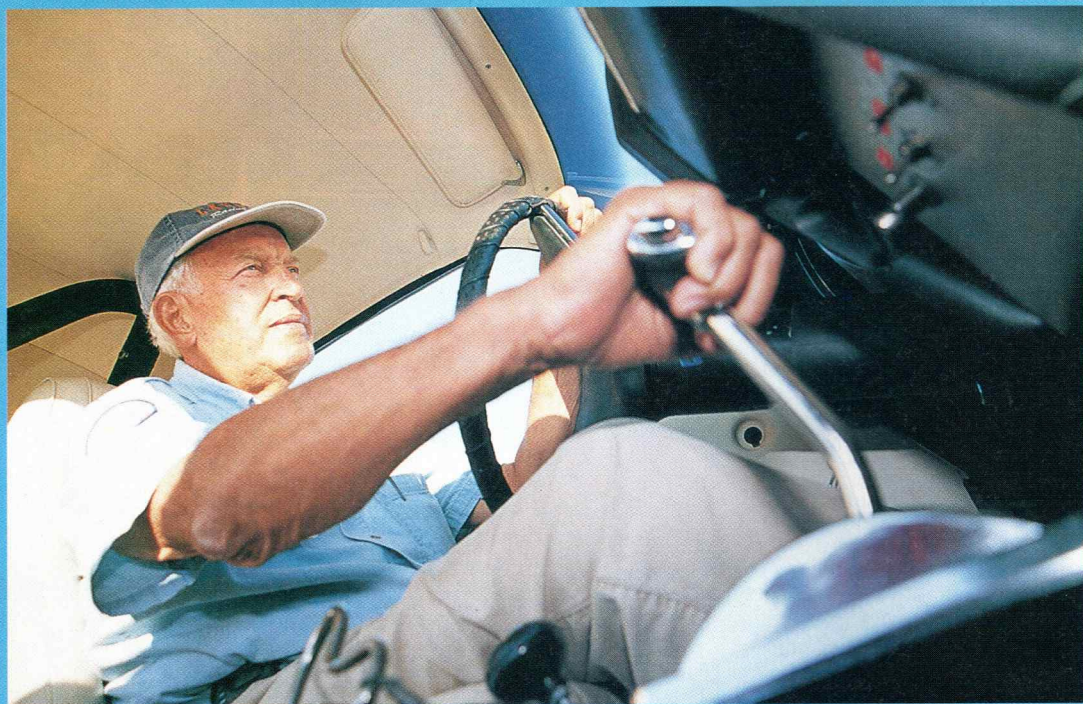




SEMPER PARATI



Al Eckstrand Invaded the Vietnam War With This Beast

text and photography by Geoff Stunkard



The Marines are always looking for a few good men. Considered the toughest of the United States Armed Forces, the guys who sign up for the United States Marine Corps (USMC) know coming in that they're in for some serious action. As the Vietnam conflict escalated in the latter half of the '60s, these were the soldiers who were on the front lines "in country," doing some of the toughest jobs found in the combat environment.

However, back stateside, things were changing. The cultural climate of the time made the war unpopular, and the lines between duty and honor were blurred by a new consciousness of this "police action's" seeming futility. The men who chose to obey the draft board or voluntarily sign up found themselves abused verbally, culturally, and in the press for their decision.

"You know, those men had a hard time of it," remembers Elton "Al" Eckstrand. "When they got back to the States after serving their country, people were yelling at them and spitting on them. Most of them didn't want to be

there anyway, and it was hard for anyone to make sense of it all."

Eckstrand was in his 30s by the time the Vietnam conflict reached the public's attention. A successful corporate lawyer for Chrysler and then a well-known drag racer with a private law practice, Eckstrand became aware of a statistic that returning servicemen were being

injured and killed in auto accidents in ever greater numbers as the muscle-car era heated up. Subsequently, the "Lawman" retired from racing and was given a new Hemi Dodge Charger by his former employer to take to Europe in 1966 and use in military-base driving demonstrations. Soon after, a plan was developed to take a similar Lawman Racing Team tour to Southeast Asia, the hot spot of U.S. military activity. Due to the investment needed to make the program happen, Chrysler decided to bow out, but graciously referred Eckstrand to John Naughton, then president at Ford Motor Division. After seeing Eckstrand's presentation, an agreement was reached, and work began on several fronts to make the new Motor Pool Mustangs a reality.

