

Interview with LTC (Ret.) Mark Koloc WWII M16 Halftrack Restorer

MSG Half-Mast: Tell us a little about yourself and how you discovered the African Queen. From what we understand, it has quite a backstory.

Mark Koloc: I retired from active duty in October of 2011. I'm a "mustang" (an officer who began his or her career as an enlisted Soldier). I enlisted in the infantry as a private first class and retired as a lieutenant colonel. My career was spent primarily in combat arms and special operations. I was blessed with opportunities and outstanding assignments that made for a very rewarding and challenging 32-plus years of combined service.

I took every school and course opportunity offered by the Army and some very challenging assignments, which eventually led me to an 18-month tour in the Horn of Africa. That's where I discovered the African Queen (my affectionate name for this old beauty, a class act from the African continent).



Images of the African Queen, as found, in the Djibouti desert

The Queen was built as an M16 anti-aircraft half-track in 1943 by the White Motor Company in Cleveland, Ohio. After her WWII service, she was converted to an M16A2 and sent with 412 other converted vehicles to serve in the Korean War to support NATO forces against North Korean and Chinese human wave attacks. Her four 50-cal machine guns were perfect for this type of mission. In 1953, she was transferred to the French Army and sent to Indochina (Vietnam today) where she served until 1954. She was then taken by the French Foreign Legion to the Horn of Africa—more specifically, Djibouti—for service there.

She broke down in late 1959 or early 1960 and was hauled out to the desert outside a French airbase and left, where she was subsequently vandalized and stripped of all of her interior. Her turret was removed and set in the desert sand so that the French could install a rocket launcher.

I discovered her sitting amidst thorn bushes in 2005, when I was doing 5-milers to acclimate to Djibouti's incredible heat. I thought right then and there that I needed to get her back to the States. Working through the French commander, a bill of sale was drawn up, and I bought her for scrap for 20,000 Djiboutian francs (about \$100).

I cleaned her up, did the customs paperwork, wrote a check and shipped her home to the US in a rented 40-foot ship cargo container. After arriving in Norfolk, she was cleared by customs and shipped via tractor-trailer to St, Paul, MN and put into storage to await my return. Thanks to the Internet, I was able to make all the arrangements for shipping online.

After retiring, and several interruptions like clock- and watch-making school (VOC-REHAB) and two cross-country moves, I was finally able to start her real preservation work in 2019. She is the only known original and complete M16A2 out of her group of 413.

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MSG Half-Mast: How difficult is it to restore a decades-old vehicle as abused as this one by the time you found it and what were the main maintenance challenges you faced restoring it?

Mark Koloc: I was committed to leaving her as original as possible—known as *conservation and preservation*—which is different and uniquely challenging compared to restoration. Examples of conservation and restoration include: not using heat to free rusted parts, because heat will damage the original paint; sourcing all original or new old stock (NOS) parts, such as gauges, tachometer, speedometer, nuts, bolts (they are a unique type just for halftracks), tracks, mechanical items, weapons etc.; sourcing equipment like radios and preserving their exterior while restoring their interiors back to working condition; not being able to sandblast and clean parts to bare metal for priming and repainting; having to make parts because originals can't be found and reproduction parts just don't meet the standard; and ensuring access to or having correct manuals on hand. For instance, the original 1942 -9 technical manual had the torque values for the head bolts at 120 ft-lbs. That value should have been 75-80 ft-lbs and was not corrected officially until 1944. The reason the Queen broke down in the first place was the fact that the French had the 1942 -9 manual for maintenance and stripped several head bolts. She never ran correctly after that as the engine would be misfiring and there would be blow-by on at cylinders 1-2 not to mention coolant issues.



The work to conserve and preserve the Queen was uniquely challenging

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MSG Half-Mast: Historic military vehicles such as the African Queen seem to generate a lot of interest among people. Why do you think that is?

Mark Koloc: Candidly, when you see her, your first reaction is SEXY BEAST! There's something just plain attractive with the design, appearance and combat record of these historic vehicles. People really appreciate what they represent: sacrifice, selfless service, American craftsmanship and good old American know-how. We were, and still are in many cases, the "Arsenal of Democracy" for many countries around the world.

Veterans are especially appreciative of our efforts, and we, in turn, are all about veterans. Many fathers and grandfathers served on these things while mothers and grandmothers turned wrenches in factories putting them together. That history, and all it stands for, still has a genuine appeal. My father was a Korean War vet (1951-1953). He was a combat engineer. Dad loved these classic military vehicles, and I remember as a youngster walking with him to look at them after parades, fairs, shows etc.

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MSG Half-Mast: The African Queen is currently on loan to the National Museum of the US Air Force. What is your long-term aspiration for the vehicle?

Mark Koloc: I would love if the National Museum of the US Army would give me a call!

She is the lynch-pin of our nonprofit and for sheer "wow" factor, she's perfect. Our educational nonprofit provides a unique, mobile educational and historical experience by offering an exciting opportunity for hands-on history, with the goal of stimulating educational interests through Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and honoring veterans who served our nation. We are dedicated to keeping our nation's vibrant military history alive and relevant for today's citizen, and the African Queen is the centerpiece of this effort.



The African Queen on display at the National Museum of the US Air Force

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MSG Half-Mast: If the past is prologue, when it comes to caring for their vehicles and equipment, what sort of lessons do you think today's Soldiers can glean from the African Queen, particularly as they again prepare for large-scale combat operations against peer competitors?

Mark Koloc: Great question. The Queen served in two conflicts with US forces: WWII and Korea. Her known record indicates that her US crews took excellent care of her. She was clearly in good shape when chosen for conversion in 1952 for Korea, and that says something when you consider that of the 2,500-plus tracked vehicles, like her, that were manufactured for WWII, only 413 were converted. She seems to have been roughly handled by others after leaving US Army control.

As one who has served in multiple kinetic environments, maintenance has been a key tool in my survival ruck! I never remember having to chastise someone for not cleaning their weapon after coming back from a patrol. Operations maintenance of vehicles was always done by the team after a mission. Let's face it, in many operations, an immobile vehicle can get you killed. Mobility is security. A working weapon or weapon system may save your life and perhaps the life of your buddy to the left and right of you. If you don't have the discipline to conduct after-operations PMCS, that weapon or vehicle may be non-mission capable just when you need it most. Remember, Murphy is everywhere and he's looking for every opportunity to mess up your day.

So be disciplined when it comes to maintenance and hold you brother and sister Soldiers accountable. Leaders hold yourself, your subordinates, and your leadership accountable. And remember, as you train for war, maintenance needs to be trained, too.



The African Queen today, driven by LTC (Ret.) Koloc
(all photos courtesy of Mark Koloc)

For those interested in viewing videos about the preservation/conservation work on this vehicle, visit YouTube on your personal computer or device and search for "African Queen Halftrack." You can also learn more at: <https://www.aqproject.org/>.