

Kelly's Heroes revive and relive WW II

by Gail L. Winfree

There are World War II heroes still around who show their battle scars rather than talk about their war experiences. They aren't the privates, sergeants, or generals who fought the great battles. They're the jeeps, halftracks, and GMC trucks that took American soldiers in and out of these battles.

And there's a group of Germans and Americans who recognize these vehicles for the part they played during that period of history. Kelly's Heroes is a historical vehicle club specializing in U.S. vehicles from World War II. The club's 16 members—3 Americans and 13 Germans—are devoted to collecting, restoring, and upholding all types of vehicles and equipment from the second world war period.

"We've been called a museum on wheels," says George Abramshe, the club's American president. Abramshe founded Kelly's Heroes, with Reinhold Schmitt, a Kaiserslautern businessman, in 1979. Both owned original World War II jeeps and met through a friend.

They began attending meetings sponsored by military vehicle clubs in Belgium and Luxembourg. Some members of the Luxembourg club suggested the two start a similar club in Germany.

"We were just two guys with old jeeps and an interest in World War II," Abramshe says. "We started making contacts and attending meetings with other clubs in Europe. Every month or so, a new person would join us until we picked up enough members to officially start our own club.

"You need at least seven people to form a club under German law. We were an unofficial club for several months before we had enough members to write a constitution and register on September 14, 1979."

The club takes its name from the movie, "Kelly's Heroes," which fits the club's image, according to Abramshe. "The movie was about a bunch of guys, soldiers, who didn't want to have anything to do with war. They just wanted to have a good time, like us.

"We have no political views and we don't allow any type of weapons or mockups in the club. We wear Army greens with our club name and other patches, but we don't wear rank insignia," says Abramshe.

Most club members have some type of military background, ranging from civilian labor service groups to the foreign legion. Abramshe, a Vietnam veteran, says the 16 members are scattered throughout Germany, though the club is based in the Kaiserslautern area.

Kelly's Heroes has a club room in Morlautern, a suburb of Kaiserslautern, where members meet occasionally. "We don't hold regular meetings because only five of our members are located in the Rheinland-Pfalz area and all of our members have jobs. We do get together before a big event and a few times a year for social events," says Abramshe.

The club's 13 vehicles, ranging from jeeps to half-tracks, and 8 trailers, all loaded with original World War II equipment, including a complete field kitchen, can be seen several times a year on the Autobahn convoying to one of the many military vehicle club meetings held throughout Europe.

"We have a good reputation and working relationship with the other clubs in Europe," says Abramshe. "These kinds of clubs are more popular outside of Germany, especially in France and the Benelux with some clubs being over 15 years old. We participate in their meeting and they come to ours, usually in full force." (The club hosts Camp Kelly in the French army training area in Mehlingen between Kaiserslautern and Sembach every May. It's one of the biggest military vehicle club meetings in Europe and visitors are welcomed.)

There are about 10 such clubs in Germany; some collect U.S. vehicles only, some German vehicles only, and some a mixture of the two, according to Abramshe.

"We get a lot of interest at our meetings; however, we don't get many new members. A person needs a military vehicle to participate in events," say Abramshe. "You're talking about an initial investment of between DM 6,000 and DM 15,000. There aren't a lot of people willing to put in the money and time needed to get one of these things on the road."

Abramshe says that most old military vehicles are bought at auctions and through surplus dealers. An unrestored jeep can cost as little as DM 6,000 with no guarantee or as much as DM 15,000 with a diesel engine and German inspection. A three-quarter truck runs between DM 5,000 and DM 7,000 and a command car can go as high as DM 25,000, Abramshe explains.

"Many of the vehicles are sold in France and the French are now keeping jeep engines for some reason. So if you buy a jeep in France, you can expect to pay about DM 2,500 for an engine to go in it," says Abramshe.

"These vehicles are generally in good mechanical condition; however, deterioration can sometimes be a problem. We convoy to all events and meetings, meaning vehicles have to pass inspection. You can count on having to put in some work to get them on the road."

Abramshe has noticed an increased interest in military vehicle clubs over the past 10 years, but still sees problems, especially in Germany. "Some Germans associate us with terrorist groups, which is ridiculous, while others just don't like to see military displays like ours.

"Many of the older Germans have bad memories of the war and being taken to POW camps when they see our vehicles; whereas, in other countries, where these clubs are very popular, older people remember being liberated when we pull up.

"Outside of Germany, we're very welcomed. When we drive through an area, people come out and wave flags, clap, yell, run up to touch us, and cheer us on. A couple of years ago, we were participating in a liberation celebration in Antwerp, Belgium. An old woman came up to me and started thanking me for liberating her family. I wasn't even born then, I though."