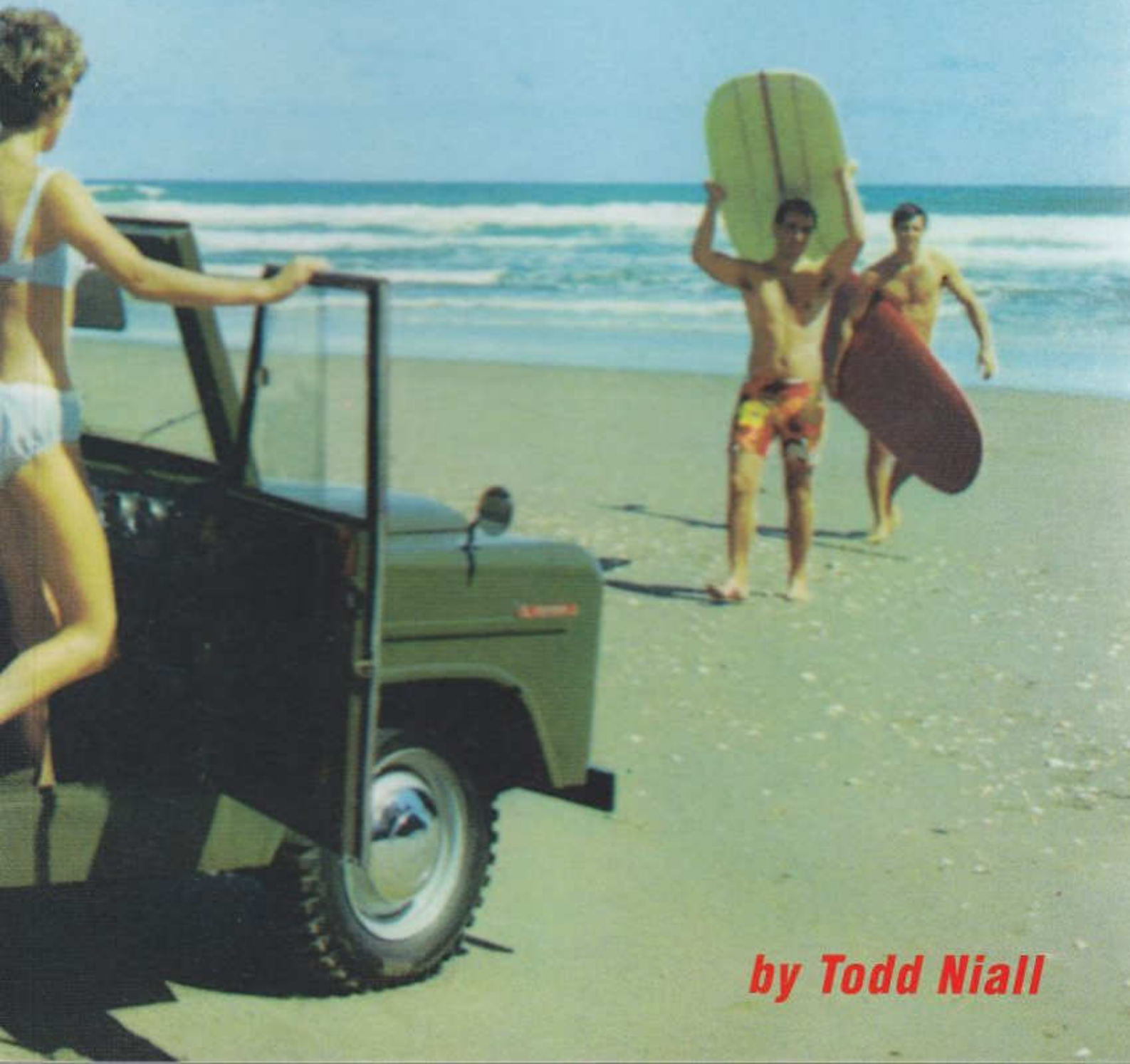


# *The TREKKA Dynasty*



*by Todd Niall*



# The TREKKA Dynasty



10 JIRKA!  
1000 Niall

by Todd Niall

iconic publishing  
New Zealand



Josef Kaplan (centre)  
and friends from quality  
control at the Skoda  
plant in Mlada Boleslav

**The proud Skoda man  
was reduced to tears...**

## czech mates

In New Zealand, Josef Kaplan became Mr Skoda.

Josef Kaplan had nearly a quarter of a century's experience with the Czechoslovakian carmaker under his belt when he and his family landed in New Zealand in 1968.

He was despatched to Skoda's most remote (but nevertheless significant) operation, for what seemed at first like a short-term contract. He became the longest-serving Czechoslovakian Skoda man in New Zealand and part of the company's folklore.

Jerry Dvorzak had been the first to become involved with the serious Skoda trade in New Zealand. Dvorzak was the trade representative at the Czechoslovakian Embassy and a young diplomat comfortable in the Western world.

He had been an enthusiastic cog in the machine that led to the deal for assembling Skodas at Otahuhu from 1961. It was the biggest deal of his career. Dvorzak was a car man, like most of the senior Czechoslovakian trade people in New Zealand, as cars formed the largest part of Czechoslovakia's exports to this country.

