

INDIAN: YOU'RE IN THE ARMY NOW!

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Part One: The Model 841

Introduction

There are still veterans and families from WWII around today who remember what it was like to buy new tires or gasoline, let alone a new motorcycle back then. New tires? Just forget it. Gas for you bike? With only a few gallons from gas ration coupons, you can scratch Sturgis off your vacation plans. Want a new Indian or Harley? "ESSENTIAL USE" only (e.g. farmers, police, postal), a ton of red tape to go through, and even then your odds are pretty poor. Rationing was wide spread and included a very LONG list of items of clothing and foods. No, war has not been good for the economy in general, or for Indian in particular. So, how did Indian do with those "lucrative war contracts"?

WWI

By 1916, only Indian, Harley-Davidson, and Excelsior were in good financial shape, with the other manufacturers... well, not so much. By the summer and fall, Indian built military use prototypes at the request of the War Department. The Board of Directors, seeing the prospect of "lucrative war contracts," decided to go all out to that end, to the exclusion of all domestic and foreign sales. They wanted the near term gains of high volume production, without the expenses of marketing and advertising. Indian co-founder George Hendee, President of the company, knew better. He argued that abandoning the domestic and foreign market would be bad for future peacetime sales, and it would unravel their valuable dealer network. But, he was overruled by the Board, and Indian went about getting as many war contracts as possible. Hendee, having had enough of that, resigns that year. (Family-owned Harley-Davidson and Excelsior opted to both supply the military, and their civilian dealers.) Indian agreed to a contract to supply 20,000 V-twin machines, Harley agreed to 7,000, Excelsior 2,500. Indian also agreed to a price of \$187.50 for each machine. With the inflationary cost of raw material rising each month, this was pure disaster for Indian, as now they must supply that number of bikes at a substantial loss. Oscar Hedstrom, Indian's other co-founder, now retired, agrees after much pleading from Indian to come back temporarily to get costs under control...mostly for patriotic reasons, for a few months.

1917, the United States has declared war on Germany. With the challenge of servicing motorcycles in field conditions, Indian sets up training with the



armed forces to train 3,000 motorcycle mechanics to service and repair not only Indians, but also Harley and Excelsior bikes. With this, all American big twin bikes gave great service in the war under even the worst conditions.

1918, Indian agrees to supply another 25,000 machines, this time with a better contract. In all, Indian supplied 41,000, Harley 15,000, plus some by Excelsior and Cleveland. In the end, Indian made almost no profit and was left with a near empty bank account, inflation skyrocketed costs, and its dealer network was starved out. Where Indian WAS #1, after the war they took a back seat to Harley-Davidson, never to regain the #1 spot. Thus, the first nail in Indian's coffin.

WWII

In WWII, the fastest German army units were the motorcycle rifle regiments. The American military was well aware of this. They were also aware that the Army's Indian and Harley-Davidson motorcycles were no match for the stronger, faster BMW and Zundapp equipped German Army units. Thus, by 1943, The War Department issued contracts to Indian and Harley-Davidson for **NEW** motorcycles, now much needed in Gen. Patton's desert war in North Africa. While Harley simply copied the BMW R71 for its version, Indian went a different path: the **model 841**. Indian took its Scout 45 cubic inch engine, gave it transverse mounting, and spread the cylinder angle from 45° to 90°, allowing it to run 100° cooler, and to speeds of up to 70 mph. Add to that advanced features of a shaft drive, hand clutch, and foot operated 4-speed gearbox. And more: a duplex cradle frame, hydraulic girder forks, plunger rear suspension, 8-inch drum brakes, and rubber-mounted handlebars. Under the prototype contract, just 1056 were made when the contract was terminated. By this time the **Jeep** had made a name for itself, being able to do far more than a motorcycle. Thus, none of the 841's saw military service beyond Army testing in the desert of California. They either went into storage or were sold as Army surplus in 1944 for \$500 from the Indian factory, then often "civilianized" and painted traditional Indian Red. A smooth ride, easy to control for those who bought one, and had it continued in civilian life, may have had a promising future like the Moto Guzzi that followed it. E. Paul duPont, then President of Indian, had such plans for the 841 to become a civilian-touring bike, but it was not to be. Still, about 300 survive today.

Again, in 1942-43, inflationary costs of raw material shrunk the income of Indian. The Army declared as surplus first 1,900 Indians, then another 3,500. These were snatched up by an again starved dealer network. Lastly, the War Department decided not to pay on earlier contracts to the tune of \$411,789, wiping out the \$500,000 nest egg Indian had set aside for post war development. Same song, second verse, Indian is left with a shoestring budget, and another nail in its coffin.

This beautiful, rare 841 is from Bob Stark's collection in Perris, CA. The serial number on the gas tank is actually Bob's military service number!

Next issue: The Model 741

