



M. BENTLEY

# Excellence:

## EXPECTED AND DELIVERED

KARL LUDVIGSEN WROTE THE DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF PORSCHE IN THE 1970s, BUT HE DIDN'T STOP THERE. HIS UPDATED THIRD EDITION IS BEING PUBLISHED THIS YEAR.

STORY BY **KIERON FENNELLY**

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**MUCH LAUDED WHEN** it first appeared in 1977 as the definitive story of Porsche, *Excellence Was Expected* is now regarded as perhaps the finest automobile history ever written. Author Karl Ludvigsen, a mechanical engineer from MIT and a career auto journalist, would seem in retrospect to have been destined to write such a book, but of course the reality is slightly more complex.

Ludvigsen was born in 1934 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and as a youngster devoured car magazines and reviews. He even had a subscription to the British weekly *The Motor* (subsumed by *Autocar* in 1988). This gave Ludvigsen a European perspective and was where, in July 1948, he read the first driving impressions of a small, rear-engined coupe made by a company in Austria.

Ludvigsen was a bright boy, and his academic career took him to Phillips Exeter Academy, where he graduated with honors before going to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then on to study industrial design at Pratt Institute. His father was chief operating officer at Fuller, a transmission manufacturer, and during summer vacations Ludvigsen junior worked at the plant, where he learned to be a draftsman and worked in the transmission shop. His academic achievements

would be supported by solid practical engineering experience.

Part of his university studies involved creative engineering, which alerted Ludvigsen to the possibilities of industrial design, a field that particularly interested him. Always a writer, he authored a column for the MIT magazine called "Uncle Karl's Car Notes." One article, on the 1935 Bugatti GP car notable for its straight eight, caught the attention of the editor of *Sports Cars Illustrated*, and it would later result in Karl's first remunerated writing job.

After graduating from MIT, Ludvigsen was offered a position in GM's design department under Chuck Jordan, but so taken was he with the possibilities of becoming a technical editor like one of his heroes, *The Motor* journalist Laurence Pomeroy, that he resigned after a few months—rather, he says, to Jordan's dismay. But Ludvigsen had other plans: at 23 he was to be technical editor at *Sports Cars Illustrated*.

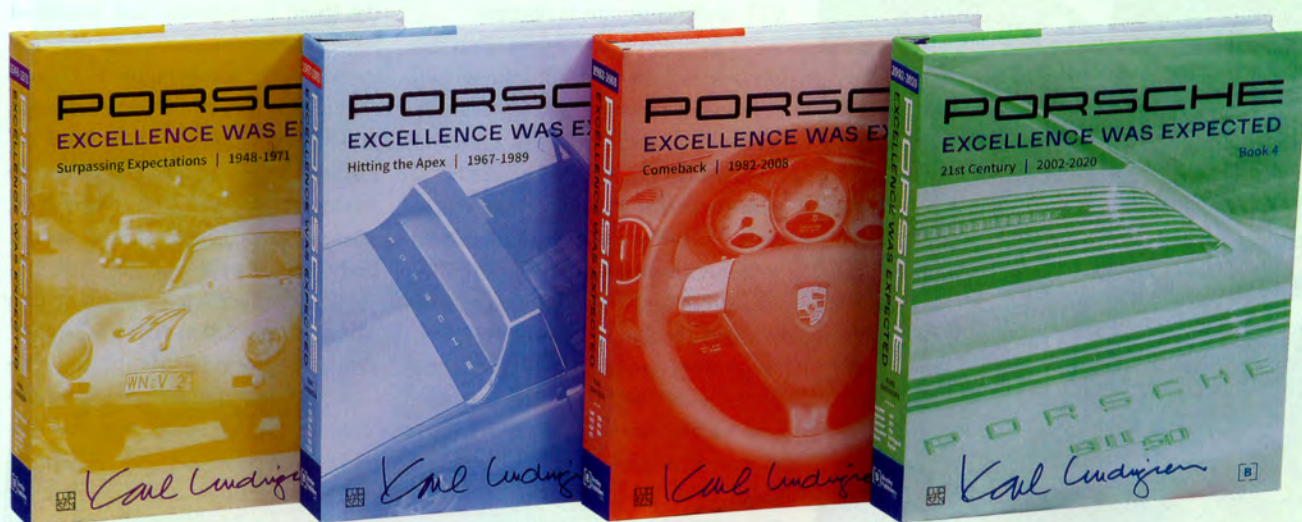
However, military service intervened, and Ludvigsen was dispatched to Germany in 1958. Today he says, "The net effect of my peculiar education, a combination of mechanical engineering and styling, helped me to talk to industry engineers." He already had an entrée in Stuttgart: a few years earlier, he had

