

## 85501 The Convertible D Prototype

Have you ever thought about people who get struck by lightning? I mean, talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time! What are the odds? What about people who win the lotto? I know some think they "knew" the magic number, but with the odds, it has to just be good luck. Even so, some would say it's "fate"...they were "destined" to win the lotto, or get struck by lightning.

Well, however it happened, about 16 years ago I had an opportunity that would thrill any Porscheophile. In 1990, because of the good exchange rate, European buyers were buying up 356s by the container full. It was a great opportunity for those of us in the "business" to find cars for those eager buyers, and put some cash in our pockets. I enlisted a friend and car enthusiast Reginal Smythe, who was here from the UK on a travel visa, to search for 356s in the area that came up for sale. I would pay a finder's fee and then purchase the car for a European client who had often requested a specific model. This time it was a Convertible D that the client wanted. The potential car was located in Corona, CA, and happened to be owned by a fellow Porsche-pusher Frank DeVlig. It was a good car, but partially disassembled. I sent Reginal to look at it and give me a report. Normally, he would do a quick inspection and call me with the VIN, engine number, condition and price. I remember the day he called, "...the VIN is 85501 and the...", "wait a minute" I said (reaching for my factory spec. book), a few minutes passed as I double checked the number in the book, "would you check the VIN plate and make sure the numbers match," "yeah, they're the same" Reginal replied. "OK, tell him I'm definitely interested and I'll call him later."

In 1990, the Certificate of Authenticity hadn't been invented yet, and information was available directly from the Porsche Archives in Germany (by letter or fax). Normally, information was only given to the owner of the car, and a title, registration, or other proof of ownership was required. Because I requested information often, I faxed Porsche and asked if they could provide me some basic information on the car. Was it the first car? Were there any prototypes, etc? The return fax was waiting for me at my office the next day. "Yes, 85501 was indeed the first Convertible D (pre-series) and was used for internal purposes by the factory. It had been assembled in July 1958 (later records would show a production date of June 19, 1958) and in May of 1959 was sold to Monroe Motors in San Bernardino, CA. I immediately called Frank and negotiations began.

Let me say now that Frank had no idea that this was the first Convertible D, and I had no intention of telling him. After all, he wasn't an elderly widow, trusting me to give her a fair price. He was a seasoned car guy, just like me, and had the same spec. book that I had. As it turned out, this wouldn't be an ordinary car purchase. It seemed that Frank had promised to restore the car for his wife and wasn't really sure that she'd let him sell it ( I suspected this might actually be a stall tactic). He said he needed a month to think about it!!! I agonized over the next month, calling weekly for an update, offering to pay full price...no negotiating. Finally the call came, "OK the car is yours, come and get it," and I scheduled the pick up by my tow service the next morning. Reginal had mentioned that the engine didn't appear

to be original, and the numbers check showed it to be a 1960 Normal. Oh well, at least I had the car.

When I got 85501 home to my shop, I had the opportunity to examine the car's details. If this was the prototype Convertible D, there must be something unusual. The most obvious deviation was the hinges for the hood and deck lid. These were not standard 356 items, but had been fabricated from flat steel. The paint on the body wasn't bad, but I had plans for a complete restoration. I had seen pictures years ago of a Convertible D with a Speedster and D script in front of the door and wondered if this was in fact that car. The paint-stripper went on and the paint came off, first the driver's side, then the passenger's. The holes for the Speedster script were indeed there, having been filled at some point with body filler, not welded. On the driver's side were also the holes for the D emblem, but not on the passenger's side. Further inspection revealed factory undercoating sprayed on the floor, and all the way up the inside of the front pedal area, fuel tank tray, and all the way up to the underside of the dash cowl area. There were an assortment of other "unusual" items and my next step was to try and authenticate them, and get more information from the factory.

Over the next year, the car sat in a corner of my shop awaiting further investigation. Frank happened to call me with another car for sale, and I thought this would be a good time to ask about the ownership history (I didn't yet have the nerve to mention the car's lineage). He had purchased it from an old German guy who had a VW shop in Carlsbad. He remembered his name, and a telephone book search turned up the number of his shop. I called him just thinking I might get more information about previous owners, not realizing what I would find. He remembered the car and commented "Yeah, the engine in that car had thrown a rod when I got it back in the 70s (very common for the early Supers with the small 356A rods). I pulled it out and put in a VW Type 1, and used it as my beach-cruiser." "I wonder what happened to that engine" I asked. "Oh, I probably threw it out, (I cringed)...but I might have saved it up in the attic." Since I now had the original engine number from the Kardex, I asked him to look for it in his attic. The next day he called back. He had found what was left of the original matching 1600 Super engine and would sell it for a very reasonable amount.

*Now wait a minute! I figured the fact that I found the car was just a wonderful coincidence, but finding the original matching engine in an old German guy's attic! Come on! This was too good to be true. Maybe it was fate???*

During the next year Frank called to mention that he had given my number to another owner of a 58 Convertible D, thinking that our cars might be close in serial numbers. "By the way" he said, "What is the serial number of that car?" "It's a real early one" I replied. "How early" he asked. "Actually, it's the number one car." There was a long silence. "Frank, are you there" I asked. "What do you suppose it's worth (now!)" he queried (a true car guy question). "Not for sale" I responded.

