



MILE LOW CLUB

John Sessions likes flying old planes such as the Spitfire, and owns two classic Land Rovers including a 1969 Series IIA 109 which has done just 3500 km

Words & photos: Nicholas Bratton

Age is relative. Forty-five years may sound old for a vehicle, even for a Land Rover. Yet there's one particular 1969 Series IIA 109 living a reclusive, island life that appears to have just rolled off the factory floor only days ago. With 3432 kilometres on the clock it hasn't even completed its break-in period. It sounded so improbable I had to go see it for myself.

Whidbey Island is a short drive and ferry ride from Seattle, but the rolling fields, sweeping coastal bluffs, and quiet villages make it feel like a world away from the hubbub of the nearby metropolis. At Fort Casey state park visitors can clamber among the giant cannon emplacements built to defend the coastal waterways during the Second World War. The island is also the idyllic type of countryside for a Series Rover. Outside the town of Coupeville was where I met John Sessions, the owner of this pristine SIIA.

Collecting old Land Rovers is a side project for John; his primary passion is aviation. He is the CEO of Historic Flight Foundation, a 'living' museum adjacent to the Boeing plant, specialising in restoring and flying vintage



Left:
Its colour may be original, but John's SIIA has been re-sprayed to give it a shinier look

“An undercarriage that would make any Series owner green with envy”



specially configured for a field-coordinating role in a war that never happened.

On the exterior the roof is fitted with a fabric-covered porthole above the front passenger's seat. This gave an officer a standing vantage point for parade reviews and for surveying the landscape. A spotlight is within reach and a radio antenna base is fixed in front of the grille for communications.

Inside the cab, more command and control kit is within easy reach. A set of paddles is mounted along the front passenger seat to coordinate aircraft traffic. An original period flashlight clips to the seat base. Although not present, the vehicle has a rack for a radio to mount in the dash, something John plans to look for to round out the equipment.

All the switchgear and controls are labelled in Danish and English. There's even a faded, almost illegible sticker peeling from the windscreen that says, in Danish, something to the effect of "Drive gently for the first 5,000km." Forty-five years on and the Land Rover is scarcely 60 per cent of the way there. The seats look unused and feature grab-bars to aid hasty troop boarding. Mounted in the cargo space are a tow bar and hand crank.

Under the bonnet all is largely original. A newer battery and wires have been installed, but the main components are still those that came from Solihull. Even an old oilcan is strapped to the side of the engine compartment. The only parts John has replaced are the belts and the exhaust. He has the original service logs, showing when the vehicle was driven and when maintenance was performed. The Danes were meticulous in their record-keeping.

This is further reflected in the smoothness of the engine and running gear. The 4-cylinder

Right: The undercarriage on John's low-mileage Landy is understandably pristine, as is the interior, still with notices in English and Danish, betraying its origins

eagerly springs to life and putters away contentedly. No clatter, no personality quirks developed over 45 years; this was exactly how the engine sounded when new – because it still is new. While 'effortless' would be a stretch to describe the clutch and transmission, they are taut and sharp. Gear changes are crisp and the 109 makes quick progress around the property.

The chassis is immaculate. Crawling beneath the Land Rover I found an undercarriage that would make any Series owner green with envy. Frame rails, outriggers, cross members, suspension, axles, and driveline are all conspicuously rust-free. Such is the result of spending nearly its entire life indoors and being cared for with discipline and attention. If the paint job looks flawless, that's because it's recent. John had the paint re-done in the original colour, although he selected a gloss finish to give it a shinier look.

Adorning the steel wheels are Dunlop 7.5 x 16 tyres. The treads are hardly worn and it takes a very close inspection to reveal the slightest signs of cracking in the sidewalls. It's unclear if these are the original tyres, but they certainly look appropriate for the part.

I was hoping for an exciting story behind the provenance of the Land Rover and how John came to own it. The D-Day P-51 warplane in the Foundation's hangar had, after all, crashed into a beet field in England after the war. John's team of archaeologists excavated the wreckage in just seven weeks between growing seasons. The acquisition of the Series was not nearly so dramatic.

John saw the Land Rover come up for sale on eBay from a collector who acquired it as part of a clearing of military surplus by the Danish government. He pounced on it and



warplanes. The museum's collection includes a Spitfire, a P-51 Mustang that flew multiple D-Day sorties, and an ex-RAF Mitchell B-25 bomber, all of which John flies regularly. It's therefore unsurprising that he'd be drawn to vintage Land Rovers.

Describing the intersection of his interests, John insists they're a natural fit. "I got my start in aviation as a bush pilot," he explains. "I love bush planes, their ruggedness and simplicity. When flying in remote areas I came to love bush vehicles, as well. The simpler the better. There's no power assist on the controls of the B-25; it's much like a Series in that way. It teaches good driving."

"For about ten years I regularly flew the coast of Canada to south-east Alaska in a 1956 de Havilland Beaver amphibious float plane. My business at the time included forest products and fishing. Often, I would 'over-estimate' the time necessary for my return to Seattle, allowing me to explore truly remote villages and settlements, primarily in northern British Columbia. Any lake was my runway. It was here I saw enduring vehicles, rugged to start with and sustainable without a degree in electrical engineering. It was here I found Land Rovers and vehicles Land Rovers had inspired."