met Porsche's gearbox specialist Leopold Schmid when the German had been invited to Fuller to examine the possibility of applying synchromesh to Fuller's truck gearboxes. As it turned out, Fuller did not go the synchronized route, but Ludvigsen stayed in touch with Schmid for many years, even after the latter left Porsche in the early 1960s.

Ludvigsen returned to the U.S. in 1959 to take up the editorship of what was to become *Car and Driver*, but a desire to understand more from the manufacturing perspective saw him go back to GM in 1961, to its PR department. After six years of corporate lobbying and press releases, he quit to become a full-time freelance writer.

During the subsequent decade he wrote numerous articles and several books, as well as his award-winning *The Mercedes-Benz Racing Cars*, an achievement that moved him firmly onto the radar of automotive book publishers. This led to the opportunity to write a history of Porsche. The first edition of *Excellence Was Expected* was a four-year undertaking, after which he returned to corporate PR, first at Fiat North America and then at Ford. In 1980, Ford moved him to London, and Ludvigsen would henceforth establish the U.K. as his new home. He married and, after

**Opposite:**  
Karl Ludvigsen  
at the Bentley  
Publishers offices  
in Cambridge,  
Massachusetts.



Below: Ludvigsen speaking to Ferry Porsche in 1974. Porsche PR director Manfred Jantke (behind, in glasses) is making sure that his boss is not diverted from the script by this most probing of journalists. Bottom: Ludvigsen and wife Annette sample the Lohner Porsche, once more a talking point as electric cars become a reality.



leaving Ford in 1983, made use of his by-then very comprehensive auto industry address book to run a successful London-based automotive consultancy until the mid-1990s. Thereafter, he resumed his journalism and writing career, which has included many more books, biogra-

phies, and, above all, two updated editions of *Excellence*.

**THE ORIGINS OF** Karl Ludvigsen's interest in Porsche are not hard to identify: American enthusiasts were always intrigued by European auto engineering—particularly that coming from Germany—and by sports cars, which seemed to be a British specialty. Having read about Porsche in 1948, it would be three years before he saw an example in person, at Watkins Glen.

"It was a mouse gray coupé and, humble as it looked among the arrogant Allards and Jaguars, it was quite obviously a quite beautifully made thoroughbred," he observed. He even managed to get his 18-year-old hands on one to record a road test for the MIT undergraduate magazine.

"It is only necessary to wish the car in a certain direction," he wrote, "to have it respond quickly and accurately.... Dr. Porsche's creation comes very close to being the ideal sports car for the American continent." Clearly the language of the writer-apprentice at work here, the effort that Ludvigsen would put into crafting his characteristically stylish prose would make him not only one of the most authoritative, but also one of the most readable, of automotive historians.

In 1956, he traded his TR2 for a five-year-old 1300 Porsche coupé that eventually let him down when,

in deepest winter, the casing of its (non-synchromesh) gearbox split. But by then, Ludvigsen was bitten, and Porsches and Porsche news—reporting the racing exploits of the 550 Spyders—were informing his writing. By 1958 he had established a working relationship with Zuffenhausen's racing manager and PR man, Huschke von Hanstein, and been introduced to Ferry Porsche, a man whose modesty, thought Ludvigsen, made him a fitting heir to *das Haus*. During Ludvigsen's military service in Germany, he used his contacts with Leopold Schmid to visit Zuffenhausen and test various cars for *Sports Cars Illustrated*.

