

A graveyard of small aluminium boats

The growth of *Saab* shot skywards like its planes. The seemingly inevitable Second World War came and, when its end was finally in sight, the firm's directors RAGNAR WAHRGREN and SVEN OTTERBECK started to think about alternatives. Who would need fighter planes once the war was over? It appeared to be more lucrative to build light and durable rowing boats out of aluminium rather than planes. Seriously, in 1944 this idea was top of the list in plans for the future of *Saab* – ahead of prefabricated houses and built-in kitchen equipment.

But instead of ending, the war flared up again even more violently and drove away all these ideas. Prefabricated houses, kitchen equipment and light aluminium boats went down the drain.

The decision not to build boats was not a difficult one for the plane manufacturers. They built 250 of these little aluminium craft with a pair of small aerofoils under the bow and they sold a few in Africa but it was just not possible to turn them into a profitable business. The boats were good on the water but not on the market. *Saab* concluded its excursion into the boat building industry and scuttled the small aluminium boats. The traces of this nautical escapade disappeared with a short gurgle. They can still be viewed by experienced divers: the graveyard of the small aluminium boats is on the bottom of Lake Vänern near Trollhättan.



Out of the air and onto the water: after the end of the Second World War, *Saab* were looking to branch out from manufacturing aircraft and thought that the future lay in small boats like this one, made of aluminium and with short aerofoils under the bow. 250 of these little aluminium craft were built, and here one of them is being demonstrated by its constructor KURT SJÖGREN and his assistant. But things did not go as intended and *Saab* were to be more in their element on dry land . . . (See page 16)

yesterday," they would say and a fantastic horror story would follow. The cold mist of horror would penetrate the very bones of their listeners, and the blood in their veins would turn to ice. The more dreadful the story, the better. A discreet smile in the corner of his mouth would indicate that the man telling the tale was well satisfied with himself, his *Saab* and the world.

The "lunatic factor" came into play ten thousand times per annum. And that is why the *Saab* survived.

These ten thousand "life-savers" were the enthusiasts and the madmen who bought their first *Saab* and so became an inseparable part of the *Saab* family. The *Saab* was a part of their life, a part of their philosophy of life. They had a feeling for the unusual technology, the uncommon front-wheel drive and the weird two-stroke engines. They were the *Saab* crazies. Simply mad about the *Saab*.

Pride of ownership

Everybody who drove a *Saab* in the USA of the Sixties was part of a kind of secret society. *Saab* drivers recognized in each other a kindred spirit, a blood brother. *Saab* drivers stuck together, united by their pride, and shared their experiences. In 1964, LENNART LONNEGREN, *Saab*'s PR manager for the USA from 1963 to September 1989, drove his two-stroke *Saab* 96 to a club meeting in Philadelphia. On the bridge spanning the River Delaware, he met another *Saab* coming towards him on the opposite side of the road, a rare occurrence in those days: at that time, there were not many *Saabs* about in the USA.

The sight of Lonnegren's *Saab* 96 triggered a huge chorus of hooting and wild gesticulations: "Stop, stop!" Lonnegren became quite scared. All this commotion made him think that he had at least lost a wheel. But his fears

were soon put to rest: the hooting driver only wanted to talk to him. It did not bother him at all that they were blocking the opposite lanes across Delaware Bridge during the rush hour. They drove to the next parking area and the other driver – let's call him Mr. Parker – pointed out to Lonnegren the long ladder he was transporting.

Mr. Parker travelled around the country selling cladding for houses. "Since I have been driving a *Saab*," he burred enthusiastically, "I have saved myself a lot of trouble with clients. Before it went like this: you need cladding for your house. May I show you? Do you have a ladder? Could I use it? Not necessary any more. Now I can take my own ladder with me." He indicated the huge piece of equipment, which occupied the whole length of his *Saab* 96. "That is not possible with any other car, only a *Saab*." With sparkling eyes he got back behind the wheel, leaving behind a speechless Lonnegren. But that is how they were, the crazy *Saab* drivers of the Sixties. Definitely *Saab*-mad.