Frank Kopečný was the next familiar Czechoslovakian face at the Otahuhu assembly plant (which became Skoda's most enduring car plant in the West). Kopečný was the sales manager for Motokov, the state agency that handled the export dealings for all Czechoslovakian cars, trucks, motorbikes, and related parts.



Trekka: the marriage of a New Zealand-built body and Czechoslovakian

**The day of the Trekka had come – Friday the second of December, 1966.**

## trekka

During 1964 and 1965, while the to-ing and fro-ing continued between Masokov and the New Zealand Government, work began on trial models of the farm vehicle that Phil Andrews envisaged.

The first was an open-topped Jeep-style vehicle with a complicated hand braking system that allowed the driver to lock one or the other of the rear wheels individually. This was a crude but effective means of improving traction in a two-wheel-drive vehicle. The concept was that in slippery conditions, the wheel with little traction could be held, while all the power was applied through the other.

The first prototype was sent to Massey University in Palmerston North, which specialised in agricultural studies. It came through its trials well and was returned to the Turner's Otahuhu factory for further development.

At the start of 1965 Noel Turner hired a body designer to produce a prototype vehicle as a basis for the model which would eventually go to market.

As the project moved closer to reality, Phil Andrews began to worry about the financial risks. Andrews had already formed a new joint venture with Noel Turner, Motor Lines Wholesale, which would handle the production of the new vehicle. But with talk of a thousand units a year, the scale of the operation was far bigger than anything Phil Andrews had ever been involved with before. At the same time, his business partner and friend Brian Elwood, had picked up hints that the Czechoslovakians

to buy single examples of interesting vehicles or components for closer scrutiny. What, if anything, they made of the Trekka is unclear.

Trekka's parts catalogues show that plans were made for a four-wheel drive example, targeting markets such as French Polynesia, Hawaii, and American Samoa. A delivery driver recalls driving to the wharves for shipping, but no one else recalls the left hand of the truck.

Motor Holdings had been unable to capitalise on its New Zealand export market, despite the way being cleared at the highest level by the Australian and the New Zealand governments.

Soon after the Australian opportunity failed, a far more promising one opened. Indonesia.

The once-reluctant Czechoslovakians were now offering further opportunities to introduce the Trekka concept – a rugged utility vehicle, which could be built in small numbers with local parts.

The Czechoslovakian trade representative in Durrum had been the one that put Motor Holdings in contact with an Indonesian agent, PT Immermotors.

Noel Turner visited Indonesia on his return from a tour of the continent in Europe in 1969 and found strong interest in assembling trucks in the Indonesian market. Two Trekkas had been displayed at the Jakarta trade fair that year.

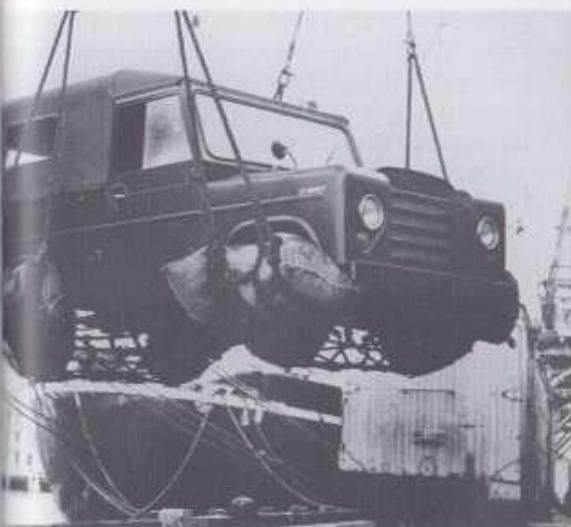
Eighteen months later, the Indonesians placed their first order for a hundred Trekkas in kit form. The initial shipment was to be followed by a further hundred to hundred and fifty each three months, with a view to selling four thousand vehicles a year.

It was an extraordinary opening. The initial order was worth NZ\$130,000, and if the trade expanded as planned the value would reach a million a year.

The financing of the deal looked complex, but was not unusual for Indonesia at the time – a sequence of bank guarantees with guarantees from the Export-Import Bank of Indonesia.

The Trekka was tailor-made for the Indonesian market. It was a newer generation Japanese four-wheel drive, like the original Toyota Land Cruiser. PT Immermotors envisaged being able to produce the local content to around 50 percent within the first year of the deal. A French held to be ambitious.

Motor Holdings appeared to have secured a foothold in a market that threatened to become more restricted. Local officials were becoming concerned at the rapid growth of the car market. The variety of models on sale. The American giant Ford had a reputation for producing a new model – an "Asian Model T" – a car that was similar to that of the Trekka.



The first export Trekka heads for Fiji in April 1967

of the Indonesian market were certainly different from the environment in New Zealand. One mysterious figure, Liem Thian Te, also known as Liem Thian Te.

