

# NICHOLAS MANNING

1945 –

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## CONFESSIONS OF A JEEP FANATIC: PART 2

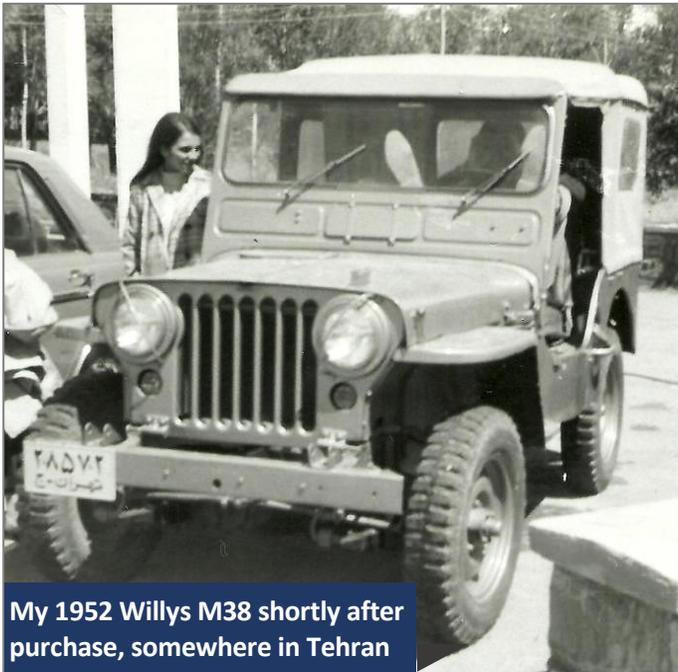
### Jeep Fanatic as a supposedly sane adult: My second jeep

After finishing school I went on to study mechanical engineering at Sheffield University and spent four years there. I was living away from home for the first time, in digs on a farm about 180 miles from my boyhood home, although it seemed much farther away where people spoke with a very different accent – or I did! During that time I sold the Ford Customline, bought a 1956 Opel Rekord, wrote that off in an accident (it wasn't my fault, really!), and then bought a 1957 Mercury Monterey – yes, another American vehicle, and it took me back to jeeps. Someone ran into the back of the Mercury when it was parked at the side of the road and damaged the rear bumper and the right-side rear light assembly. After a bit of searching, I came across the parts I needed in Reg Woolhouse's yard in Barnsley, Yorkshire. There, he had a number of American made vehicles left behind by US servicemen when they relocated back to the USA, and he had some M38 jeeps stacked one on top of the other against the back wall of the yard. There must have been at least a dozen of them. I was very interested because I'd never seen an M38 before. Years later, someone from Barnsley he told me that Reg always refused to sell any of the jeeps and, despite his primitive attempt to preserve them by throwing used engine oil over them, they finally rusted away.

After leaving university, and after two interviews in the London Hilton with the owner of a company in Iran, I began working for them, starting at Now Rooz (the Iranian New Year which falls on March 21<sup>st</sup>) in 1969. Before leaving for Iran I visited a number of companies in the UK with which the Iranian company was doing business to learn about their products, and then I was sent to the USA to do the same with suppliers in New York, Oklahoma, Texas and California. I spent three months there, and also managed to do a lot of sightseeing at weekends, visiting Oklahoma City, Six Flags, the Grand Canyon and Universal City Studios. I finally arrived in Tehran in July and was met at Mehrabad Airport by the owner of the company. Perhaps too busy, too young, too enthralled by the novelty to notice, I was becoming a world citizen of a sort, beginning to globe-trot.

The office I was to work in for the next three years, the period of my contract, was on Iranshahr Avenue in Tehran, and for the first two weeks I stayed in the Marmar Hotel which was about a ten-minute walk away. I should mention at this point that a lot of street and place names in Iran have changed since the Islamic Revolution, but I'll refer to the old names as I remember them. Obviously, I had to find permanent accommodation and a vehicle. Anyone who's been in Iran will no doubt agree with me that it must be the worst traffic chaos in the world. The Iranians are very polite when it comes to letting you through a doorway, insisting that you go first but, but behind the wheel of a car, that all changes. Anyway, I started looking for an apartment and found one in the Yousef Abad area close to the only cinema in Tehran that showed English language movies. The next step was to find a car, especially as the apartment was a lot farther from the office than the hotel was, and too far to walk each day.

