

# BIRTH OF THE BRC: THE BUILD, SEPTEMBER, 1940

BY DAVID KANALLY WITH PHOTOS FROM BOB BRANDON AND THE HEINZ HISTORY CENTER

What heady times, what stressful times September and October of 1940 must have been for the American Bantam Car Company! As we've seen in past articles about Bantam's journey to the jeep, Harry Payne, Frank Fenn and Harold Crist had by this time 75 years ago convinced the Army that not only was a 1/4-ton four wheel drive truck possible, but that Bantam was the best company for the job!

Now all they had to do was make good on their promise. That's no mean feat for any car company. Clearly Willys and Ford could afford to wait and see how Bantam's efforts would pan out. But for Bantam, the jeep contract was a do-or-die affair.

Ralph Turner, in a 1982 interview with Bob Lindsey, recalled specific details of those days. "I had the job of cutting the metal and then putting it together. I can remember Crist sitting by the hour on a nail keg changing the design here and there as we finalized the first prototype."

Turner got the steel for the frame from the neighboring Armco steel plant. "I took it back to



September 4, 1940. The body tub assembly, complete with canvas-upholstered seats, awaits its fitting to the chassis. This tub was hand built by Ralph Turner and Chet Hempfing.

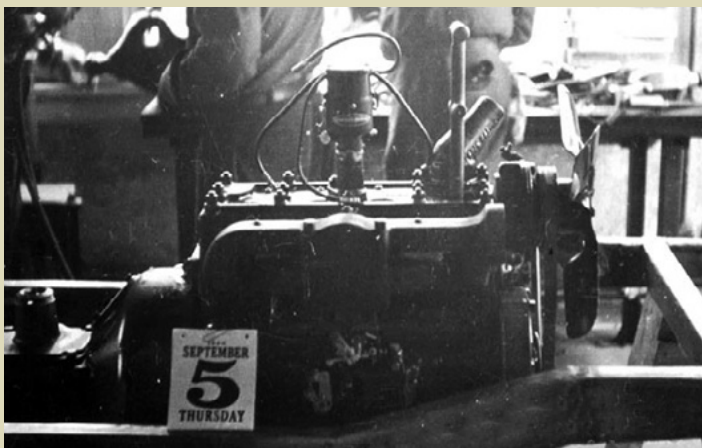
Bantam and made a box frame." "A box frame is light and strong because it has the ability to twist and give without breaking. We then cut the sheet metal to shape, and formed the body of the Bantam. Crist wanted a curved and rounded hood. No one knew how to make a rounded hood, so Crist hired a German metalsmith to do the job. The man took an acetylene torch and a series of hammers, and pounded a perfectly rounded hood."



Ralph Turner lowers the engine onto the chassis with help from Paul Green.

"Crist, Probst, Hempfing and I worked almost 24 hours a day during these 49 days. Sometimes, the project would be on schedule, and I would go home to get some sleep. No sooner would I get to sleep than Crist would call and say, "Come on back, Ralph, we have a new problem. I never thought men could get so tired and still work."

And work they did. For this first-of-a kind vehicle, there were no dies. The Bantam factory was not "tooled up" to create some large number of Bantam Reconnaissance Cars. Every cut of the frame



September 5, 1940. The engine is mounted on the chassis.



September 6, 1940. The distinctive rounded grill is mounted at right.





*The body tub is mounted on the chassis. Note the extension cords, likely used for portable tools and work lights, as well as the mechanic's creeper in the photo.*

members, every bend, every angle, every weld, was made by hand. ABS member and master BRC restorer Duncan Rolls, who studied every square millimeter of all available photos of the first jeep says that the welds on the frame rails are plentiful and visible...indicating that the Bantam team used no jig, and had no extra time to grind down weld beads for cosmetic purposes. The Bantam team acquired as many components as possible from suppliers; including, most

famously, the engine from Continental and the axles from Spicer. Some of the key components arrived within a day or two of the target completion date, September 21, 1940. On that day, the Bantam team brought its creation outdoors for a photo with the Bantam and supplier principals responsible for it. Two days later, it was in the hands of the Army at Camp Holabird for testing. Bantam had made good on its promise.



*The world's first jeep, Sept. 21, 1940. (l-r) Karl Probst, Harold Blair, Firestone Rep., Chet Hempfling (wearing cap), Walter Hempfling, Bob Brown (Army civilian engineer), unidentified, Ralph Turner, Harold Crist, Ernest Bush, unidentified, Paul Green (wearing white hat), Bill Klein from Gabriel Snubbers), unidentified, Mr. Gruber (wearing cap), unidentified.*