Over the next seven years I completed the metalwork (you guys who own your own shop understand why it took this long), and had more time to evaluate the car

and how it differed from the production model. It had obviously been made from a Speedster body. The modifications to the doors, rear inner fender panels, and front cowl were obvious, and were all done by hand. The hood, doors and deck lid had no stamped numbers to identify them to the chassis, but I guess since this was the first car Drauz had built for Porsche, there was no need to number them. The doors were interesting fabrications. The inner panels seemed to be modified versions of something from another car, made to fit the 356 Speedster door. The holes and brackets for the window channels (special hand made versions of the production units) and regulators (modified Cabriolet type) were gas welded into place, and the tops of the doors were cut away and modified to allow for the windows. New garnish rails were fabricated and the attaching screws were about two inches closer to the center of the door than production cars. The rear inner fender panels were modified for the new top and the cutting and gas welded seams were very obvious. The windshield posts were solid brass (like the production Convertible D) but the support tube was a steel piece that had been threaded into the post, not cast in place like the production car. The door jam and cowl had been modified to fit the new posts, and the tubes that held the new posts were shorter than the production car. Where the Speedster had a simple hole in the cowl for the wiper shaft, 85501 had the small bump, like the production Convertible D, although hand fabricated and welded into place. The defroster vents were merely slits in the cowl, like a Speedster, but had been modified to fit (poorly) the new windshield and seal, and fitted with a new style vent cover.

The workmanship of the car was good, but not what one would expect from a Porsche production car. The doors did not match from side to side, and although the gaps and body lines are now flawless, I expect that they probably were not when the car was delivered to Porsche for evaluation. This was, in fact, a prototype.

In the summer of 1999 I was vacationing at my in-laws in Germany. An acquaintance of mine, Werner Kuehn, owned a restoration shop that often worked on 356s. While visiting his shop to check-out the latest projects, I mentioned that I owned the first Convertible D. I couldn't believe his reply. "You should definitely talk to one of my customers," he said. "His name is Gerhard Drauz, and he owned the Drauz Company in the 1950s. He may have information or records about the car. Here's his telephone number."

*This was incredible! First, I basically trip over the 1<sup>st</sup> Convertible D, then find its original engine in an attic, and now I've stumbled across THE Herr Drauz who's still alive, and still living in Heilbronn, Germany.*

As soon as I got back to my in-law's house, I called Gerhard Drauz. He was happy to talk with me and said he had owned and operated the Drauz factory during the production of the Convertible D and Roadster bodies for Porsche (I'm sure that an entire book could be written about the Drauz Company but this is not my intention here). He said that Karroserie Drauz had specialized in building Cabriolet bodies and that Porsche had approached them about building the successor to the Speedster. He remembered the project well. The car had, in fact, been built from

a Speedster body, and the design had been done by one of his employees (who was no longer living). It was then presented to Porsche for evaluation and final assembly. I asked about the "Speedster D" nomenclature, and he said that it was only used on the Prototype and that Porsche had decided to change the name to "Convertible" (adding the "D" later) for the production model. He said that the body of 85501 was used as the pattern for producing the tooling necessary to build the production car. The company produced the Convertible D, and later the Roadster, until it was purchased by NSU in late 1961 (when Porsche turned over the production to D'Iteren in Belgium). Unfortunately, Herr Drauz had no written information regarding the company's contract with Porsche, or any drawings or details regarding the prototype. He didn't know what happened to the car after it left the Drauz factory.

Many books have shown pictures of the "Speedster D" and the newest book "Porsche Speedster Typ 540, Quintessential Sports Car," has the most comprehensive report on the beginning of the model and the production of the prototype. The Convertible D Registry website also has pictures and details regarding production of the car. When I first started asking for information from Porsche, they seemed to know less than I did. I asked about the Speedster and D emblems and they reported "...since the car was a Convertible, it should not have the Speedster emblems." Weeks later I received several press photos from the factory showing the Speedster and D emblems. It seemed that 85501 was the photo car and appeared in many publications, and brochures produced by the factory (with Speedster and D scripts removed). These photos proved invaluable in duplicating the original appearance, and verifying the differences between 85501 and the production car.

There has been considerable discussion regarding the Speedster and D script. The only car that has ever been pictured with the D script showing is 85501. The second car, 85502 (also a pre-series car, produced just one week after 85501, and delivered to Ferry Porsche for evaluation) has been pictured with the Speedster script on the passenger side. Since the D script was only on the driver's side of 85501, it's entirely possible that 85502 also had the D. There are no known photographs of the driver's side of 85502, so whether it carried the D script will remain a mystery. Did any production cars have the Speedster D script? It is very doubtful. The pre-series cars, 85501 and 85502, were finished in July of 1958. Both of these cars are shown in the first brochure that was printed in August of 1958, with the Speedster and D emblems removed (probably by airbrushing). In this first brochure the car was referred to as a "Convertible", not until later advertising was the "D" added to the name. Since production didn't start until September of 1958, it seems that by then Porsche had already decided to change the name. In fact, a Porsche factory newsletter to dealers, dated July 31, 1958, announcing the new model, refers to it as the "Convertible D." I owned 85511 and it had no sign of holes for either the Speedster or D emblems. This information, along with Gerhard Drauz' memory of the "Speedster D" name only being used on the pre-series cars, makes it highly unlikely that any of the production cars 85503-85510 carried any side script.

