



History of the DUKW

Unique Vehicles Nicknamed “Ducks” by World War II Soldiers

General Motors developed the unique vehicle commonly called a “Duck” in 1942 and despite early skepticism; it became a vital asset to military operations during World War II. With most of Europe’s harbor facilities in ruins, U.S. ships could not get close enough to unload vital supplies and inland, many bridges were destroyed. The smaller amphibious Ducks became a key solution. Able to operate both on land and in the water, Ducks became a valuable asset for transporting U.S. troops and supplies to the hard-to-reach areas.

The vehicle’s technical title is DUKW, which is a military equipment code representing the features of the vehicle: D signifies 1942, the year of the vehicle’s production; U indicates its amphibian qualities; K stands for its front-wheel drive features; and W represents its twin, rear-wheel drive. However, U.S. servicemen affectionately nicknamed the vehicles “Ducks.”

First used in “Operation Husky” – the invasion of Sicily – Ducks came to the rescue, as Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs) were incapable of reaching the shore due to the treacherous conditions that had rendered the cargo boats immobile. One hundred Ducks arrived at the Sicilian coast carrying 300 tons of ammunition and 28 loads of shore regiment equipment. Upon landing, Ducks immediately rushed the ammunition and supplies 20 miles inland to the waiting troops. It has even been rumored that more than 100 Italian soldiers, surprised by the unusual vehicles and their capabilities, surrendered to American troops upon the arrival of the fleet of Ducks.

Ducks went on to become one of the most-celebrated vehicles of World War II and have been credited with playing an integral role in winning the wars in Europe and the Pacific. Participation of the Ducks in all major World War II and Pacific operations was sealed in October 1942, when the Chief of the Army Transportation Corps classified the vehicles as standard equipment and the U.S. Army Equipment Service issued production orders to General Motors in April of the following year.

Until mid-1943, most of the Ducks were shipped to North Africa, which received 1,099 out of 1,535 produced through June of 1943. By the end of that year, 4,508 vehicles had been produced. The Pacific and Europe did not receive adequate supplies until 1944, when production was accelerated to 11,316 vehicles. With 5,376 Ducks manufactured in 1945, the total figure produced reached more than 21,200 Ducks over a three-year period.

The Duck's most famous military usage was participation in the historic D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944 at Normandy, France, where 2,000 Ducks were used to transport men and supplies from ship to shore. The rugged Ducks were vital in the effort to establish a beachhead and begin the process of pushing the German forces back. Duck success stories continued inland where key bridges had been knocked out by warfare. Between March 7 and March 31, 1945, seven Allied armies involving 370 Ducks, crossed the Rhine River to penetrate the heart of the Reich, playing a large role in the success of the operation.

Ironically, despite the success of the Ducks, the vehicle and its predecessors were initially viewed with tremendous skepticism and even hostility. When Roger W. Hofheins first approached the U.S. government on the subject of creating an amphibious vehicle, the nation was at peace and there was little need for such a vehicle. However, one year later, the War Department appropriated funds toward the development of military equipment programs, including the development of amphibious vehicles, and assigned P.C. Putnam to the project.

The skepticism that shrouded the project turned into optimism when a U.S. Coast Guard vessel became shipwrecked along the Massachusetts coast during unstable sea conditions, causing normal lifeboats to be unable to reach the stranded crew. Coincidentally, two Ducks happened to be stationed nearby awaiting demonstration tests. Desperate to save the crew, the Coast Guard requested that the Ducks attempt to reach the stranded boat. Accompanied by a Coast Guard officer, Putnam and two others largely responsible for the design of the Ducks maneuvered the vehicle and brought the stranded crew back to safety in less than six minutes.

The creation of the Ducks provided the army with a sophisticated transport vehicle with enough marine capabilities to overcome the rugged sea conditions. The technological advances of the Ducks allowed amphibious operations to reach their zenith during World War II. Ducks went on to help in the Korean War as well, before being retired from service in 1958.