MG Post War Expansion: Go West Young Man!

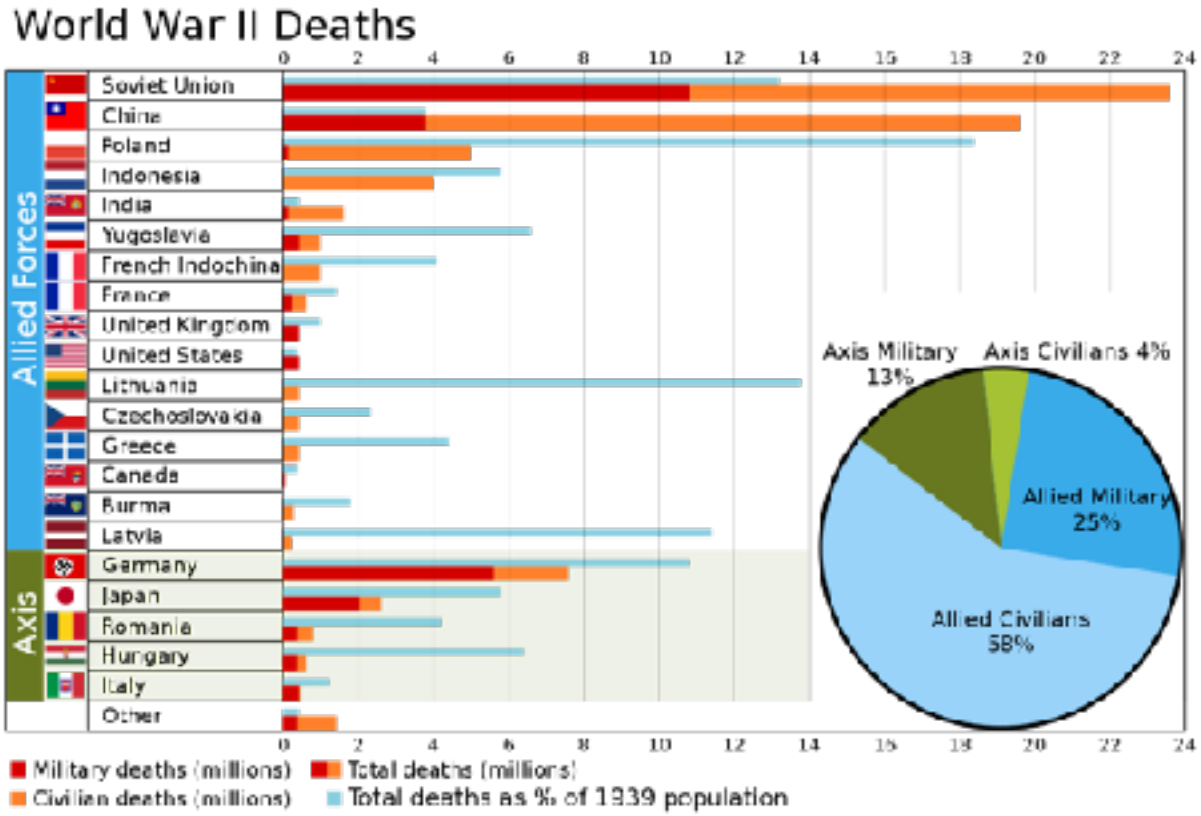
By Bob Vitrikas

Prior to WWII MG's presence in the U.S. was nearly invisible. Approximately 85% of MGs were sold in the UK and very few of the other 15% went to the U.S.. How many pre-war MGs have you seen in the U.S.? Perhaps the first MG sold in the U.S. was sold to Edsel Ford, son of Henry Ford, by the London Ford agent on 18 February 1930. According to Dick Knudson's book, "M.G.: The Sports Car America Loved First," Edsel enjoyed driving his MG M Type Midget around Detroit and the Michigan countryside for three years before donating it to the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn showing 27,509 miles on the clock. Coincidentally, his son, Henry Ford II, bought the last MG imported into the U.S., a black 1980 Limited Edition which is also in the museum's collection.