Taking into consideration the high cost of new cars and my salary of US\$500 per month, it was obvious that a new car was out of the question. One weekend, as I walked around Tehran getting to know the city, I came across Amir Kabir Street, where to my delight I



My 1952 Willys M38 shortly after purchase, somewhere in Tehran

saw a number of M38 Willys Jeeps for sale and several businesses dedicated to supplying parts for the M38. In fact, the whole street was full of businesses offering spare parts and car accessories. I found someone who spoke English, and he was able to help me negotiate a reasonable price for a 1952 M38 in good condition. I don't remember just how many Rials it cost but it was substantially cheaper than a car. It was painted in a light grey colour, no doubt a government requirement to avoid confusion with any active military vehicles.

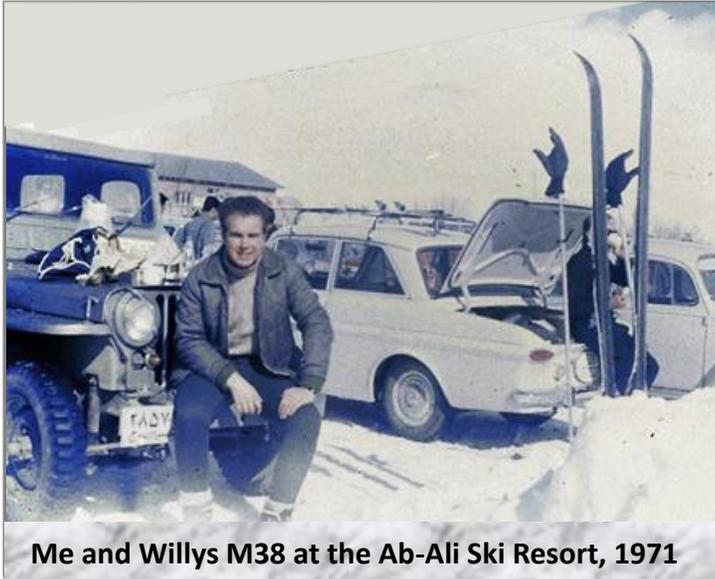
There were quite a number of M38s in civilian use in Iran in those days. They'd been supplied by the US as military aid sometime after the end of the Korean War and the reinstatement of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi as Shah. By the time I arrived in Iran to live, the M38 had reached the end of its useful military life and had been replaced by the GAZ-69 and 69A. In fact, all Iranian military soft-skinned vehicles by that time were of Soviet origin including many GAZ-66 and ZiL-157 trucks.

Life was good in Iran, at least for a young Brit in my position, and for many Iranians, but not all. I got on well with my mostly Iranian colleagues and spent some interesting, agreeable, and even fun times with them. I always felt very secure in Iran and did a lot of walking, getting to know the city, even going deep into the Bazaar area. The Shah was continuing a policy of 'westernization' started by his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, when he came to power in 1925. The Pahlavi Dynasty finally ended with the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Looking back, I suppose it was inevitable, but at the time, I never thought about the possibility, I was too busy enjoying a dinner of blinis and caviar at Leon's Grill Room, or drinking Screwdrivers on the terrace of the Hilton Hotel overlooking the city, or going dancing in a disco on Pahlavi Avenue. With the rush to modernize the country, fuelled by income from the vast crude oil reserves, the Shah and the elite of Iran were distancing themselves further and further from the rest of the population. Any dissidence was being firmly quashed by Savak, the Shah's secret police, whilst at the same time the people were listening more and more to what their mullahs were saying at prayers on Friday. I often reflect on one example of how by the mid-1970s a vast sector of the population was being left behind in the modernization process. With so much cargo arriving by ship at the Persian Gulf ports, there was an urgent need for more trucks to move the goods inland. That need was covered by importing vast numbers of Mercedes and White tractor-trailer units, but who was going to drive them? The government didn't initiate a massive driver training programme for Iranians, no, instead they brought in thousands of drivers from South Korea and Pakistan!

Now back to my passion! Obviously, I used the M38 to go to and from the office every day, and I think it offered me a little more protection and respect from other road users than any car in such disorderly traffic. In the two years I ran that Jeep I only had one accident. It was on a street crossroads not far from home and close to Pahlavi Avenue. I was on a priority street but a car on the other street that should have given way to me, didn't. The other car hit my jeep on the right hand side just under the canvas door. Fortunately no one was injured and as I knew there was a police post on Pahlavi Avenue, I walked there and got an officer to come back to the scene of the accident with me. He very carefully paced the width of both streets and declared that I was in the right (phew!) as my street was two paces wider than the other street. He made his report, with which I was able to claim for the repair from my insurance company, Bimeh Asia.

