

Geländewagen: Mercedes-Benz's G-Class at 40

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Mercedes-Benz's stalwart off-roader, the Geländewagen, turns 40 this year. *Shaun Connors* delves into the history of this light utility 'evergreen' and explores a popularity that shows no sign of waning

In February 2019 Mercedes-Benz's G-Class marks 40 years of continuous production. Over those 40 years and in ever-changing civil and military environments, the G-Class has largely stuck with its original design philosophies.

Mercedes-Benz has mostly opted to continually invest in and enhance the capabilities of the G-Class. The net result of this investment is a design that has adapted to cope with the difficult demands for tactically capable designs that also comply with limiting civil legislation. Perhaps of even greater significance, however, is that the G-Class has survived the emergence of the mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicle and the 'protect everybody against everything all the time' mentality that accompanied the MRAP.



For Australia's Land 121 requirement a stretched single cab with pick-up/tray-type rear body was developed. (Mercedes-Benz)

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Many armed forces have or are acquiring batches of heavily protected 'light vehicles' to carry out roles that a design such as the G-Class might have performed prior to the emergence of asymmetric warfare. To offset the cost of these more heavily armoured vehicles, tactically capable designs such

as the G-Class are often replaced or supplemented by less expensive vehicles for homeland and non-tactical roles. In many cases, those cheaper platforms are commercial pick-up trucks with a 10-year civil life cycle and little more than a coat of flat paint, steel wheels shod with all-terrain tyres, and perhaps weapons racks.

The original G-Class could carry more than most of these pick-up designs are rated to carry, while the current G-Class, when compared with a first-generation model, provides around a 150% increase in payload, for a 10% increase in overall dimensions.

The G-Class still attracts customers that require its almost unique skill set, and during 2017 (figures for 2018 were not available at the time of writing, but are expected to be comparable) around 3,300 examples from 22,000 produced were the '461 military/governmental' variant.

It remains to be seen if the G-Class will match the longevity of the rival Land Rover or Jeep products, the former ended a 67-year continuous production run in January 2016, but it appears G-Class production could run beyond a half century. Such a run would be quite an achievement for a vehicle that at the time of its inception had an anticipated production life span of no more than 10 years.

Growing pains

Development of the G-Class traces back to at least 1972, with the first wooden mock-up made in April 1973 and the first metal prototype appearing in 1974. Throughout its conception stage the idea was to develop a cross-country vehicle that could be present in the new civil all-wheel drive niche, but was primarily capable of addressing military needs. To achieve those goals, it was decided to give more design importance to practicality than aesthetics, hence the distinct utilitarian/boxy shape the G-Class retains to this day.

The Unimog was the lightest all-wheel drive product in the Mercedes-Benz portfolio at the time, and for the G-Class venture the company opted to work in co-operation with Austria's Steyr-Daimler-Puch (SDP). The joint company, in which each had a 50% share, was known as GeländeFahrzeug Gesellschaft (GFG).

A number of names were considered for the new joint venture vehicle, including H2 (Haflinger 2), but this was rejected because of its association with SDP, the manufacturer of the Halfinger light 4x4. The chosen name G-Wagen (often Anglicised to G-Wagon), is short for Geländewagen, meaning all-terrain vehicle. G-Wagen/Wagon was revised to G-Klass/Class in 2002.

Production was to be (and remains) at what is now Magna Steyr's Graz plant in Austria. An initial production target of 9,000 units per year was set, with exports expected to account for 96% of sales. The Mercedes-Benz emblem would be applied to 90% of production, with the remaining 10% being badged Puch for SDP-favoured markets. GFG was dissolved in 1982, with Daimler (Mercedes-Benz being a Daimler brand) taking full ownership of the product.

Green machines

Germany's Bundeswehr evaluated a prototype G-Class in June 1973 and it was widely anticipated that with it Mercedes would win the contract to replace the Bundeswehr's fleet of DKW Munga light

vehicles. This did not happen, however, and in 1976 Volkswagen was awarded a contract for its Iltis, a considerably cheaper vehicle and one that had some component commonality with the outgoing DKW Munga. When Iltis itself required replacing, the G-Wagen was chosen.

With Bundeswehr sales temporarily out of reach, the key decisive factor behind production start-up for the G-Class was an order for 20,000 units for the then-Iranian Imperial Army. Deliveries to Iran did not occur, but production began in February 1979 and the German Border Police and the Argentine Army emerged as first customers for the G-Class. The Norwegian military followed soon after, and a trend of customisation to suit user requirements began with an order from Indonesia.

The 50,000th G-Class was produced in 1986, with the 100,000 mark passed by 1992. As of this writing, more than 300,000 had been produced.

Three of a kind

Throughout its production run, the G-Class has been continuously updated, and a wide variety of engine, gearbox, and body/chassis options have been produced. However, for designation purposes there have been only three series of vehicles: the former 460 series and the current 461 and 463 series. A 462 series designator was applied to what were essentially CKD 461 series built under licence by Hellenic Vehicle Industry SA (ELBO) in Greece from 1991.

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