No status is the best status

Until 1966, American *Saab* customers remained a homogeneous band of people, who were completely different from everybody else. In this vast country, the USA, with her strong car industry and a huge choice of all kinds of international makes the purchase of a *Saab* was not only a decision to buy a car, but also a decision to go against convention. This "thing" from Sweden ("Where is Sweden?") had front-wheel drive ("What? Front-wheel drive? What's the good of that?") and, to crown it all, a two-stroke engine ("What the devil is a two-stroke engine?") *Saab* in America was "one against all the rest". A *Saab* was the very manifestation of determined noncon-

Monogamy

During the introduction of the 99, 900 and 9000 in the USA, *Saab* had the same problem as with all *Saabs* right back to the *Saab* 96. Nobody believed the newest model was a true *Saab*. Above all there were complaints from the dealers. Just six months after the release of the 99, pleading letters with the following request were arriving at *Saab*'s US headquarters: "Please tell the Swedes to send us the 96 again! Our customers want the 96 and not the 99." *Saab* drivers believed in faithfulness and monogamy. Their love of "their" car was strong, so strong in fact, that even the attractions of a new beauty could not persuade them otherwise. To this day the tradition still exists, and will no doubt carry forth with future *Saabs* to come.

Scouts

Such endurance tests needed careful planning. In August 1985, an expedition to "spy out the land" with a camera took place at the Alabama International Speedway. In Sweden, Talladega was an almost unknown track and to put an end to this handicap, they produced a video. PR-director JIM FREEMAN drove several laps in his *Camaro*, and STEVEN ROSSI, *Saab's* press officer in the USA, handled the video camera – out of the sunroof at speeds in excess of 100 mph.

The next problem was the biggest one: *Saab* wanted to rent the track for a period of 25 days. Not one speedway in the world can be made available for such a length of time, and the same applied to Talladega. *Harley-Davidson*, the world's most famous manufacturer of motorcycles, held a contract for carrying out tests there during the period in question but after intensive negotiations, *Harley-Davidson* were kind enough to waive their test rights for 25 days.

Such endurance tests do need a "dress rehearsal". You have to know if the tyres can stand the strain and how much fuel is needed and you have to pay attention to all the small but important things so as to avoid problems later.

Between 29 September and 5 October 1985, a team of eight carried out a trial in Talladega – with a black 9000 *Turbo* company car from *Saab* in Orange, Connecticut, which was later used as the camera car for shooting the "Long Run". The black *Saab* had a nickname: *Car No. 4*.

The results of the trial run were very encouraging. *Car No. 4* covered 4,681 laps of 2.66 miles each, a total of 20,047 km. If you discounted the 108 pit stops, an average speed of 212 km/h was reached, if the pit stops were

included the average speed was 203 km/h. The car used one full tank for each 47 laps. Hand pumps were used to transfer petrol from 55 gallon drums into the tanks. Consequently, the pit stops were extremely long and the team knew before the Long Run that they would have to reduce the time in the pits.

DON NAMAN, the Speedway manager, learned his first *Saab* lesson during the trial run. An "average speed of 110 mph" had been mentioned during preliminary discussions. Mr. Naman came along after the first 10 laps and snapped at OLLE GRANLUND.

"You wanted to drive at 110 mph, but you are doing 130 mph now. You can't do that with mass production cars. That's too dangerous."

"We know what we are doing."

"The tyres will not take the stress."

"They will."

"I give you five more laps, and they will be finished."

Olle Granlund should have placed a bet with Don Naman. The tyres took it and took it and took it. "Donny" came back in the afternoon.

"When did you change the tyres?"

"We didn't change the tyres."

"When are you going to change the tyres?"

"Perhaps tonight."

The next morning, the 9000 *Turbo* was still tearing round the track using the same set of tyres. Don Naman was more than impressed. He simply could not believe it.

With the very promising results of the pre-tests under their belt, PER GILLBRAND, director for engine development, OLLE GRANLUND, director for the development of new cars, BOSSE HELLBERG, director for quality control, and STEVEN ROSSI travelled to Chicago where they met BURDETTE MARTIN on 2 May 1986. Martin was the

"Doubting Thomases"

None of the Southerners really believed that the "Long Run" would turn out to be a long run. Nobody expected all three *Turbos* to survive 20 days and nights. *Audi* had tried before *Saab* in Talladega and gave up after 2 days with engine problems. The people in Talladega had had their experiences and based their contracts on them. The NASCAR commissioners, fire department, security and food supplies were all contracted for six days only. The security team who knew what it was like from other events and race tracks, laughed their heads off. "After five days at the latest," they said, "you will turn tail and vanish." The NASCAR commissioners were also very sure. "Six days are enough. The Swedes will be gone by then." They were all fundamentally wrong. After six days, a certain nervousness appeared when all the contracts had to be prolonged.

The "doubting Thomases" changed their minds after all contracts had been extended. They started to believe in success and stood completely behind *Saab*. They understood that *Saab* was a "winner", not a "loser". Winners demanded respect and support. The "Thomases" were very proud to be part of the "Long Run", and to be part of the records that *Saab* would achieve on "their" Speedway. Before, the *Saab* people were all foreigners and