models of Deserters:

1967-69 Deserter series 1, 84" wheelbase fiberglass-bodied rear engine kit using VW chassis.

1969-72 Deserter GT, 84" wheelbase restyled car with side pods, wedge-

shaped nose, curved windshield, gull-wing hardtop option.

1968-72 Deserter GS and GS/GT, both with 85" wheelbase, mid-engine, using Autodynamics-built tubular space frame designed for Corvair engines, Volkswagen, or Porsche 912/911 engines. The same frame could be used in both body styles.

As for the future of the Deserter GT: recently the original molds were sold and are now are on the west coast, for intention of reproducing. No updated information as of when. Bob Elliot, a strong Deserter enthusiast, is working on a mold on the east coast and he has the side tanks already available now.

Now, my Deserter GT is on a non-VW frame. I have been told it is a frame that was offered by J.C. Whitney. I was also told it was a Sears. So to me it is still unknown. I did acquire a virgin gull-wing door

hardtop roof. But it was not practical for the application of changing out like a hardtop for a Mercedes or early T-Birds. When I listed it on eBay, it was sold in less than ten hours.

My future plan is to change out the electric fuel pump system to the Corvair fuel pump. I like hard tubing, not rubber hoses and a fuel pump rubber diaphragm that is located over the exhaust header. I'd like to maybe race it one day, once I get an enclosed trailer to haul it long distances. I've heard, from a member of Bayshore Corvair Association in New Jersey, that there are two GS/GTs in New Jersey. He also had seen a Deserter at Lime Rock years ago. I think it would be interesting if we could get people with Corvair-powered oddities in CORSA.

(Rent or buy the original movie *The Thomas Crown Affair* from 1968, starring the late great Steve McQueen, the dune buggies used in that movie are not Deserters but are 140 HP Corvairs. The location of the action shots with these Vair powered buggies was Cranes Beach, Massachusetts, bordering the town of Marblehead where Autodynamics was based. It has been said that Steve McQueen, who also drove the action shots, added the buggies to his collection. Several clones popped up for years after this movie was made.)

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