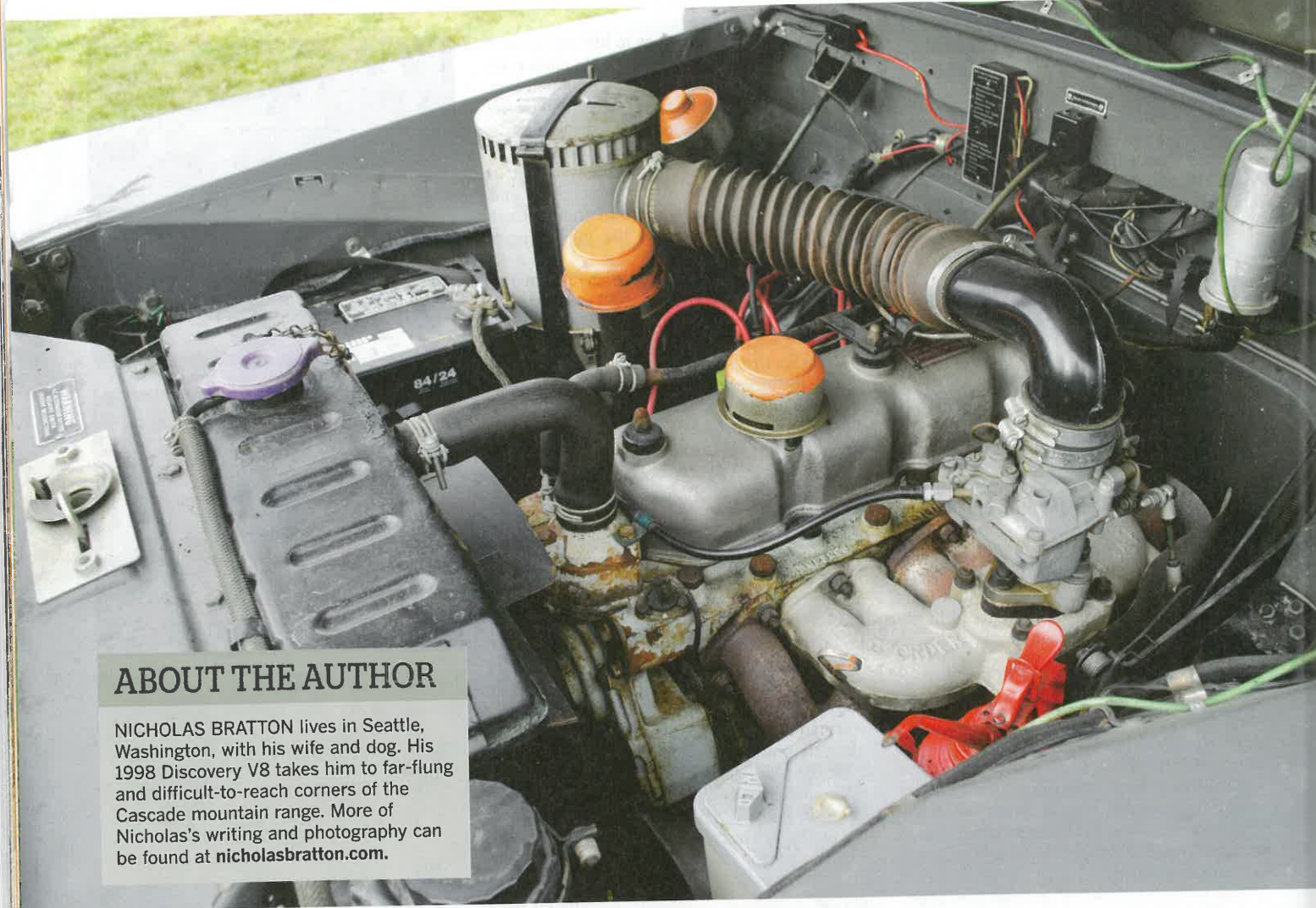
While John invests untold hours and resources into restoring rare warplanes, his Series IIA is almost completely original and has many distinctive features custom-built for its purpose. Before he bought it, the Rover was an officer's liaison vehicle in the Copenhagen Civil Defence Command. It is

HISTORIC FLIGHT FOUNDATION

FOUNDED in 2003, Historic Flight Foundation is a collection of important aircraft produced between 1927 and 1957, all restored and in flying condition. Visitors can see the planes up close, watch restoration in progress, and even ride along during public events. www.historicflight.org



Below: The IIA (left) has spent most of its life under cover, preserving it from the elements; to the right is John's III which has done 10 times the mileage!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NICHOLAS BRATTON lives in Seattle, Washington, with his wife and dog. His 1998 Discovery V8 takes him to far-flung and difficult-to-reach corners of the Cascade mountain range. More of Nicholas's writing and photography can be found at nicholasbratton.com.



“Only parts replaced are belts and exhaust”



Above: Scarcely run in! However the engine bay bears a few corrosion scars, betraying the vehicle's true age; **Left:** The '69 IIA (right) seems comfortable indoors

arranged for a local expert to inspect it and ship it to the Port of Tacoma, Washington, from where he drove it up to its current location. “About ten percent of the total

distance this Rover has covered since 1969 was on the trip from the port to my house,” he grins broadly.

These days the 109 doesn't see frequent use, although he does occasionally take it for a spin around the island where locals greet him with enthusiasm. Whidbey Island is a haven for simple Land Rovers from simpler times. A couple of farms over, a red Series III 109 still serves faithfully and Defenders and Range Rovers from the early nineties are not uncommon sights on the scenic lanes. John's friends on Whidbey know he has reached his hideaway when they report 'sightings' of the 109" in the country town of Coupeville.

Keeping the Danish darling company in the garage is John's other Land Rover, a 1971 Series IIA 88in with a safari roof. Although it has been driven nearly ten times the distance of its older partner, the 88" is still comparatively adolescent at 32,000km.

Is this ex-Danish Series IIA the tidiest original Rover of its vintage? It's certainly found a loving home on an island where life is calmer. Knowing John's attention to detail and care for the warplanes of Historic Flight Foundation, this Land Rover – a wonderful Cold War relic – may yet outlive him.

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