The "Deuce" seated at the wheel of his brand new MGB. Photo courtesy Pinterest.

Another wealthy early '30s MG owner was Barron Collier, Jr. Barron and his brothers, Miles and Sam, were sportsmen who loved fast cars and in 1930 and 1931 they had constructed a home made road course on their Pocantico Hills, New York estate, Overlook. While on their European honeymoon, Barron's wife Barbara fell in love (love was in the air after all) with the spritely MG J2 and promptly bought one for her new husband. The little J2 prompted Barron to take it up a notch. In 1933 the Collier brothers renamed the Overlook Automobile Racing Club, the Automobile Racing Club of America. Joined by their enthusiast friends, a series of races were held at Overlook, later expanding to use public roads, and MG found itself in the middle of early amateur road racing in America! It all came to a screeching halt on 1 September 1939 when war broke out in Europe and two years later America was decisively engaged in the war.

May 8, 1945: The Second World War was finally over in Europe. The war in the Pacific would continue for another four months. The guns would finally fall silent around the world on September 2, 1945, six years and one day after Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Europe was in ruins and Germany's major cities were reduced to burned out piles of rubble. So much for the 1,000 year Reich. The cost of lives, military and civilian, was staggering. In war civilians often pay the highest price; 50-55 million died in WWII in addition to 21-25 million military deaths. Over 50% of these were Chinese and Soviet. This on top of 14 million military and civilian deaths in World War I.



Take a moment to study this chart. You may be surprised to learn that the Soviet Union suffered nearly 24 million civilian and military deaths amounting to 13% of the total population. Compare that to Germany's 7.5 million or 11% of the population and Japan's 2.7 million or 5.8% of the population. The UK sustained 383,700 military deaths and 67,100 civilian deaths, about 1% of the population, while the U.S. had 291,557 combat deaths. For comparison total U.S. combat deaths in all wars (Revolutionary War through Afghanistan) is 666,441. Total U.S. COVID deaths as of May 2023 are 1,127,152 and documented U.S. abortions in 2018 totaled 878,000. Enough about that.

The combined effects of World War I and II were devastating to the British economy and its Empire. Britain was exhausted and devastated. Many of her major industrial cities lay in ruins, a substantial portion of her male work force were casualties of war and there were major shortages of goods for rebuilding the country. Up until 1950, rationing of petrol was strictly enforced, barely enough for 100 miles a month of "pleasure motoring." Rationing of some food stuffs would continue until 1955. Export sales were key to recovery and steel was allocated based on number overseas sales, "Export or die."

The writing was on the wall, the British Empire could no longer be sustained. It would be replaced by the Commonwealth and the U.S. would replace Britain as the pre-eminent world power but remained a staunch ally and trade partner. In contrast, the U.S. was relatively untouched by the war and emerged an economic powerhouse with millions of returning servicemen and women anxious to get on with life; marriage, babies, houses and of course automobiles. Over two-million U.S. servicemen and women passed through England during WWII and many had fond memories of those adorable little British sports cars, chief among them were MGs. The stage was set for MG to "go west young man" to the lucrative American market.

In the MG workshops post war reality was stark. The heart and soul of MG, Cecil Kimber, had been fired in late 1941 and met an untimely death in a freak train accident in February 4, 1945. In his place George 'Pop' Propert served as General Manager during and after the war, under the watchful eye of Nuffield brass at Cowley who did not approve of frivolous expenditures such as motor sports. Fortunately the factory had been spared from bombing and the factory floor was quickly cleared of war time production machinery and the assembly line reconstructed. MG has always been an assembly plant, not a manufacturing factory such as the Ford River Rouge factory where raw materials went in one end and cars emerged from the other. As a result the MG factory could be quickly reconfigured but was totally dependent on outside suppliers. Being a part of the enormous Nuffield organization largely solved that concern.