The plan that was conceived required eight cars. Six would be 428 Cobra Jet fastbacks that the servicemen would be able to testdrive themselves. The other two would be flat-out drag cars, one for Eckstrand to use in demonstrations in Southeast Asia and one for the show circuit that would be part of a European tour later in 1970. By mid-1969, it was decided that these



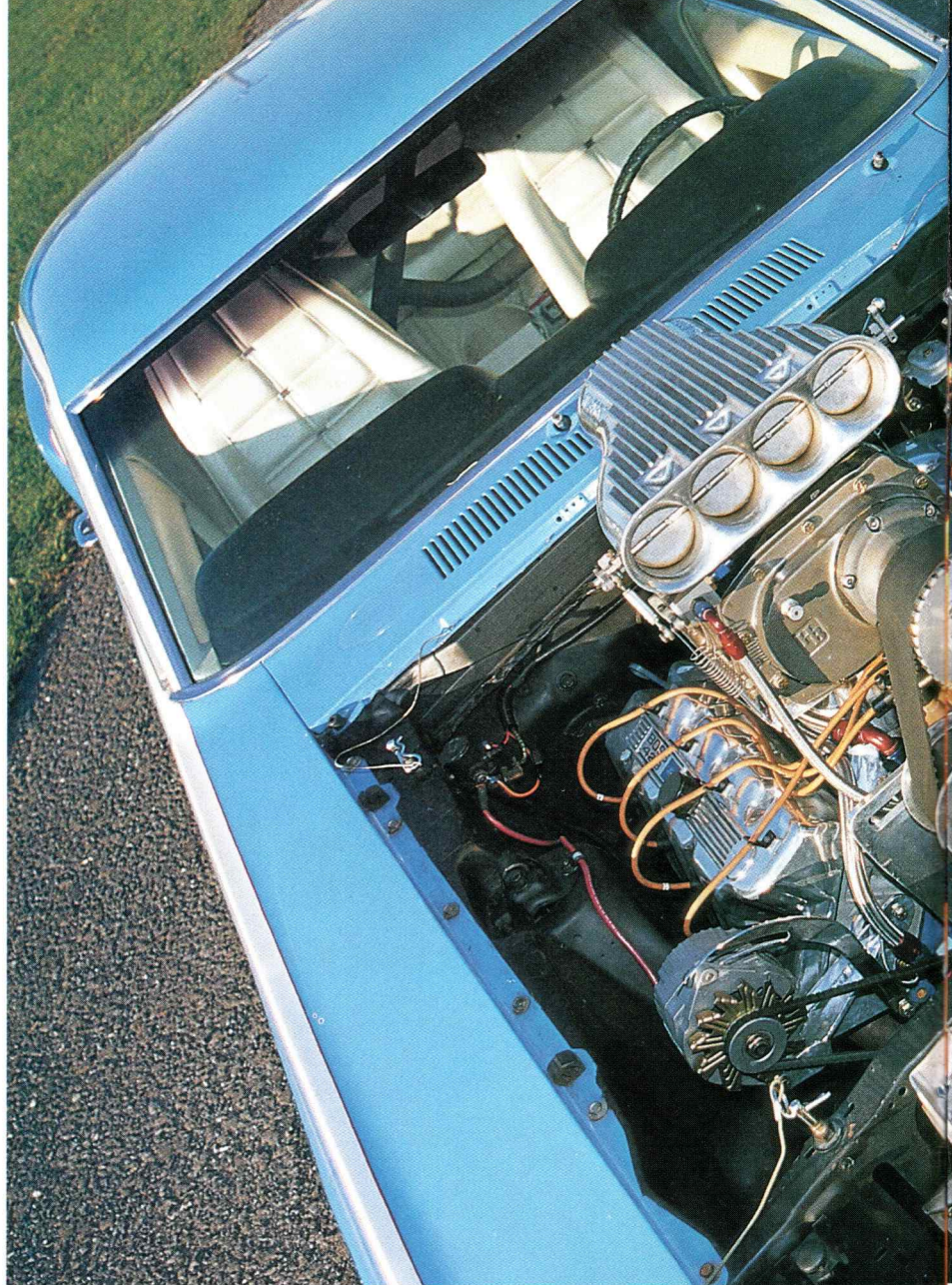
two cars would be the just-released Boss 429 Mustangs.