The jeep had a fixed tubular support for the canvas roof and canvas doors. I never took the canvas roof off the vehicle because in the summer one needed shade and I'd only remove the doors. In the winter, with temperatures falling below 0°C in Tehran, even

with the doors on one had to use warm winter clothing as there was no heater in the vehicle. Despite having a tailgate, the spare tyre and jerrycan carriers were mounted to the rear much like an MB or GPW jeep. Otherwise the jeep was pretty much as it had left the factory with its 24-volt waterproof electrical system intact, although I never did put it through any wading tests.



**Me and Willys M38 at the Ab-Ali Ski Resort, 1971**

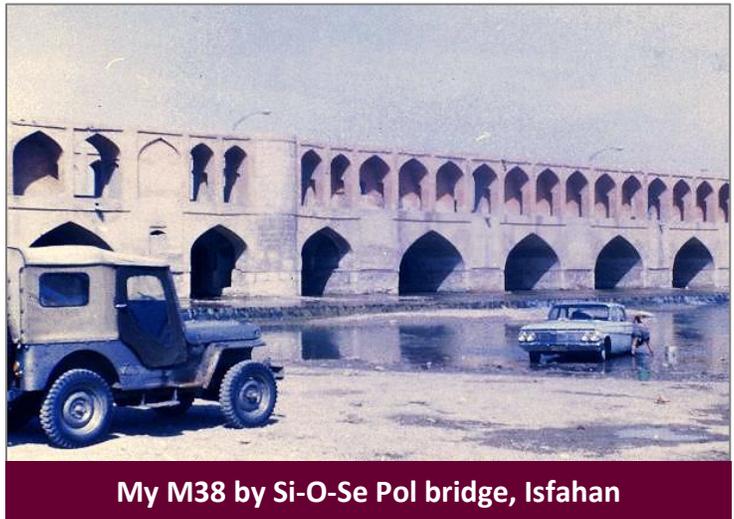
I made several long trips in the jeep, from Tehran to Isfahan and Shiraz, and to Rasht and along the Caspian Sea coast, as well as a couple of trips to Ab-Ali, one of the ski resorts close to Tehran. Once out of Tehran, the main highway system in Iran was quite good and linked all the major cities. It had been built, no doubt with military defence objectives in mind, under the auspices of CENTO, the long defunct Central Treaty Organization,

whose member states included Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, the UK, and later the USA.

I decided to make the trip to Isfahan at night while it was cool as I'd be crossing an area with very high daytime temperatures. It turned out to be one of the scariest trips I've done in all my life. Iranian truck drivers don't use their lights at night! They drive by moonlight or, if it's cloudy, Allah seems to guide them. The jeep's headlights weren't all that good and it was difficult to pick out the silhouette of a truck coming towards me with no lights in the darkness. The truck driver would obviously see my vehicle with its lights on and to make sure that I wasn't falling asleep at the wheel, just as we were about to pass each other, he would turn his full headlights on and completely blind me. That's how it was! Every truck driver on the road did the same. Maybe that was their way of extending the useful life of the vehicle's battery! That's the only logical explanation I could think of, but perhaps there's another explanation, I really don't know!

There was one thing worse than that though, and that was driving at night with trucks going in the same direction and with no lights on so you couldn't see them until you were up close behind them. I had several nasty frights on that trip coming up fairly fast and getting far too close to a very slow moving truck before realizing it was there. In fact, it was so frightening that I still have a fear of running into the back of a truck at night even today, nearly fifty years later.

In spite of the scares on the journey, the visit to Isfahan was very well worth it. There are so many historical and fascinating places to visit: Chehel Sotoun, a splendid pavilion in a park, the Ali Qapu Palace, the Si-O-Se Pol bridge with 33 arches over the Zayandeh River, the main square with the bazaar, and the many mosques decorated on the outside with very ornate blue tiles. I then drove on another 300 miles to Shiraz, also known as the Garden City, famous for its roses (the climate is much milder there), and for being the birthplace of the poet, Hafez.