Like most manufacturers, MG's immediate post war products were based on pre-war designs. Thus the 1939 TB Midget design was slightly updated and sold as the TC Midget. TC sales began in late 1945 and continued until late 1949. A total of 10,000 TCs were sold, more than triple any previous MG model. All were right hand drive and fitted with 19 inch wire wheels. A strikingly beautiful design with nearly perfect proportions, the TC became an instant classic. In his seminal work, "MG by McComb" noted

MG author Wilson McComb let us in on a secret. Contrary to popular belief, just 2,001 TCs were sold in the U.S. compared to 3,408 sold in Britain. Hmmm….

Nevertheless, the impact of the those 2,001 TCs on future U.S. sales cannot be overstated. The TCs were widely used around the world in motorsport competitions, thus gaining publicity far beyond their numbers. In 1949, the factory encouraged this by releasing a competition manual specifying factory tested and approved modifications that raised the power of the meager 1250 cc engine from 54.4 hp to as much as 97.5 hp when fitted with a supercharger.

The timeless classic lines of the MG TC

After 18 months the TC was joined by the four door, four seater Y-type salon. Also a pre-war design, the Y-type used a single carburetor version of the TC 1250 cc motor and a sturdy, but heavy, boxed section frame. Significantly it had an independent coil spring front suspension and rack and pinion steering, major improvements over the TC, but it weighed 550 pounds more than the TC seriously degrading its performance. Sales were disappointing. Oh dearie me…

In May 1949 production of MG's old competitor, Riley, was transferred to Abingdon and George Propert was replaced by Jack Tatlow, a Riley manager. Tatlow learned to respect MG's production planning and parts control and the old rivalry was soon forgotten.

MG sales needed a boost and S.V. Smith, MG's overseer at Nuffield, asked MG for ideas. "Well thank you very much for asking!" MG responded with a new design in just two weeks. Truth be told it wasn't really a new design but essentially a re-bodied Y-type. Well why not? The Y-type had a much better front suspension and vastly improved steering so for starters MG loped 5 inches out of the wheelbase so it matched the T-type. The chassis passed over rather than under the rear axle. The Y-type suspension necessitated smaller diameter (15" vs 19") disc wheels vs the T-type's wire wheels. More powerful two-leading shoe drum brakes were fitted to the front. A hypoid type rear axle allowed for the transmission to be slightly lowered. The TC's final drive ratio was retained but the smaller wheels effectively lowered the gearing allowing the TD to match the TC's acceleration despite a 170 lb increase in weight. The Y-type wide ratio gearbox was used vs the TC's close ratio box. The engine was improved in detail but power output was unchanged at 54.4 hp. A later model, the Mk II, raised the output slightly to 57 hp. The rack and pinion steering could easily be adapted for either right or left hand drive. The TD body was four inches wider than the TC, and more generously proportioned fenders and bumpers were added fore and aft. Come to think of it, those were a lot of updates in just two weeks! Introduced in late 1949, the press responded favorably, though some traditionalists mourned the loss of wire wheels. Sales soared. Combined MG and Riley production for 1950 reached 10,000 units for the first time. In 1952 combined sales of the MG TD and its sister salon the YB, reached 11,560 units of which an astounding 10,621 were sold overseas. In 1952 the numbers were even more lop-sided, 10,592 TDs were exported and just 246 were sold to British MG enthusiasts. Wow! Export and thrive! When sales ended in late 1953, 26,664 TDs had been sold.

The MG TD is still a great design but the wire wheels were missed.

Business was booming for MG in 1950 but they had their sights set on raising the bar a lot higher with the introduction of a sleek, wind cheating body. The racer, built for the 1951 Le Mans 24 hours race, was known as UMG 400, and was the forerunner of the MGA. This wind cheating design raised the TD's top speed by 50% to almost 120 mph. However the driver sat very high in the car so a wider frame was designed to allow a much lower passenger profile. Thus in 1952 the stage was set for the MGA design to succeed the rather dated looking TD. The prototype was designated EX 175.