Meanwhile, Eckstrand's legal and professional background was cutting through red tape on the government level. Moving such a large amount of nonessential equipment to a war zone would have been impossible for most people. Nonetheless, Eckstrand managed the logistics and received assistance from the Departments of Defense, Transportation, and Public Safety, not to mention the USMC, who had become the tour's primary military backer. A group of 428-powered Mustangs went to Europe for driving demonstrations in 1969, which gave Eckstrand a chance to work out some of the possible difficulties that might be encountered when the Asian tour began.

Back in the States, work was beginning on the Super Boss program. The NASCAR-tagged machines were assembled using the best parts available at the time. Since there would be no timers or dragstrips where they were going (the demonstrations usually occurred at airstrips), the cars were created to be durable and able to make a strong top-end charge. Connie Kalitta and Roy Steffey, two of Eckstrand's racing friends in the Detroit area, developed the engine package. The package included a 6-71 Hampton blower, an Enderie injector setup for methanol, and some internal changes, although the short-block and heads were left basically stock. To make room for a fuel tank, the radiator was moved to the trunk. The interior was also left stock, augmented by an aftermarket Sun tach and gauges. Motor Wheel Corporation supplied the rims, Goodyear furnished the tires, and the white and blue paint and Lawman lettering was applied by Denny Began of Detroit.

Once finished, the first car was shipped over to the Coral Sea via ship, but was destroyed at sea when an 8-ton container of Army claims forms fell on it. Upon learning this when he arrived in Okinawa, Eckstrand had to fly back to the States where he and his crew quickly assembled the back-up car, which hadn't been completed. The car was then flown via an Air Force transport plane back to the South Pacific.

In the course of the next three years, Eckstrand and the other members of the Lawman United States Performance Team performed demonstrations in a variety of cars



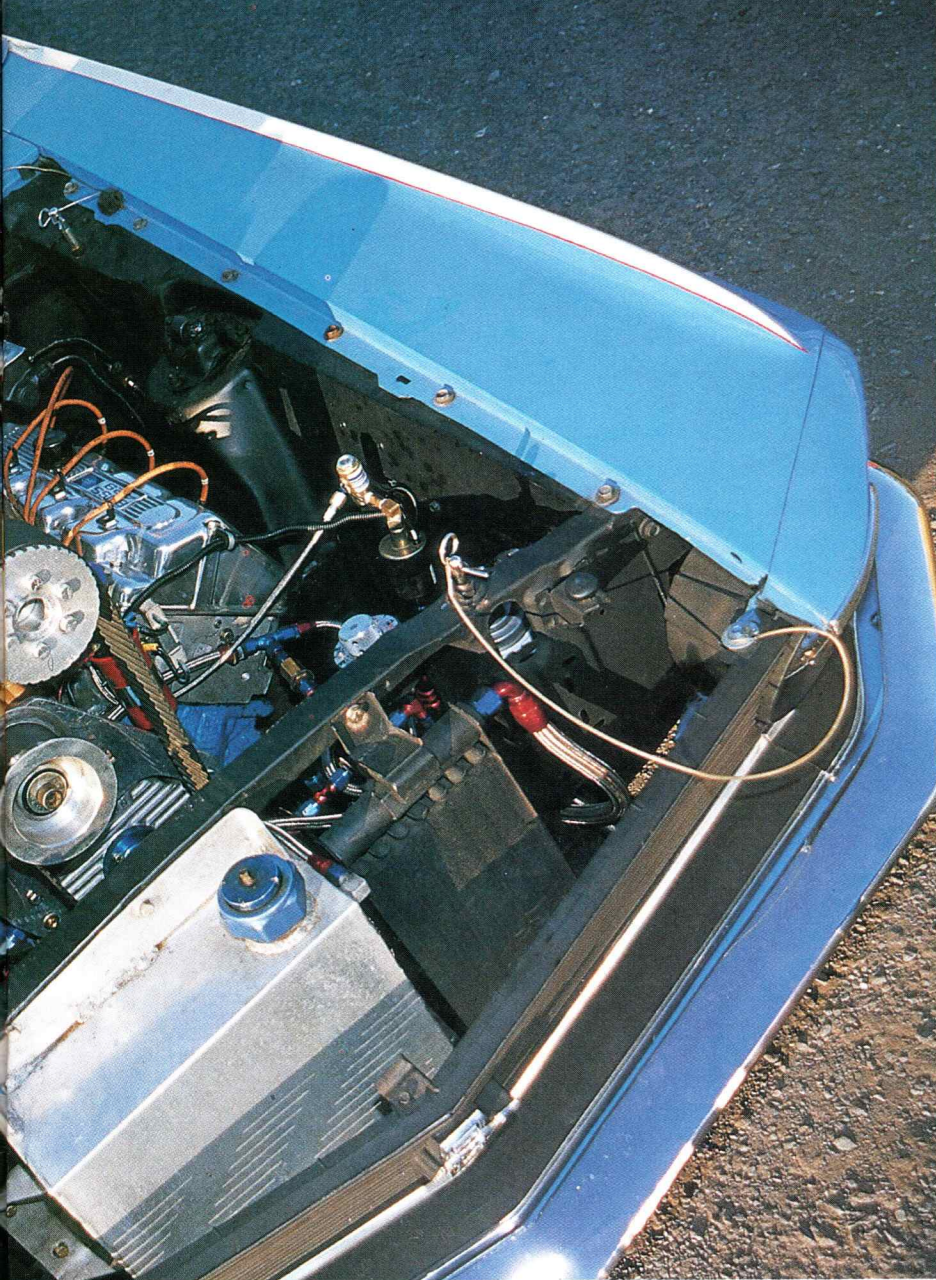
... so the Lawman Mustang is once again united with its originator. It's a true survivor.