Liem Thian Te had been involved in the original discussions about forming PT Immermotors to build the Trekka, but in the end he didn't take part. He was the first to obtain the initial fully built Trekka that was sent to Indonesia as a pattern and was impressed. Hartono claims he was given an order to sell two hundred to Indonesia's army. The deal apparently collapsed when the army found the vehicle was powered by an engine from a communist nation.

The order for the first hundred proceeded on the basis that PT Immermotors had pre-sold the shipment, largely to the navy. This was significant not just for Motor Holdings, but for the company.

This was the first major breakthrough for New Zealand into the Indonesian market.

The Trekka packs helped launch the first regular direct shipping line between the two countries, Royal InterOcean Lines' service, which set off in March 1971 with the Trekkas, on a service that was intended to open doors for other exporters.

The order together had been a novel exercise for staff at Motor Holdings. They had plenty of experience at unpacking crates but packing them was a different matter.

The shipping line was halted while all the New Zealand-made parts for the Trekka, including the seats, seating, and trim) were packed. The mechanical parts were simply readdressed without the crates being opened.



The Trekka Dynasty is award-winning radio journalist Todd Nail's first book.

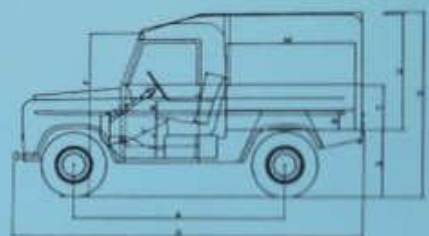
Cars came before journalism for Todd, who once sold spare parts for Peugeots. The Trekka was filed in the back of his mind for twenty-five years, until he thought of it in 2001 as a good subject for a radio documentary.

That documentary, "The Trekka's Tale," was the start of an intriguing journey down the avenues of New Zealand history.

Research on the subject took Todd as far afield as Venice, where Michael Stevenson's "This is the Trekka" represented New Zealand at the Biennale art exposition, and the Czech Republic, where he met Josef Kaplan, the "Skoda man."

At the 2004 Qantas Media Awards, Todd received the Bill Toft Award for Radio Journalism (the top overall prize for radio) and the Best Radio Sports Reporter award. He also presented Summer Report on National Radio, which won Best Radio News Programme.

Todd is the Business Editor with Radio New Zealand. He lives in Kumeu with his wife Angelika and teenage children Lukas, Laura, and Julia.



Go anywhere - too right!  
Roger Taylor on a Sunday  
drive near Wanaka



**...the cabins filled with  
up to thirty centimetres of  
water as the river rose to  
door-handle level outside.**

## southern mates and *battletruck*

There were those who were wary of claims about the Trekka's off-road prowess. Roger Taylor and his mates weren't among them.

Hunting and fishing in the ranges around Wanaka in Central Otago in the early 1970s was for real men, with real vehicles. Roger Taylor, Frank Woolf, and John Fleming (professional venison and possum hunters), Jock Roxburgh, and Roger's brother Donald were all Trekka men.

This was rugged country, surrounded by mountain ranges that peaked at more than two thousand metres above sea level, with long river valleys that ran down into the southern lakes, Wanaka, Hawea, and Ohau. There were snow, ice, and sub-zero temperatures in winter and dry heat in summer.

The Taylors had been there since 1915, when Roger's grandfather, William, owned Makarora Station near the river of the same name, in the shadow of the McKerrow range with its one thousand, nine hundred metre peaks.

There was no road out to the station when William Taylor moved there. Instead, a mail boat brought mail and groceries and took away the wool. The small township of Wanaka could also be reached in a day-long trip on horseback. Today, it's a only forty-five minute drive away.

William Taylor soon took a Model T Ford out to the station, squeezing it onto the mail boat, with two planks protruding over the stern to keep the oversized cargo on board.

ing visit: A Trekka  
ing unloaded from an  
ZAF Bristol Freighter  
Qui Nhon 1973



**“...we were using  
the Trekkas as  
ambulances, with  
the patients lying  
crossways in the  
rear section.”**

## vietnam

The Trekka's claim, "Goes 'most anywhere,'" was put to the test in July 1969. Five of the vehicles were flown into South Vietnam at the height of the Vietnam War.

New Zealand had joined its ally, the United States, in fighting communist North Vietnam.

In 1969, the Land Rover was already in frontline duty with the New Zealand Army in Vietnam. Its New Zealand-made rival, the Trekka, was destined for a civilian hospital in Qui Nhon, the provincial capital of Binh Dinh province. The five-hundred-bed state hospital on the coast eight hundred kilometres north of the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon had become the focus of a major foreign-aid effort by New Zealand's Department of External Affairs.

Up to two dozen New Zealanders were stationed at the hospital: surgeons, nurses, and medical and administrative support staff, backing the efforts of local staff in the sparsely resourced hospital.

The aid programme had begun in 1963 with a small civilian surgical team from public hospitals around New Zealand. It grew over a few years to more than a dozen. A two-storeyed maternity and children's ward was built with New Zealand aid, carrying the name "Sir Walter Nash Memorial Children's Ward," after the late 1950s Labour Prime Minister.