The opportunity to write what would become *Excellence Was Expected* came about in the early 1970s. By then, Ludvigsen had resumed his contact with Porsche following his six-year interregnum at General Motors. A former GM colleague and journalist had begun a book on Porsche, a task Ludvigsen says he envied, and when this fellow died unexpectedly, the publisher asked Ludvigsen to continue the work.

"I was thrilled to take on this tribute to my fallen friend," he said. The experience brought out the nature of the man: he read the uncompleted manuscript and was dismayed to find words like *probably*, *possibly*, and *perhaps* recurring far too often for his taste. With many of the actors still alive and working at



Porsche, some of whom he knew, he determined he would start again and tell the story in his way. By late 1973, he had already made significant inroads.

But then a setback occurred that almost shipwrecked the venture. The publisher fired Ludvigsen's editor, Dean Batchelor, a man in whom Ludvigsen had implicit faith for what was a major publishing venture. He had already worked with Batchelor to produce his prize-winning book on Mercedes-Benz racing cars, so with a heavy heart, he resigned from his undertaking with the publisher and returned the advance. Then he had a stroke of luck: another publisher, a fellow scribbler from their *Automobile Quarterly* days, offered to produce the work.

Then it was back to business: in May 1974, Ludvigsen traveled to Stuttgart to cover Porsche's 25th anniversary of car making. He took advantage and met the self-effacing Ghislaine Kaes, Ferry's first cousin and also his secretary in the early years. Kaes would prove to be an extraordinarily useful contact: as well as opening the archives, he showed Ludvigsen the ten-year report books that Porsche had begun in 1942 and which were a huge source of information. Kaes also helped him with

the photographic archive: simply finding and identifying the pictures was quite an achievement. Ludvigsen immersed himself in *Christophorus* files, interviewed Ferry, and came across the then still-secret Studebaker project: "I loved discovering that kind of thing."

**THE WOULD-BE PORSCHE** historian admits that at times he did feel overwhelmed: as well as this almost unmanageable plethora of historical information, he had to keep up with contemporary Porsche activity. In the mid-1970s that included a series of new models plus an energetic racing program based on the 911 derivative, the 935. To make matters worse, other books were appearing long before his own finish line was anywhere in sight.

"There was John Bentley's biography of Ferry Porsche, Paul Frère's *Porsche 911 Story*, and *The Porsche Book* by Lothar Boschen and Jürgen Barth. I began to wonder if all my efforts were worthwhile," he admitted.

In Ludvigsen's defense, it is worth pointing out that the Bentley book was Ferry's personal memoir which, if revealing, had relatively little to say about the postwar years. The other two books were technical works, invaluable references for

writers and enthusiasts of the cars, if rather dry. Neither tackled what was for Ludvigsen his central mission. As he later observed:

"We all knew what happened on a superficial level: cars came and went, races were won or lost, people came and went, and Porsche's business flourished or slumped. But often what we didn't know was why the company and its cars evolved as they did or how its leaders made the business and engineering decisions they did that determined the company's fate. For me, the how and why of car company decision-making is the most interesting topic an enterprise has to offer."

This was the essence of *Excellence was Expected*. Nevertheless, even with the enthusiastic support of his publisher, he still worried about the acceptability of his work, which would be judged by Porsche owners—the most difficult of people to please. And despite Porsche's records, there remained details he had not been able to resolve to his satisfaction—who built all the America Roadsters in the 1950s, for example, or why there did not seem to be a definitive record of how many 904s were built.

As the publishing date neared, he was surprised that despite ask-



CHAPTER 8 1968-1969 917: The Big Porsche

If ever a racing car left a lasting impression on the world it was the Porsche 917. It was low, wide and long. It was also powered by a mighty flat-twelve. Even before it was fully developed one of its drivers dubbed it "the fastest car in the world." For Ferdinand Piëch, however, it was "The greatest risk I've ever taken—I could have lost my job."