to an audience of more than 240,000 servicemen. Though not in the war zone itself, the team visited military bases, hospitals, and other locations along the Pacific Rim, and Eckstrand received numerous commendations for his efforts on behalf of the soldiers.

"These were war-hardened men who had seen it all," he recalls. "Some of them would see the cars and begin to cry. I think some of

them thought that nobody gave a damn about them; well, somebody cared. This was very important to our whole team. We would work from sunrise to sundown every day, but it was nothing compared to their experiences in the war zone."

As for the sole remaining Super Boss Mustang, it came back to the States when the tour ended and was sold as Eckstrand made plans to move to Scotland on a semiperma-



ment basis. For the next three decades, nobody knew of the car's whereabouts. Eckstrand returned to the States in 1999 and toured his old '66 Hemi Charger on the Mopar show circuit. During the course of the year, he received a tip that the Super Boss was indeed still in existence and in storage in the Detroit area. So former Lawman team member Bob Varcoe went to look at it and confirmed that it was indeed the sole survivor.

Still in the original paint (it had been relettered back to the Lawman name, which was removed prior to its initial sale), the car was now owned by Sam Eidy. Eidy, who owns a restoration/performance car business called Motor Speed Sports in Clinton Township, Michigan, admired Eckstrand's career and kept the car as a tribute. He acquired it in the mid-'70s from the man to whom Eckstrand had first sold it; unlike many early race cars, it had never been cut or otherwise molested. A fellow lawyer as well as a degree-holding engineer, Eidy allowed Eckstrand to reacquire the car, so the Lawman Mustang is once again united with its originator. It's a true survivor. Other than a fresh blower (which Don Hampton built from original parts specially for Eckstrand), new tires, and some touch-up paint, it was altered very little from what it was when it came back to America in 1971.

At the All-Ford Nationals at Carlisle, where the car made its first major public appearance in almost 30 years (its first-ever in the United States), Eckstrand met and talked with some of the men who were part of the Vietnam War effort.

"Something over there changed me forever," he says. "I don't understand it, but everyone else I've met who was there feels the same way. I can still remember these guys with their muddy boots and grenades climbing into the car, just to see it, and it's very hard not to get misty-eyed when I think about it.

"When we would show up," he recalled at the 2000 International Drag Racing Hall of Fame ceremony in March, "these guys weren't looking at me, Al Eckstrand, or even these cars. They were seeing this part of America: the heroes of racing, the Shirley Muldowneys and Don Garlits of the sport, and what they saw there helped make what they were enduring worthwhile."

Thanks again, Al.