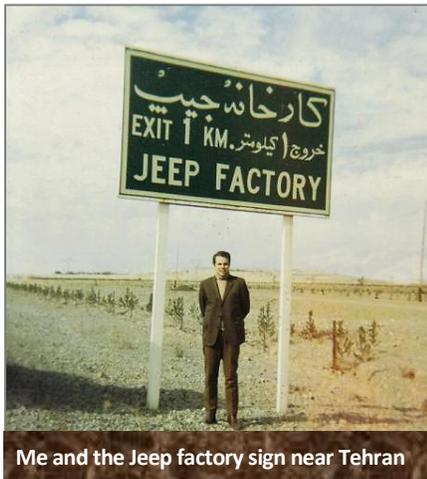
My Iranian colleagues in the office told me about the Caspian Sea coast, and how different it was to the dry climate of Tehran, so I offered to take them in the jeep. I'd pay the cost of fuel if they'd take care of the food and lodging. They were very enthusiastic about the trip, so taking advantage of a long weekend holiday we set off for Rasht and the Coast. It was a very pleasant trip and there's certainly much more vegetation along the coast compared to the rest of Iran, which is mostly very barren. We passed several hotels and motels but my friends knew where we could rent a tent with mosquito netting in someone's garden along the shore, which is what we did. It was a great way to spend a couple of days by the beach.

I remember the sand was very dark in colour and it looked perfect for driving along the shore. All went well for a while but I didn't notice that where a small stream emptied into the sea, where the sand was much softer. We got stuck. Even with four-wheel-drive in low range, it wouldn't budge. We tried rocking it, we tried to lift it and put some planks of wood under the wheels, but we couldn't get it out. In fact, we were probably making things worse as the wet sand seemed to suck the jeep down. After a couple of hours, we gave up and walked to the main road. Fortunately, it wasn't long before a local farmer drove by on his tractor. My friends stopped him, explained the problem and he kindly offered to pull us out. With the tractor far enough away from the jeep on hard sand and with a long, strong rope, the jeep was finally extricated. Once back on the main road, I never drove on the beach again.

After two years running the M38, by 1971 I'd saved up enough to buy a new car as I had other plans for my last year in Iran. I went back to the man who'd helped me with the

original purchase of the jeep, who'd become my friend, and told him that I planned to sell it. It wasn't long before he found a client for the jeep, but just before I could show it to him, the gearbox developed a problem. Not wanting to spend money on repairs, I dropped the selling price and the buyer accepted. Good-bye old friend, you served me well.

The Willys M38 wasn't the only jeep to be seen in Iran. There was a factory, then known as Sherkat Sahami Jeep, later to become Pars Khodro, on the Tehran-Karaj road, that built



Me and the Jeep factory sign near Tehran

jeeps under license from the Kaiser-Jeep Corporation. The CJ-5, often sold with a hard-top, was known as the Jeep Shahbaz and was built from about 1959 onward. The Jeep Wagoneer was introduced in the 1960s as the Aho'o, as well as the Jeep Gladiator Pick-Up, known as the Simorgh. These three Jeep models were quite a common sight on Iranian roads in those days. Pars Khodro went on to produce Rambler cars as well in the 1970s, but when General Motors purchased part of the company, they changed to producing Opel, Chevrolet and Buick products

until the Islamic Revolution and the cessation of all commercial ties between Iran and the USA put an end to all that. For the company to continue in business, they obtained parts from Mahindra & Mahindra in India in order to produce the Tosan jeep and meet a demand from the military for vehicles eventually required to fight the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and for civilian off-road use.

Of course, the jeep wasn't new to Iran. Many original standardized jeeps had seen service in Iran during the Second World War, escorting convoys of lend-lease vehicles and other



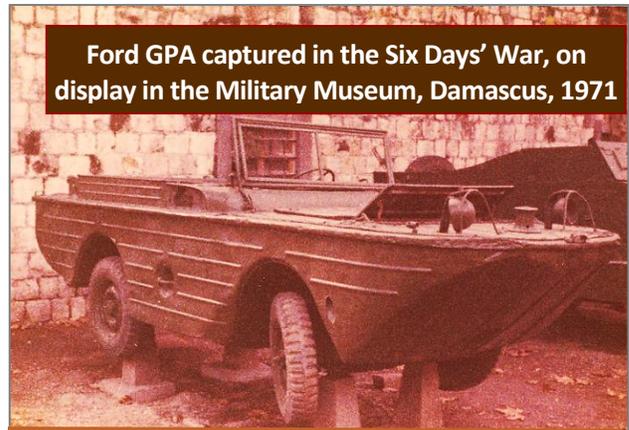
My collection of technical and other manuals purchased in a bookshop in Tehran in 1971