**N**ever before had a Porsche so dominated a more elite. There had been impressive Porsche introductions before. One member the 901 at Frankfurt in 1963 or 1964 was important, but in each of these the latter Porsche had to share the limelight with other new cars of equal or greater significance. This time it was different. This time the Porsche was overwhelmingly the star of the show.

The car roared at shoulder height on a plinth slanted toward the side so it could be seen more easily. It occupied the stand of the Automobile Club de Switzerland at the Geneva Salon of 1969, in a special section devoted to sports and racing cars. Behind it were huge panels of working lights that added to the awe. The car was white with a green nose. It had no text or decals of Shell, Dunlop and Coker, its usual sponsors. The car was the only one of its kind in the world.

Jo Siffert, Gerhard Mitter, Vic Elford, Stuckler von Hasenau and his successor Rolf Stommelen. The Porsche people were grinning a lot and with good reason. Their 917 was poised to roar off at 100 mph through a huge jungle in the 1969 Le Mans 24-hour race. Charles Hulbert of Motor wrote that "it is difficult to see where the opposition [to the 917] is coming from in Le Mans and the other endurance races." However, it would take much longer than expected to achieve that dominance.

Stuckler von Hasenau was asked whether the twelve-cylinder 4.5-liter Type 917 was a harbinger of direct Porsche competition in the sports-car market place with big engines, cars like Ferrari, Maserati and Lamborghini. "No," said von Hasenau, "we have no intention whatsoever of producing a big Porsche," as that time the 917 had an engine of only 2.0-liter size; the 917 was a reborn by comparison.

**Racing Through Lougholou.** "When will you race this car?" asked a questioner at Geneva. "More important for us is the Le Mans 24-hour race," Rolf Stommelen answered, "but we may have a car in the Monza 1,000 kilometers. I don't even take the copy in the case of Brands Hatch on April 13." Von Hasenau concluded, "We will have produced 25 of them by March 31 so it will be ready then to be homologated as a Sports Car." This was the only way Porsche could compete in 1969's sports car racing with such a big engine machine. Since 1968 the only cars eligible to compete for the World Manufacturers' Championship were 3.0-liter prototypes like the 906, cars made in small numbers, and 5.0-liter Group 4 Sports Cars. Air of 1969 the Big Sports Car had been made in a series of 25 identical cars within a 12-month period.

The 917 story has now been told by several insiders, but Ludvigsen's authoritative account has stood the test of time.



but VW never reckoned on the cost of the 917 program!”

After nearly 50 years following the company closely, he remains staggered at its consistency. Writing in 1977, he said, “Over thirty years of its existence I saw no slackening of the strong, distinctive Porsche spirit. Porsche (unlike other manufacturers) usually spots shortcomings long before press or public and moves to erase them. That’s one reason why the book is so big: the people at Porsche have simply never left the cars alone. I’m confident they never will.”

Today he does not demure: “It’s incredible how Porsche has retained its ‘Porscheness,’ an amazing achievement. When people ask ‘What car do you like?’ it is impossible not to mention Porsche because the firm builds drivers’ cars, model after model, a uniquely brilliant way of working.”

**QUITE APART FROM** the sheer breadth of his research, another characteristic sets Ludvigsen apart from many other Porsche authors: his command of the German language. Never having to rely on the filter of translation simply adds to the authority of *Excellence Was Ex-*

*pected*. Indeed, the ability to read German enabled him to take immediate advantage of the previously unseen Porsche archives that Ghislaine Kaes showed him in the early 1970s; it also allowed him to pursue other German-only resources, for example a website that lists German patents, another route for confirming Porsche’s engineering history.

Speaking the language also advanced his cause: Ludvigsen says he conducted most of his interviews in German, although, he concedes, “Horst Marchart’s Austrian accent was so strong we ended up talking in English!”

