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Marblehead's dune buggies find new lives

By Mike Stucka , Staff writer

MARBLEHEAD - In the early '70s, hair was long, music was fresh, and teenager John Coutinho was finishing a dune buggy in Swampscott to pick up "chicks."

Today, haircuts are shorter, but Coutinho is still driving the same Deserter dune buggy, this time with his 5- and 8-year-old daughter "chicklets" strapped into the back seat.

Nearly four decades after their creation in a Marblehead race-car shop, Deserters are still running strong. Of perhaps 700 made, at least 90 are still on the road or being worked on. And these days, their owners are finding each other again on the Internet, said Bob Elliott of Hopedale, who started DeserterOwnersGroup.org to pull people together.

"It was the amazing thing," Elliott said, "because prior to the Internet, we all thought we might have the last Deserter cars."

Hardly. Deserters remain alive and well, both in memories and in driveways and garages.

Alex Dearborn, father of the Deserters in Marblehead, still runs a company with the same name - Dearborn Automobile Co. - that is now a Topsfield business specializing in rare Mercedes. Facing new interest, Dearborn wrote "The Deserter Book: The Fun Cars from Marblehead" and expected to sell maybe 20 copies of the 100 in his first printing. Today, he doesn't even have a copy for himself from the second printing.

Deserters will always be a work in progress. Because most were kits adapted to scrapped Volkswagen Beetles and built by amateurs, they took on parts of their owners' personalities and skills. Coutinho still has things to do to his Deserter that he meant to do 34 years ago. Now living in Hopkinton, he said the dune buggy encouraged him to become an engineer.

"It was so much fun," he said. "It was hard work. I know every square inch of that thing. If it makes a little noise, I know what that noise is."

Unlikely starts

The Deserters were born with Dearborn, who came out of Boston University to approach Autodynamics, a Marblehead company that made Formula Vee race cars. Dearborn asked to become a race-car driver.

"Back then, I wasn't at all afraid of asking a ridiculous favor," Dearborn recalled with a smile.

Autodynamics' work was mostly seasonal. Dearborn, seeing the growing popularity of dune buggies in California, cloned a car called the Manx. The Deserter was born, and Dearborn's contract with Autodynamics gave the company work in the slow winter months.

The Manxes were not legal on the streets, however, and Dearborn saw this as another opportunity. He made

Deserters street-legal from the beginning, and they immediately became popular. In the winters, Autodynamics built two cars a day, with the Deserters' fiberglass bodies stacked up like Dixie cups outside on Barnard Street.

Bill Woodhead, a 69-year-old Gloucester sculptor who built the Deserter bodies, remembers a Marblehead crew composed of English literature majors, hicks from New Hampshire, brawlers, drug addicts and artists. After one fight in Maddie's Sail Loft, Autodynamics employees were banned for a month. Founders Ray Caldwell and Fred Jackson, both Ivy League educated, started the company in Marblehead because of a woman.

"It was Ray, really. Ray was a racer; he married a German," Woodhead said. "People thought she'd be comfortable in Marblehead. She was very cultured. She occasionally ate truffles. The good part of it was in Marblehead there was a well-trained group of people who could do anything."

And they did. The first set of Deserters was called the Series One, a general rip-off of the Manx. Later came the GT bodies. Then came the GS frames, which took away the need for a Volkswagen base. The cars got more popular, and Dearborn got himself invited to a Bahamas Grand Prix to use a Deserter as a pace car.

To Florida in a dune buggy

He drove from Marblehead to Florida in January, taking the dune buggy mostly along the beach, driving under piers and returning to roads only when he encountered cliffs. After he caught the ferry to the Bahamas, the fun continued.

"It was so much fun, it should have been illegal," Dearborn said. "In fact, some of it was."

Dearborn sold the Deserter business to Autodynamics, which got a major contract to race a Dodge Challenger. Autodynamics expanded, Chrysler quit the racing business, and Autodynamics folded. Autodynamics is gone, but many of the Deserters remain, becoming ever more personalized by their owners.

There are new owners like Mike Ragonese of Hopedale, who has worked with cars his whole life but only recently got into Deserters. His dune buggy now boasts the original, wimpy Volkswagen engine that's now tweaked to 275 horsepower. Asked whether it would beat a Ferrari, Ragonese said maybe.

"If you're talking 0 to 60 (mph), for sure," he said. "But get around 80 and bye-bye."

And there are owners like Lt. Col. Charlie Tupper, who sold his first Deserter in 1970 to actress Jane Holzer as he was joining the U.S. Air Force. Tupper now works in Germany, coordinating medical crews bringing wounded soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan; his newest Deserter is safely at home in South Carolina.

Like most of the Deserter owners still out there, Tupper says his work isn't done. The brakes need some work. The rear axle needs some seals. Maybe he'll clean up the engine. And change the seats.

When Tupper returns to the United States, another decades-old Deserter will hit the road.