UMG 400 on the track at the 1951 Le Mans 24 Hour race. Notice how high up the driver is sitting. A revised chassis design fixed the problem.

A major leadership change occurred in late 1952 when John Thornley, "Mr. MG," was promoted to General Manager 21 years to the day after he was hired by MG! He was the embodiment of an MG enthusiast having bought his first MG, an M-type Midget, in 1930 and in October 1930 attended the first MG Car Club meeting. He served as the Club's first secretary in 1931 and worked at MG from 1931 until his retirement as Director and General Manager in 1969.

1952 was a noteworthy year for British car mergers. Long time rivals Nuffield Group and Austin Motor Company were merged to form the third largest motor manufacturing business in the world, the British Motor Corporation. Lord Nuffield handed over the reins to Austin manager Sir Leonard Lord. This would prove to be poor timing for MG. In late 1952, shortly after Thornley took over the reins at MG, he proudly took their new design to newly appointed BMC Chief Sir Leonard Lord for his go-ahead. Lord turned them down flat. Donald Healey had gotten to Lord three days earlier at the 1952 Motor Show and convinced him to build the car at the Austin factory in Longbridge. Its appearance was similar to the MG design. It was called the Austin-Healey 100.

What now?

TD sales fell 40% in 1953. Something had to be done. And done fast. And with very little investment. What emerged was the MG TF Midget. Amazingly, but with typical MG pluck, the TF was literally designed on the MG factory floor by Cecil Cousins, Alec Hounslow, Syd Enever and a panel beater by the name of Billy Wilkens. In just two weeks, these gifted men built the TF prototype and then turned it over to the design office to draw up the plans. What emerged was what is considered by many as the most beautiful of all the square rigged MGs. However, when it was introduced at the 1953 Motor Show, it was derided as indicative of a company which had lost its impetus and ability. As if to rub salt into the wound, the highly successful TR 2 was introduced the same year. Yikes!

Three MG superstars clockwise from left; John Thornley, Syd Enever and Sir Stirling Moss discussing instrument placement on the fastest MG ever, EX 181 which exceeded 254 mph on the Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah.

From its earliest days, MG understood that competition improves the breed and sales. Thornley had been deeply involved in MG competitions and record breaking so it is no surprise that MG soon got back into record breaking with Goldie Gardner and George Eyston leading the charge. MG engineer Syd Enever managed to coax 213 hp @ 7,000 rpm out of the supercharged but relatively simple TD 1250 cc motor, sufficient to push the Gardner-MG record breaker to over 210 mph. MG added to its racing pedigree in the U.S., taking the Team Prize at the 1952 Sebring 12 Hour endurance race. To boost TF sales, a new 1466 cc engine designated XPEG was developed and the new model designated the MG TF 1500 Midget. Power was boosted from the TF's 57 hp to 63 hp. To highlight the new engine's performance a record breaker designated EX 179 was built using the prototype MGA chassis and a streamlined body inspired by Goldie Gardner. In 1954, driven by long time MG record breaker Captain George Eyston, the XPEG powered streamliner set U.S. and International records in the Class F sprint category at a speed of 153.69 mph; and with Eyston and Ken Miles (yes the same Ken Miles of Ford vs Ferrari fame) at the wheel established records for the six hour category at 121.63 mph and the 12 hour category at 120.87.

The TF was never more than a stop gap measure until the inevitable modern MG would be released. Total sales of the TF and TF 1500 were 9,600 cars of which 3,400 were TF 1500s. North American TF exports totaled 6,235. 1955 was the last year of MG T series production and just 661 MG TF 1500s were exported to North America. Not to worry, the best was yet to come!

Chris and I sure enjoy our TF 1500. She is named "Valentine" because she was dispatched from the factory on 14 February 1955.

If you are interested in learning more about MGs in America, I recommend your buying a copy of Dick Knudson's excellent book on the subject, "M.G.: The Sports Car America Loved First."