materiel along the Persian Corridor from the Iranian ports up to the Russian border. Some may have stayed on in Iran after the war, either being transferred to the Iranian Army in an attempt to reorganize it once the Allies left, or auctioned off to individuals. I really don't know. The fact is, I never came across a single Willys MB or Ford GPW during my stay there. I did, however, find a number of Technical Manuals one day in a second-

second-hand bookshop near the British Embassy in Tehran. They were mostly for TM10s and TM5s, pertaining to other (non-jeep) war-time U.S. military vehicles. How they got there is anyone's guess but I took the opportunity and bought them, including a GAZ-69/69A Driver's Handbook in Russian. I kept them for many years before selling them to a collector.

The new car I purchased after the M38 was a 1971 Volkswagen 1302S with the 1600 c.c. engine. I had the factory deliver it to me through a VW dealership in Vienna. The colour was 'Clementine' (remember the 'Valentine' paint for my first jeep? How romantic my vehicles have been, haven't they?). It was on German Zollfrei (duty free) plates, the old oval ones, and after picking it up in Vienna, I used it first for a holiday in Europe and then drove it to Iran for my last year there. Getting there was quite an adventure, driving across what was then Communist Yugoslavia, the North of Greece and all the way across the centre of Turkey. It took me about six days.

Before ending my employment contract, I had some holiday time due so my mother came to visit from England, and we took a trip to Lebanon to spend Christmas 1971 there. We drove through Tabriz and crossed the Iran-Turkey border at Bazargan, then on via Agri (with temperatures overnight low enough to freeze the battery of the car and turn the engine oil in the sump to a thick greasy substance), Erzurum, Elazig and Iskenderun in Turkey, then along the Mediterranean Coast of Syria and down into Lebanon. It was wintertime and, fortunately, I'd gone prepared with snow-chains and a shovel. My mother's idea of being prepared was taking a bottle of Iranian vodka with her! Even crossing the mountain pass on the Antakya-Yayladag highway before arriving at the Syrian border, I had to use the shovel to clear the snowdrifts so we could get through. There were about ten cars following in our tracks that weren't so well prepared. We spent a whole week in Lebanon visiting Byblos, Sidon, Ba'albek and Beirut, with Christmas night spent watching the excellent show in the Casino du Liban. We encountered far less snow on the trip back to Tehran and saw in the New Year in a hotel in Elazig in the middle of Turkey.



Finally at Now Rooz 1972, I loaded up the VW with all my worldly possessions and set off for the UK, this time taking the route along the Black Sea coast through Trabzon, Turkey. It turned out to be a bad decision. It was a time of terrorist activity and three NATO

engineers had just been kidnapped in Ünye on the Trabzon-Samsun road. I first realised that something was happening in the area when I stopped for lunch at a restaurant along the way. Someone there showed me a local newspaper with photographs of the three engineers. I could read their names in the captions under each photograph and then the person holding the newspaper drew his index finger across his throat, indicating that the three were dead. After leaving the restaurant I was relieved to find that the Turkish Army had roadblocks set up along the highway all the way to Ankara. At the first one, an officer explained what was happening and that I should only stop at each of the roadblocks and not deviate from the route. I felt fairly safe as I could see that they were expecting me at each roadblock along the way and they would wave me through.

After an accident in Gebze just before Istanbul, I had to spend nine days in the city while the car was being repaired, and so taking advantage of the time, I got to know the place fairly well. I enjoyed Istanbul very much and hated leaving, but when the repairs to the car were finished I really had to depart for the UK.

Once settled in at my mother's house in Essex (my parents had recently separated), I started commuting to London to work at the offices of a US company in the pipeline construction equipment business, where I'd found myself a job before leaving Iran. It didn't take me long to realize that commuting wasn't for me. After three years working in the Middle East, I needed to look for another job overseas. However, while looking I needed something to keep me busy during the evenings and at weekends. What better than a jeep to occupy my spare time.

### **Jeep Fanatic as a supposedly sane adult: My third jeep... and 30 jeep-less years**

TO BE CONTINUED