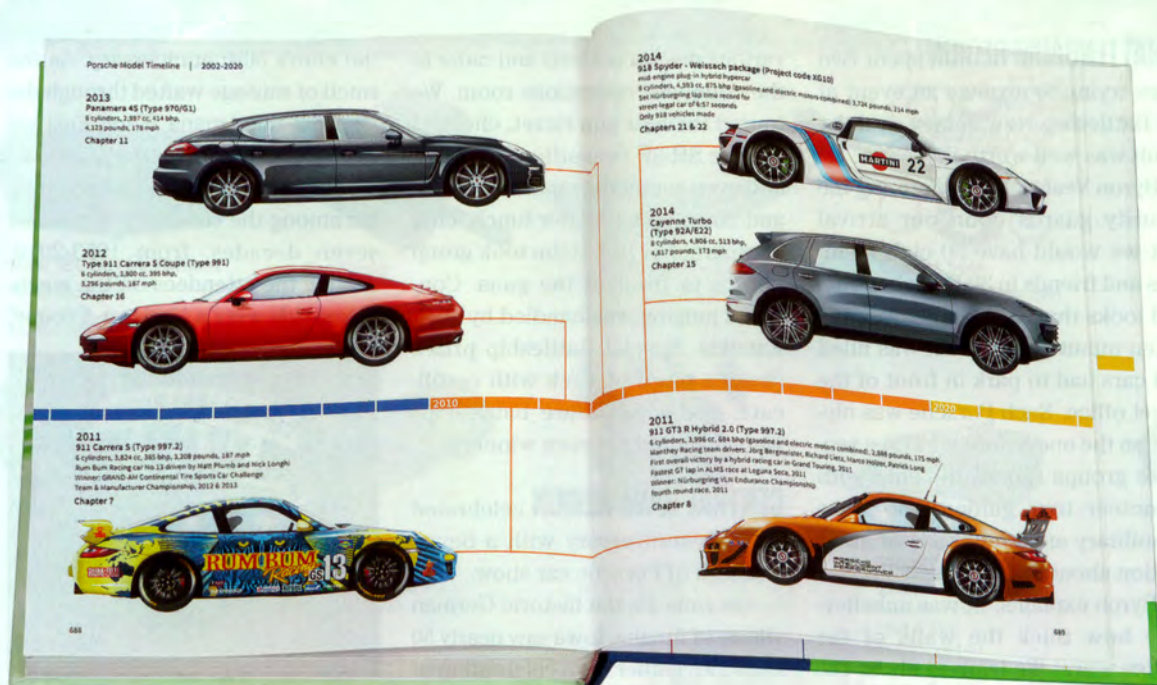
Individuals at Porsche whom he recalls especially helped him with the first edition were Helmuth Bott and Ernst Fuhrmann, who both gave him many extensive interviews. Former archivist Klaus Parr was instrumental in assisting with the 2003 edition. Porsche’s stylists, too, he says, gave him a lot of their time. Ludvigsen is especially grateful to Wendelin Wiedeking, “who gave me a wonderful interview: his contribution is unquantifiable.”

He was less fortunate with former engineering director Wolfgang Dürheimer. His request to interview the then Bentley chief was rejected.

“I then discovered that Dürheimer had apparently ended the fabled Porsche tradition of the ten-year books so useful to historians. Paul Hensler used to keep them up to date.” The look on Karl Ludvigsen’s face suggests he regarded such an act as almost criminal.

Most interviewees recognized his achievements, however, and occasionally his standing would grant him the kind of privileged face-to-face meetings rarely available to journalists. He mentions the intensely private Ron Dennis of McLaren: “He gave me a fantastically generous interview about the TAG period and allowed me to take pictures, too.”

More books have been written about Porsche than about any other make—the fascination of the Zuffenhausen sports car firm has attracted scores of authors and hundreds of journalists over half a century. Many of them have and will continue to consult the pages of *Excellence Was Expected* in their research, a source whose veracity is rarely, if ever, questioned. If excellence was once again expected, it has, with this magnificent and concluding new third edition, emphatically been delivered. ●





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# PANORAMA

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE PORSCHE CLUB OF AMERICA