For the next few years the car sat at my shop in bare metal. I had collected most of the NOS parts needed to complete the restoration, but because of our workload at the shop, couldn't seem to find the time to start. The Speedsterfest in 2005 was looming, and I knew that 85501 would be an interesting part of the Speedster/Convertible D history to display at the event. As the time approached it became obvious to me that the car was not going to be ready. Since the metalwork was completed, and the body was basically ready for paint, I thought it would be interesting for people to see the car in that stage. I installed the original emblems and side trim, and had no trouble getting approval to join the display of Speedsters and Convertible Ds at the Quail Lodge in Monterey, CA. My friend, and local vintage car transporter, Greg Mcnair would be in charge of the "Dster" (as we affectionately called it at the shop) at the event, and the trip from Long Beach to Monterey and back. It was a little out of place positioned prominently on the lawn, in bare metal, with the 6 fully restored prototype Speedsters, although, I received nothing but positive comments. People seemed to enjoy seeing a car in that stage of restoration.

After the Speedsterfest, I had a new found enthusiasm to finish the restoration! Shortly after the return from the event, the painting and assembly work moved ahead at what was now record-speed. The original Ruby Red color was duplicated from a collection of samples, as was the original Napaflex "brown" vinyl interior (an exact match to the new Porsche "Cork" color). Though 85501 was delivered as a 1600 Super, it was photographed by the factory with Normal hubcaps (possibly for advertising purposes). The car was restored, as close as possible, to the available factory photos. Some of the interesting details (verified by photos or inspection of the car) on interior and exterior are:

1. Specially fabricated hinges on hood and deck lid.
2. Windshield frame with no sun visor.
3. Small black windshield washer jets.
4. Euro style bumpers with Hella headlights.
5. Late 1959 style front turn signal assemblies (with no SWF logo).
6. Door top chrome rails that end at the side windows rear edge.
7. Grey rubber hood handle seal.
8. Speedster top latches with flat foam seal under top header.
9. No seal under windshield posts.
10. Interior garnish rails that had the screw holes 2" closer to the center than production cars.
11. Interior door pulls lower and 1" forward.
12. Door panels with modified pouch, but no locking pouch.
13. Blocked fresh air vents, like a Speedster.
14. The Kardex shows a Ponto mirror but the factory pictures show an Aero mirror. Further inspection reveal two sets of holes in the door, for using either mirror.
15. Undercoating on the floor and all the way up the firewall to the lower part of the dashboard.
16. Ashtray not on the Kardex, but verified by 1958 Christophorus photos and holes under the dash.

The engine was a standard 1958 1600 Super but used the early, external bypass oil tube with the oil thermostat. There was also a (blocked off) oil line fitting on the output side of the oil pump on the front cover (for testing?). The transaxle was a 716 version, with a 9/58 casting date. It was obviously not the first transaxle in the car, and was undoubtedly part of the testing that Porsche did with the car. It carried only the number 32 stamped into the bottom of the case. It had BBAB gearing with the 716 gears and late synchros. The nose cone had been modified for a selector shaft seal, the clutch fork was the early style, but the lever was the later clevis/pin type. The return spring was retained by a bolt threaded into the side of the case. All of these modifications looked to have been done by the factory. The shift rod had a rubber coupler just ahead of the linkage at the rear of the tunnel, and the linkage had a special bracket that looked like it might have held a modified reverse light switch (more testing?). There were two switches mounted in a bracket under the dash to the left of the column. The wires were positioned under the dash but had been cut. The fast idle cable had an interesting switch that made contact when the cable was pulled on. Again, the wires were under the dash but had been cut (more testing?). All of these unusual modifications are evidence that the car was definitely a test vehicle of some sort. I'm not sure why Porsche decided to keep it at the factory, but it was definitely used for more than just the photos.

About 18 months after its debut at the Speedsterfest, the restoration of 85501 was finally completed. I was confident that I had done everything possible to restore it to its original condition, while still keeping the modifications intact to preserve the history of its use at the Porsche factory for 10 months. As with most modern day restorations, the body, paint, and attention to detail are much better than original. Though it has been mechanically restored to original, and fully road tested, I doubt that it will see many miles. A museum would probably be a better venue for display than the local freeway. The car is an interesting part of Porsche history and deserves to be seen by the 356 community. Plans for the future are still up in the air. I'm just glad fate brought us together and I had the opportunity to document and restore the car over my 16 years of ownership.

*So, do I really think it was "fate" or just "coincidence?" Am I ready for the next amazing find? Well, they say lightning never strikes twice in the same place...but you never know.*

